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Preparing Initial Teacher Education Students for Flexible Learning Programs

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Abstract. In Australia, there is currently no official training pathway or qualification required for working in Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs). This causes a problem for both new teachers wishing to work in this area and for employers who have no way of knowing whether a new teacher has the appropriate skills or knowledge to teach in this alternative context. To address this problem, we designed and implemented a program during which Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students were given the opportunity to experience teaching in a FLP. Here we report on the experiences and perceptions of the preparation program from the perspectives of the key stakeholders, including the ITE students, FLP staff, and the young people attending the FLP. All stakeholders perceived the project to be a success in enabling the ITE students to gain valuable theoretical knowledge and practical experience of the FLP context.

Introduction

Teachers play a crucial role in preparing young people to lead successful and productive lives (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses teach graduates to follow ‘mainstream’ education policies and procedures designed to cater for most students (Thomas, 2018). However, mainstream education settings do not serve all students, particularly those from marginalised and lower-socioeconomic backgrounds (Mills, et al., 2016; Mosen-Lowe et al., 2009). Accordingly, Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) have abounded in recent years to address the needs of these students. There are more than 900 FLPs in Australia and over 70,000 young people are engaged with alternative education providers (te Riele, 2014). FLPs provide young people with pathways to successful education opportunities after experiences of failure and/or exclusion from mainstream settings and strive for inclusive educational pathways that offer wraparound social services, practical support, individual learning plans, and supportive and respectful relational contexts (Abrams, 2010; Mills, et al., 2016).

The project this paper reports on originated from separate, informal conversations, between us, the authors, and staff of a Flexible Learning Program (FLP), as well with ITE students enrolled in a Master of Teaching program, in [deidentified], Australia. In these conversations the FLP staff identified challenges related to recruiting new teachers with specific knowledge about working with disenfranchised young people and who had had experience in this specialist teaching context. High staff turnover at the FLP and a lack of formal pathway or training program means there is a limited pool of suitable applicants for teaching positions.

Separately, the authors had been approached by ITE students who expressed an explicit desire to work with disadvantaged and disenfranchised young people. In their ITE course, the students explained, there was no opportunity to gain specific knowledge to work in the area, nor was it deemed appropriate for ITE students to participate in Professional Experience placements in these ‘challenging’ contexts.

These two serendipitous conversations occurred within a teaching environment where there is little written about the requirements of staff in FLP contexts, nor about ITE preparation programs for students who want to specialise in this sector of education. The overarching aim of this project, therefore, was to determine whether ITE courses could play a part in the preparation of future FLP teachers. To meet this objective, the authors proposed a project which included three phases of inquiry:

- (1) The design of a targeted program to equip ITE students with the skills and knowledge needed to work in an FLP context;
- (2) The implementation of a program for ITE students to be immersed in an FLP context as part of the ITE course;
- (3) An investigation into how the program was perceived and experienced by the stakeholders (i.e. ITE students, FLP staff and young people).

This paper reports on the third phase of the inquiry: a qualitative investigation of the key stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences of the preparation program.

Literature Review

It is well established that teachers in FLPs play a pivotal role in re-engaging young people who have become disengaged from mainstream education (Coles et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2017; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2016a; 2016b; Mills et al., 2017; te Riele, 2006; 2010; Waters, 2017). These young people may come to FLPs with a myriad of challenges, such as complex family situations, substance use, social difficulties, language problems, learning difficulties, mental illness, as well as cultural, racial or ethnic barriers (Bland et al., 2008; Lamb et al., 2015; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Mills et al., 2016a). It is imperative that teachers in FLP settings understand these challenges and can provide learning opportunities that are responsive to each young person’s needs (Morgan et al., 2014).

While FLPs have proliferated in recent years, there is a distinct lack of research about the educational practices of alternative education settings (Shay et al., 2016). There is currently no consistent policy about teacher staffing in FLPs and no official training or qualification pathway to work in these settings (Thomas et al., 2020). Graduates of ITE courses are generally prepared for teaching in mainstream schools and are not explicitly taught the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed to work in FLP settings (Hobbes et al., 2019). Likewise, there is evidence to suggest that teachers’ experiences in mainstream schools may not translate into effective teaching in alternative settings (Hanson-Peterson, 2013). There is a critical need, therefore, to develop mechanisms to build a skilled alternative education workforce.

As school non-completion puts young people at risk of long-term unemployment and under-employment, and social exclusion (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Mitchell, 2016), teachers are in a unique position to provide early identification and response to situations that threaten young peoples’ engagement with school (McKee & Dillenburger, 2012). It is important, therefore, that FLP staff possess knowledge of trauma-informed practice and relational ways of teaching (Morgan et al., 2014; 2015) to meet the needs of their students. Considering that low achieving students are more at risk of becoming early school leavers, it is pertinent to recognise that teachers also serve as carers (Smyth & Hattam, 2004), and that

respectful and caring teacher-student relationships form the basis of re-engagement. Researchers have found that there is a lack of pre-service and in-service education about topics that would benefit marginalised students (Hanson-Peterson, 2013). Studies have consistently reported that teachers hold limited knowledge about relevant topics, such as self-harm, mental health, child abuse and child protection (Mckee & Dillenberger, 2012; Walsh & Farrell, 2008; Crawford & Caltabiano, 2009).

Prospective FLP teachers need to be knowledgeable about and be able to employ trauma-informed practices and relational pedagogy as these facilitate re-engagement and can redress the impact of trauma and social exclusion experienced by disenfranchised young people (Morgan et al., 2014; 2015). Trauma-informed practice provides a framework that encourages understanding of young peoples' behaviour, rather than punishing the behaviour (Morgan et al., 2015). It recognises that trauma affected students may exhibit maladaptive responses to perceived threats that can result in avoidance or escalated behaviour. Central to Trauma-informed Practice is strong, trusting, consistent adult-student relationships (Hobbes et al., 2019) and constructing a place where students feel safe and can regulate when required. Relational pedagogy is young person-centred, requires collaboration with multidisciplinary colleagues (Morgan et al., 2014), and must be prioritised over curriculum delivery (Morgan et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2015). Relational pedagogy promotes active listening and democratic processes with input from young people and recognises that young people have agency and the capacity to choose their own learning trajectories (Morgan et al., 2014; Smyth, 2006). Relational ways of teaching require a shift towards power-with, rather than power-over, young people. Teachers need to be willing to develop mutual and respectful co-learner relationships (Morgan et al., 2015) that strive for mutual growth and learning (Otero, 2003).

A consideration of the individual needs of each young person and the adoption of trauma-informed practice is essential for FLP teachers (Morgan et al., 2015) as inexperience and/or a lack of awareness of the complex needs of young people can exacerbate their educational exclusion (Morgan et al., 2014). However, teachers cannot be expected to develop this knowledge by chance (Walsh & Farrell, 2008) or in response to anecdotal accounts from other teachers (Rossi et al., 2016). Greater training opportunities are needed for both in-service and pre-service teachers to develop the knowledge and skills required of FLP teachers.

Program Design

Currently, ITE programs do not appear to prepare graduates for the FLP setting or provide enough learning experiences about mental and social wellbeing, youth suicide, and child abuse and neglect (Hanson-Peterson, 2013). In our search of the literature, we were unable to find studies that have reported on the design of ITE programs for the preparation of teachers for FLP settings. Yet, teacher educators have designed programs for other, non-traditional contexts, such as in inclusive education settings (Lancaster & Bain, 2007; Walton & Rusznyak, 2014), international/cross-cultural education contexts (Jin et al., 2019; Kabilan, 2013), and remote and distance education settings (Kennedy et al., 2013). In each of these studies, theory learning, and in-situ Professional Experience placements were key components of program design.

For the FLP context, we designed a program aimed at equipping ITE students with the skills and knowledge needed to become effective teachers in a FLP setting. This paper reports on the experiences and perceptions of the program from the perspectives of the key stakeholders (ITE students, FLP leadership and teaching staff, and the young people

attending the FLP). Key elements of the preparation program are highlighted in Figure 1 and described below.

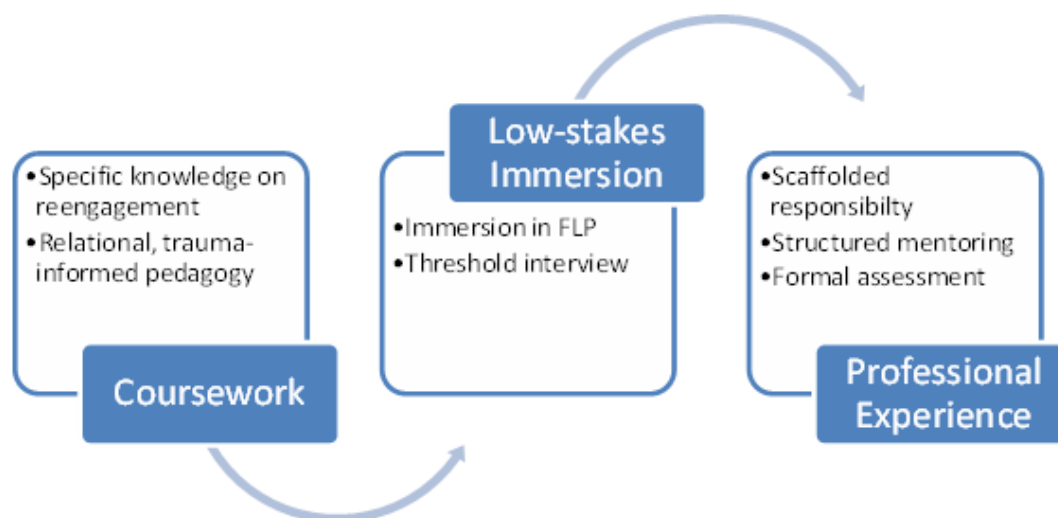


Figure 1: Preparation Program structure

Coursework Component

Participating ITE students completed the postgraduate-level coursework unit, *Reengaging Disengaged Students*. The unit was originally designed to upskill in-service teachers for working with disenfranchised young people. The content covered in this unit included: a theoretical framework to help teachers understand engagement; strategies to promote the relationship building; and evidence of effective pedagogy and structures in FLPs.

Low-stakes Immersion

To make sense of the theoretical work provided in the unit, *Reengaging Disengaged Students*, the ITE students needed to have first-hand experience working with young people in this alternative context. Immersion in the FLP provided the ITE students the opportunity to experience the FLP before committing to completing a formal Professional Experience placement. In this project, ITE students completed one day per week, for 16 weeks, immersed in the FLP setting.

Professional Experience

The final phase of the preparation program was a formal, assessed, 20-day placement as part of the Master of Teaching Professional Experience requirements. ITE students were assessed by their supervising teacher at the FLP on each of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011).

Method and Methodology

Underpinning this research was the attempt to understand the experiences of the various stakeholders involved with the pilot program. Following the example set by O’Learly (2004), formative evaluative research tries to grasp the “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats” (p.136) of a program with the aim to ascertain with the aim to assess its future potential. While the findings of this study are case specific, it is hoped that they will inform other Initial Teacher Education Programs attempting a similar path.

Ethical clearance, including protocols for ascertaining consent, was received from the [Deidentified] Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct interviews with participating ITE students and the FLP leadership and teaching staff to ascertain their experiences and perspectives of the program. We also received ethical clearance to obtain the FLP’s internal review containing the perspectives of the young people attending the FLP.

Participants

Seven participants were invited to be interviewed as part of the research due to their direct impact on, or involvement with, the pilot preparation program. Two ITE students and five FLP staff were involved. Two of the participants were male, and five were female. Indirectly, voices from young people interviewed for the FLP internal review were also used to inform the investigation.

Data Analysis

The interviews were, as described by Burgess (1988), ‘purposeful conversations’ and followed the core features of semi-structured interviews (Mason, 2002). The interviews varied in length from between 20 and 30 minutes.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Consistent with the thematic analysis techniques described by Braun and Clarke (2006), we familiarised ourselves with the data through close and repeated reading of the transcripts and generated initial codes from the data. Together, we then searched for and refined the overarching themes in the data by connecting individual codes and naming and defining the “essence of what each theme is about” (p. 92). We conducted several iterations of this process before deciding on our key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Findings

The interviews with the ITE students, FLP leaders and staff, and the de-identified feedback from the young people revealed three substantive themes related to their perceptions and experiences of the pilot preparation program.

Theme One: Theory to Practice

Two ITE students, Holly and Mandy, participated in the preparation program. Both ITE students reported positive experiences of undertaking the postgraduate-level coursework unit, *Reengaging Disengaged Students*. Mandy reported being particularly motivated to be

successful in the preparation program because of the coursework within the unit. Learning about the inherent inequities that exist within mainstream education systems particularly resonated with her. Mandy explained:

[The unit] provided a bit of an opportunity to reflect on some of the inequities in education and society, and how schools are structured in a certain way to appeal to a hegemonic group... what I could really relate to were the ideas around how schooling structures can inadvertently perpetuate socio-economic inequality through asserting the dominance of values shaped by an economic and labour market orientated paradigm.

Likewise, Holly considered the unit's theoretical learnings and assigned readings to have "really transformed" her thinking, enabling her to consider engagement "as it relates to the individual and the institution equally." Completing the unit while being immersed within the FLP context allowed Holly to "absorb" the theoretical ideas she learned by seeing how they play out in a practical setting, such as "how to help heightened young people, [and] negotiate." Mandy was similarly able to make connections between her theoretical learnings and her experiences at the FLP:

I can imagine that it could be possible to do [the practical experience] without [completing the theory unit], but it definitely helped to have all that information. I feel like having that background knowledge helped me to kind of get into the mode of understanding the practical aspect of teaching in a [FLP] context.

The coursework unit and its associated assessment tasks required the ITE students to make concrete links between the theory and practice while volunteering at the FLP. The ITE students were required design reengagement plans for their students, as well as evaluate the reengagement outcomes of the FLP overall. These tasks served to strengthen the ITE students' understanding of disengagement and strategies for reengaging young people. As Mandy reflected:

[The assignments] were both really helpful in solidifying and understanding some of the key concepts around the dimensions of engagement. And I was able to see how those notions of engagement are interrelated.

Holly, on the other hand, reported some difficulties in meeting the requirements of the postgraduate level unit as an ITE student. As the unit was also studied by practicing teachers seeking specialised professional learning, Holly felt "intimidated" by the unit's fellow students. The assessment tasks, which required students to develop a personalised re-engagement plan for a young person, challenged Holly as she was "unsure how to appropriately translate data into recommendations." While the practising teachers in the unit were accustomed to data-driven planning (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2019), as an ITE student, Holly felt under-skilled for this task.

The partnership arrangement between the University and the FLP provided other tangible benefits to the FLP. The ITE students' completion of their assignment tasks provided valuable in-depth analysis of the factors influencing engagement and recommendations that the FLP was able to use within their educational programming for the young people. FLP teacher Terri reflected on the value of the reengagement plans:

We got some pretty great feedback on how we can best support two of our most, I guess, at-risk young people... I think if the teachers and youth workers of those classes take the time to read through that, it's actually really useful just to further their knowledge of that young person... so I'm hoping that Holly and Mandy can see some real outcomes from the work that they've put in.

Drawing from the FLP internal report, according to the perspective of the young people the ITE students demonstrated effective and innovative teaching skills. Utilising their

theoretical learnings and the pedagogical framework adopted within the FLP, the ITE students set clear goals and expectations for the young peoples' learning. When Andrea (young person) was asked about Mandy's teaching, she commented: [she was] "really understanding... Like, just the way she, like, set the work and explained how to do it. It was easy to know what you have to do."

A focus on the young person's interests and motivations is a critical component of planning for teaching in FLP settings (te Riele et al., 2017). According to the young people, Holly was able to exemplify this practice in her teaching.

I was just learning more than I usually would (Samantha, young person).

I was more focused on what I was doing because I noticed in class a lot that, I actually...if I am interested in something, I will sit there and actually learn about it and remember more and more and more about it (Cassie, young person).

Holly's expert content knowledge, and her capacity to share that content in ways that motivate and engage the young people, was a key strength of Holly's practice. Jack (young person) commented, "well, [Holly's] a great art teacher. She's really fun and enthusiastic. I don't know. She's cool." Compared with other teachers he had experienced, Jack felt that "she was better than normal art teachers" because of the way she taught the content in ways that engaged and excited him.

The young people did, however, provide useful feedback to the ITE students about their teaching practice. Fiona (young person) suggested that Holly did not 'control' the class as well as her regular teacher because Holly did not raise her voice. Another young person, Ben, also agreed: "she had to be a little firmer... just a little more strict... her voice was tiny." While comments indicate that Holly was successful in adopting pedagogical strategies that personalised learning to the interests of her students, young people in FLP settings also appreciate teachers with strong classroom management practices.

As indicated by the FLP staff, the ITE students' learning about trauma-informed teaching aided them in successfully undertaking the immersion and Professional Experience components of the program. Audrey (FLP teacher), for example, reflected on Holly's teaching and how her learning about trauma enabled her to be successful in the FLP setting:

She's developed strategies on how to process the background [of the young people] and develop empathy... so, for her to have that understanding on how to approach young people with those behaviours and to actually realise there is a backstory and to learn that backstory, I think that's cool.

Indeed, the immersion component of the program was particularly well-regarded by the FLP staff and ITE students. Holly particularly believed the immersion component to be essential element in her capacity to bridge theory and practice ahead of her formal Professional Experience Placement.

[Immersion] in the school was the best way to really understand flexible education and compatible pedagogies. Seeing how natural consequences and negotiations can be an authentic part of a school environment really contextualised what I had been learning and prepared me for the prac [Professional Experience].

Theme Two: The FLP as a Unique Teaching Context

Although the ITE students found their theoretical learning and immersion to be beneficial to their success in their formal Professional Experience placement, both ITE students reported experiencing challenges in undertaking their work in a FLP setting. Mandy, for example, found applying trauma-informed practice to be difficult when confronted with a

heightened young person in a real teaching setting.

I guess the biggest challenge for me was discovering one of my triggers, which was being kind of provoked by a young person in the class... feeling kind of under attack, and just having to process that at the time, was really challenging, you know. My brain just felt like it was on fire. I was thinking like... afterwards, I was like, 'phew, thank God that's over.'

The young people seemed to be acutely aware of the challenging nature of their schooling environment in the internal review. Tommy (young person) explained that not all ITE students would be suited to working in a FLP: "some teachers out there that, like, couldn't put up with a lot this ... because some people here get really angry and stuff." Samantha (young person) also discussed the complexity of working at the FLP: "Like, mainstream, oh, it's just basic, but with us kids, it's all hard because we're different from mainstream." The ITE students experienced this complexity through their immersion and Professional Experience. As Tommy explained, Holly did not fully understand his need for space in the classroom: "sometimes there would be times where I'd want to be left alone and she'd keep talking to me but like, she didn't really know, because it was like she'd only be in the classroom every now and then."

The adoption of relational pedagogies and the building of strong teacher-student relationships are critical in the FLP environment (te Riele et al., 2017). However, FLP teacher Audrey initially expressed some reservations about the program's capacity to prepare the ITE students for this element of their practice:

To have rapport is very important. And unfortunately, naturally, not all people that are passionate about this area of education have those natural abilities. So that is a challenge to, I suppose, communicate how somebody can develop those skills if you're not naturally that sort of person.

Throughout the preparation program, the ITE students employed intentional efforts to build respectful and caring relationships with the young people. Holly, for example, brought her skills in arts-based education to her Professional Experience placement. FLP teacher Audrey commented that Holly's art classes were "the most valuable thing for her to do in coming into the space [the FLP]" as they made the young people "more open to her." ITE student Mandy drew on her own personal experiences of being disengaged from school to establish relationships that came "from a position of empathy and understanding of what it's like to be in that position."

The ITE students' efforts to develop respectful relationships with the young people were positively perceived by the FLP leadership and teaching staff. Georgi (FLP Leadership) reflected:

I think building those relationships with young people for them was sometimes challenging. But I do think they both worked hard at it, and as a result were able to build really authentic relationships with people that have certainly been sustained because they've both come back to follow up on projects they did when they were in the classroom. And the young people were really excited to see them.

Andrea (young person) suggested that Mandy learned important aspects of relational teaching in a FLP "like, understanding that it's easier to negotiate with someone, rather than just telling them what to do." Ben (young person) echoed this sentiment when describing Holly's teaching: "she's understandable and you can negotiate with her." Perhaps the most telling example of Holly's success at developing relationships was highlighted by Samantha (young person) who explained that Holly "made me feel wanted at school."

Striking a balance between effective teaching and ensuring young people's safety was not always easy for Holly and Mandy. FLP leader, Georgi, acknowledged the challenges faced by the ITE students in establishing productive and respectful working relationships.

... finding that balance between wellbeing, education, and when do I essentially put my foot down with young people? And when do I sit there and restoratively work through something? I think finding that was sometimes challenging for [the ITE students].

Georgi's observations are best exemplified in Micky's (young person) comments. Micky described Mandy as "annoying" because she "kept following [him around the classroom]." As a teacher, he thought "she was shit" and the lessons were "boring." Micky was opposed to hosting ITE students at the FLP, claiming it was "stupid" and that ITE students should remain in mainstream schools. Mandy was, therefore, challenged in her capacity to build the kind of relationship with Micky that could enable his successful engagement.

Theme Three: Preparation for Future Professional Experience and Teaching

The FLP environment presents a unique teaching setting for ITE students to undertake a Professional Experience placement. While negotiation and the co-construction of learning experiences and learning expectations are central to teaching in FLPs (te Riele et al., 2016), these strategies may be more challenging to implement in mainstream school settings. In their interviews, Holly and Mandy expressed some concerns about the transferability of their newly learned skills to mainstream school settings. While the ITE students appreciated the opportunity to experiment with 'alternative' pedagogies, each worried about how relevant these experiences would be to the mainstream classroom they will find themselves teaching in during their final placement. Particularly, the ITE students communicated concerns about their preparedness to undertake student assessments.

I feel less prepared for many aspects of my final placement.... as the Flexi [FLP] took a very different approach to assessing students and had a more dynamic teaching cycle (Holly).

... the culture that they have around assessment... that's one of my concerns about entering PE4 is just going in and being able to kind of be more structured in that approach (Mandy).

In FLP settings, the wellbeing and engagement of young people is prioritised over curriculum delivery and assessment (Morgan et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2015). Therefore, the ITE students had limited opportunities to develop their skills in assessment design and judgement of student learning.

Interview findings show, however, that the ITE students developed other specialised skills in the FLP setting that would be transferable to a mainstream teaching context. The ITE students' reflections on the program revealed that new their understandings of trauma-informed practice have greatly influenced their developing philosophies of education and their intended future classroom practice. Holly claimed "this prac was quite transformational for my practice" and she expressed an on-going commitment to developing inclusive classroom communities in her future teaching. Likewise, Mandy argued that the experience helped her to "put things into perspective as to why behaviours occur in certain ways." Mandy further reflected that:

Some of the notions around trauma-informed practice enables you to view things more compassionately because you are aware of the impact that trauma has on the developing brain and the subsequent challenging behaviour that can emerge from that.

As Mandy commented, the program enabled her to “be able to look at things more objectively” and to gain the confidence to “understand classroom behaviour, to address it, and to use negotiation skills to find a common ground with young people.” The immersion component taught Mandy to “do all the sorts of things that [she] probably would have been a bit, you know, slightly afraid of” within her formal Professional Experience placement.

The young people also commented on the transferability of teaching skills developed in FLP settings for mainstream school teaching. Jack thought the ITE students’ classroom management skills developed in the FLP would be relevant in mainstream settings:

[In mainstream schools] learning to, you know, herd children. People, like, you know, in and out of class... [In the FLP] they don't just stand around and, like, 'get here right now or I'm calling your parents'. It's more like, very calm and you know...

Finally, the ITE students’ work on developing engagement strategies and individual re-engagement plans was positively perceived by the young people. Fiona (young person) argued that all ITE students would benefit from learning to teach in an FLP setting because disengaged students are present in all schools (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). She explained, “there are some kids who go to mainstream school that their parents will refuse to send them to a [FLP] school like this, who need to learn the way we do...” While the ITE students were concerned about the relevance of their FLP experience to their future mainstream teaching, the young people with experience of both mainstream and FLP settings believed the skills the ITE students developed would make them effective teachers in mainstream schools.

Conclusion

We sought to address the problem of teacher training and recruitment for FLP settings by designing a preparation program for ITE students interested in teaching in these alternative contexts. In investigating the perceptions of the stakeholders (ITE students, FLP leadership and staff, and young people), we found that the preparation program was generally positively received and supported the ITE students to develop their skills in engaging young people and building productive relationships. The program enabled the ITE students to make connections between theoretical approaches to re-engagement, such as relational pedagogies and negotiation, and the practice of teaching in an FLP. The ITE students learned about the unique characteristics of flexible learning and alternative education contexts and developed a range of transferable skills applicable to their future teaching in mainstream school settings.

This pilot program marks the beginning of our efforts to place ITE students in non-traditional contexts for their Professional Experience placements. We acknowledge that this study had few participants and, given the small number of alternative education schools in [deidentified], we may find it difficult to sustain the program. However, there are positive indications that this kind of program is needed. As one FLP leader remarked, “it’s been great for us because we’ve been able to use the placement students as [casual teachers] and that’s something that we haven’t ever been able to do before.” Future iterations of the preparation program will seek to expand the number of ITE students involved to continue to improve the preparation of the teaching workforce in flexible learning contexts in our state.

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