# GTPLP Research Report

## Graduate Teacher Professional Learning Program

**Prepared for Beyond the Bell Great South Coast by Deakin University**

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# Contents

# Executive Summary

The Graduate Teacher Professional Learning Program (GTPLP) was a research initiative of Beyond the Bell, a community organisation that seeks to alleviate relative disadvantage that is disproportionately experienced by children and young people living in the Great South Coast region of Victoria. During 2023, the GTPLP initiative was targeted to graduate teachers in the Great South Coast region of Victoria: Moyne, Southern Grampians, Corangamite, Warrnambool City and Glenelg. At this time, the workforce of the region includes approximately 80 graduate teachers. Of these, 57 teachers responded to the survey developed for the project, with 24 being actively connected to the program.

The GTPLP offered a series of professional learning sessions in which graduate teachers working in the south-west region could explore their professional identity, professional wellbeing and professional practice and develop communities of practice in their professional networks. The GTPLP is unique as, rather than the one-size-fits-all approach of most professional learning programs, it has been developed based on input from graduate teachers as to their current professional needs.

**The overarching question guiding the GTPLP was:**

*How can we best support graduate teachers in the south-west region of Victoria?*

## Summary of key findings

The summary of key findings that follows brings together graduate teachers' responses to the surveys and the professional learning sessions.

### Pre-program survey

Although this program was open to teachers in their first four years in the profession, it was dominated, across all phases, by teachers in their first and second years. In the case of the pre-program survey those in their first two years in the profession constituted 70% of respondents. This was generally lower than the participation rates for those in the first two years for other components of the program, where such teachers represented around 80% of attendees.

### Employment status

Almost three in five respondents were employed on fixed, full-time contracts. Over half work in primary schools, a figure that may prove an underestimate, since one in nine are employed in P–12 schools.

### Employment intentions

While almost half (48%) said they are keen to remain in the profession for as long as possible, this is almost matched (44%) by those who are undecided and is overtaken when those who have already decided to leave the profession are added to those who remain unsure. While many of those who are undecided are likely to remain in the profession, this remains a troubling result. This is because the majority of these teachers have literally just graduated into the classroom after making a significant life investment towards their chosen vocation. That over half remain uncertain about how long they may stay in the profession after one or two years is cause for concern.

### Qualifications

Most teachers (two in three) held a graduate degree, with one in six holding a master degree.

## Graduate teacher support

The graduate teachers were asked what support they had been provided and what support they would like to receive across the four themes of the program.

In the case of professional development, the main identified forms of support received included one in four having team meetings, one in five having access to peer observations or informal mentoring and one in eight having formal mentoring.

Almost one in three would like mentor support, one in five would like more access to professional development, one in six would like access to peer observations, while one in nine would like more time.

Wellbeing support was dominated by the support the graduate teachers sought out themselves. This included two in five who found people, both inside and outside of work, to talk to, one in five who found ways to limit the amount of work they do as a coping mechanism, and a further one in five who felt they had no support mechanisms at all.

While one in six said they did not feel they needed any wellbeing support, 28% felt they needed general support and nearly a quarter (23%) were unsure of what support would help them.

Around a quarter of the teachers did not have any formal or informal professional networks they could draw upon. Those who did have access to these networks felt they supported them across a range of aspects of their career, including improving their professional relationships, their sense of belonging, motivation to share resources, professional levels of trust and sharing their professional practice.

**TABLE 1** Proportion of teachers who felt well, very well or extremely well prepared

| Teaching attribute | From well to extremely well prepared |
| --- | --- |
| Handle a range of classroom management or discipline situations | 73% |
| Use a variety of instructional methods | 71% |
| Teach their subject matter | 90% |
| Assess students | 75% |
| Differentiate instruction in the classroom | 69% |
| Use data from student assessments to inform instruction | 76% |
| Teach to Victorian content standards | 76% |
| Teach multilingual/multicultural students | 33% |
| Integrate inclusive practices and make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of students | 73% |
| Use computers in classroom instruction | 82% |

### Professional preparedness

The survey asked the teachers how well they believed they were prepared for a range of core teaching tasks. Overall, teachers felt they were either well or very well prepared for their professional work. Mostly, other than for their felt preparedness for teaching multilingual or multicultural students, the only teachers to feel they were not at all prepared were those who had not yet qualified as teachers and had been provided with permission to teach. Table 1 shows the proportions of teachers who felt either well, very well or extremely well prepared for the various teaching attributes.

Other than in teaching multilingual/multicultural students, the majority of teachers felt they were at least well prepared for the core tasks they would be performing in the classroom. This is a key finding and one that runs counter to much of the general commentary on early career teacher preparedness.

Teachers provided written responses to a range of prompts, with their responses then categorised into themes. One prompt asked what types of professional learning support they required now. The major themes clustered around assessment, differentiated instruction and curriculum support.

When asked where they might see themselves in five years, just over half believed they would still be in teaching, with one in four hoping to be in a leadership position or within a track leading towards them becoming a principal. One in five believed that if they were to achieve this goal, they would need continued professional development and guidance.

## The program

When prompted to consider what they were most proud of in their first years within the profession, many responses related to the relationships these teachers had built. This is a noteworthy finding, as research has consistently shown that teachers who focus on the relationships they have in and out of the classroom make the most impactful teachers.

One of the central parts of the program is encouraging the teachers to engage with a 'problem of practice'. They do this in small groups and are trusted by the facilitators to address these problems amongst themselves. This is an exercise in respect for their already existing high levels of professional practice, knowledge and skill. It also provides the teachers with practice in working within a community of practice, in carefully listening to a problem faced by another teacher and in providing either potential solutions or even reassurance as a fellow professional. This session also enabled teachers in the third and fourth years in the profession to reassure those who had just begun their journey that some of the problems that appear currently insurmountable become much more manageable with time.

The teachers themselves asked for a session that might explain their employment entitlements. This was provided by two principals and proved very well received by the teachers.

Teachers were also asked to reflect on the metaphors they might hold for teaching. In doing so, they were provided with a space to visualise their professional identity in its myriad forms. Core to this reflection is the opportunity the exercise provides teachers in pulling together disparate aspects of their experience in ways that show the benefits and limitations of particular metaphors in structuring how they view that experience.

Introducing the teachers to the 'Wellbingo' card was designed to encourage them to focus on their own wellbeing as a key factor in the impact they can have in the classroom. The card is designed to help teachers focus on simple actions they can immediately take that may make a real difference to their work life and shift their attention to self-care. It is important to recognise that self-care is positioned as

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# Response to research question

*How can we best support graduate teachers in the south-west region of Victoria?*

Central to the guiding philosophy of this professional learning intervention is the belief that early career teachers require support across four interrelated dimensions: professional identity, professional wellbeing, professional practice and professional networks. Each of these dimensions is understood to enable the others to be sustained, and ignoring any will endanger the sustainable integration of teachers into the profession and ultimately be more costly than providing support across these four dimensions.

This professional learning has also been founded on the understanding that early career teachers have stronger professional capabilities than they and others generally give themselves credit for. As they adopt a strengths-based approach to their introduction into the profession, we believe they will thereby continue to develop the skills and dispositions required to make them resilient members of their school communities.

That is, the best way to support graduate teachers is by providing professional learning opportunities focused on providing them with a clear focus on their own professional identity; strategies that help them sustain their wellbeing, peer and professional support to improve their professional practice; and multilayered networks they can turn to across all of their needs now and into the future. We hold that becoming a teacher is a process, and one that is not time limited but that continues to grow across one's teaching journey in a community of other professional teachers.

immediately actionable and in the teacher's control, but that it sits within a larger socio-cultural view of teacher wellbeing.

The sessions focused on improving teacher professional networks were designed to be practical and to build towards making the teachers aware of the skills they already possess as professionals while informing them of the support available from peers, their schools and elsewhere that can make a significant difference to their teaching and professional learning.

## Post-program survey

The post-program survey received only five responses — as such, what can be reasonably said about it is limited. Nevertheless, the comments coming out of this survey did stress the benefits these teachers felt they acquired throughout their participation in the program. Hearteningly, these included a strong focus on feelings of connection with other teachers at the same point in their journey and how this reinforced their sense of connectedness to the profession.

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# Key recommendations

**1** That teachers within their first years in the profession continue to be provided with strengths-based support that focuses on developing their professional identity, wellbeing, practice and networks.

**2** That every effort be made to provide early career teachers in the region with access to fellow teachers at similar points in their career journey, particularly in schools where they may be the only teacher at this point in their career.

**3** The aspect where teachers felt least prepared to be effective within the classroom was their ability to teach multilingual/multicultural students. Consideration should be given to providing interventions to address these perceived skill shortcomings.

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# Beyond the Bell and the Great South Coast Region

Beyond the Bell is a not-for-profit, collective impact, backbone support organisation operating across the Great South Coast in Victoria, Australia. As a regional leader in place-based initiatives, and valuing innovation, creativity, equity and sustainability, Beyond the Bell works collaboratively with its partners to achieves its aim of ensuring every young person in the Great South Coast is connected to education and actively engaged in their learning.

The collective impact framework is a structured approach to addressing complex social issues by bringing together diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively toward a common goal. As a backbone support organisation, Beyond the Bell works closely with the education and community sectors, playing a critical role in facilitating and coordinating the collaborative efforts of these stakeholders through facilitating communication between partner organisations, guiding the development of a common agenda, mobilising resources, and collecting and analysing data.

Emphasising the pivotal role of data, Beyond the Bell engages in comprehensive data collection and analysis activities. This data not only deepens Beyond the Bell's understanding of the region but also serves to inform future programs and initiatives. Within the collective impact framework, data assumes critical importance, serving as the linchpin for informed decision-making and enabling stakeholders to make judicious choices about strategies, interventions and resource allocation. Data is utilised to foster a shared understanding of social issues among partner organisations, while facilitating more effective measurement of progress through the establishment of clear indicators of program effectiveness. Data also plays a pivotal role in identifying trends, patterns and emerging social problems that may not be immediately visible. This capability allows for continual improvement, helping Beyond the Bell and partners to adapt strategies based on data insights.

By utilising this framework Beyond the Bell supports numerous initiatives across the region that work towards supporting educational outcomes across the Great South Coast. This includes early intervention and school transition support such as the Stepping Stones to School program, offering services like playgroups, parenting programs and transition assistance. The organisation extends its commitment to students through support of the Level-Up program, which supports numerous partner organisations to deliver in-school support programs, including targeted cultural support and specialised interventions. Additionally, Beyond the Bell supports mentoring programs that connect students with adult mentors, alongside career development initiatives that equip students with the skills and knowledge for informed career decisions. Finally, Beyond the Bell is committed to empowering youth voices through supporting youth leadership initiatives such as the Making a Difference youth reference group, while also supporting education transition initiatives, such as providing individualised career advice that ultimately prepares young individuals for leadership roles while guiding them through educational transitions into the workforce.

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As a regional leader in place-based and collective impact initiatives, Beyond the Bell emphasises innovation, creativity, equity and sustainability in its collaborative efforts with partners in the education and community sectors. By facilitating communication, guiding the development of a common agenda and mobilising resources, Beyond the Bell plays a crucial role in ensuring every young person in the Great South Coast is connected to education and actively engaged in their learning. The organisation's strategic use of data is central to informed decision-making and continuous improvement. Through various initiatives, including early intervention, school transition support, in-school programs, mentoring, career development, and youth leadership, Beyond the Bell actively contributes to enhancing educational outcomes in the Great South Coast.

The purpose of the GTPLP initiative is first to capture the current professional needs of graduate teachers in the south-west region of Victoria, and second to design an effective professional learning program in response to those needs. This initiative can provide insights into how graduate teachers can be better supported, which in turn may impact their consideration for staying in the profession.

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# About the Graduate Teacher Professional Learning Program

## Significance

The graduate teacher phase is an important one in the life cycle of teachers, as studies have shown that teachers find the first three years in the profession the most difficult and are more susceptible to burnout and attrition, and more so when they are faced with "challenging student behaviour, isolation, a lack of collegiality and engagement with professional networks, and being overloaded with responsibilities" (Hogan & White, 2021, p. 18). Studies have shown that excessive workload, managing relationships with parents and colleagues, and dissatisfaction with their job lead to early career teacher attrition (Buchanan et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2019; Scott, 2019; Smethem, 2007; Carroll et al., 2022; Gallant & Riley, 2017; Shields & Kilgour, 2018).

Given the current precarity of the teaching workforce in Australia, findings from this research can provide insights into how graduate teachers can be better supported, which in turn may impact their consideration for staying in the profession. For the purpose of this research, we explore four areas of teacher support: professional identity, professional wellbeing, professional practice and professional networks.

## Professional identity

According to Sachs (2005):

> Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

The literature reveals that there is no one single definition of teacher identity; rather, it is understood in different ways from different perspectives. Across the literature there is also an overarching understanding that identity is not static but shifts over time, influenced by a range of factors (Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Britzman, 1992; Day

et al., 2006; Mockler, 2011). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) state that the main factors which influence the development of teacher identity include "the place of the self, and related issues of agency, emotion, narrative and discourse; the role of reflection; and the influence of contextual factors" (p. 175). Day et al. (2006) show that teacher identity is "affected, positively and negatively, by classroom experiences, organisational culture and situation-specific events" and "sustaining a positive sense of effectiveness to subject, pupils, relationships and roles is important to maintaining motivation, self-esteem or self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and commitment to teaching" (p. 614).

According to Alsup (2006), teacher identity is one of "continual becoming rather than an endpoint culminating in a singular identity construction" (p. 7) and "incorporates the cognitive, the emotional, the bodily, and the creative" (p. 14). Britzman (1992) similarly argues that "the taking up of an identity is a constant social negotiation that can never be permanently settled or fixed, occurring as it necessarily does within the irreconcilable contradictions of situational and historical constraints" (p. 42). Mockler (2011) similarly argues, that teacher professional identity is "formed and re-formed constantly over the course of a career and mediated by a complex interplay of personal, professional and political dimensions of teachers' lives" (p. 1). A teacher's sense of self goes beyond the scripted role or function of a teacher as measured against policy discourse, student outcomes or professional standards. A developing professional identity cannot be separated from one's sense of self (Day et al., 2006; Rodgers & Scott, 2008), and this can only be troubled the more one's envisioned professional identity differs from both the lived reality of a role and one's professional aspiration.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2006; 2009) explored the identity development of those in the transition from student to new teacher and found that they "could articulate only a very tentative sense of their identities" as they made their way through "negotiating within shifting conceptions of what teaching is or should be, relating to the identities of others, [and] becoming agents of their own identity development" (p. 185). Cobb (2022) recently shows how identity, resilience and agency "work in tandem"

to enable early career teachers to navigate the complexities and challenges in their initial years of professionalisation. Research shows that identity does not "inhere solely in the individual" but rather is "lived out in individuals" (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 419); that is, it is "shaped, developed, or changed in response to lived experiences" (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 44). Linking agency with identity highlights the role of the context in allowing teachers to renegotiate or defend their identities (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018), something implied in our preferred term of 'becoming teachers'. Cobb (2022) adds that teachers need to be able to exercise resilience in order to navigate the "tensions between their constructed identities and the realities of school culture and wider education policies" (p. 3). Cobb's findings show "how identity, resilience and agency work in tandem to broker learning and conceptions of self" (p. 9) and allow teachers to have a more successful transition into their profession.

Just as the teaching profession is one that is ever evolving and changing, so is teacher identity. Thus, when we discuss teacher identity in this paper, we are recognising its multifaceted and complex nature.

## Professional wellbeing

Wellbeing is not a single concept, but rather a dynamic interplay of conflicting and contextualised relationships that develop and change over time. Risk, security, freedom, professional efficacy, the possibility of change and personal growth all work with and against each other in the construction of an individual's sense of wellbeing (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 2008). As such, it is understood that the definition of teacher wellbeing necessarily changes over the course of a career. In the early phases of that career, the precariousness of employment and the overwhelming sense of having too much work to do in too little time act to undermine an early career teacher's sense of wellbeing (Mayer, 2014; Mayer et al., 2017). To counter this, schools that focus on developing a teacher's sense of efficacy create an environment more likely to retain early career teachers, since "teacher wellbeing prospers in work environments that are meaningful and that make educators' core work achievable" (Shirley et al., 2020, p. 3).

Central to how teacher wellbeing is often addressed is the guiding assumption that it is an issue for the individual teachers themselves; that is, that addressing a teacher's lack of wellbeing implies

taking action to fix the teacher (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). This is understood to occur within the context of "neoliberal ideologies that favour and privilege individual competition, accountability, performativity and management" (p. 100). This finding is similar to that of Gallant and Riley (2017) where New Public Management is identified "as the biggest contributor to the teachers' exit" (p. 900). Furthermore, "individualistic ways of approaching wellbeing avoid the social origins of ill-being" (Shirley et al., 2020, p.8). Shirley et al. stress that a shift of focus towards greater teacher professionalism often helps to overcome the debilitating impacts of early career teacher ill-being:

> Educators appear to benefit from the breadth of collaborative professionalism in systems that bring them closer to each other and to their students in taking responsibility for and achieving these transformational purposes. (p. 10)

Acton and Glasgow (2015) in their literature review of teacher wellbeing in neoliberal contexts offer a comprehensive definition of wellbeing that encompasses, to name a few, factors of wellbeing including external factors, such as policy initiatives; relational factors, such as connectedness and belonging; and individual factors, such as sense of competence, attitude, healthy work-life balance and pedagogical competence (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). The review found that the literature on teacher wellbeing is understood as "socially influenced" (p. 103). The review also highlights that professional working relationships are important for teaching wellbeing as a part of "establishing a positive overarching school climate that fosters and encourages professional, mutually-supportive collegial relationships between teachers and administrators is of utmost importance in sustaining teachers and enhancing their wellbeing" (p. 106). Furthermore, systemic level policies effect teachers' wellbeing through the school implementation of policies that impact workload, agency and respect for teacher professional knowledge.

Teacher wellbeing is important for preventing teacher absenteeism and attrition and supporting retention (Beltman et al., 2022). The expected outcomes of teacher wellbeing include engagement, retention, lower stress level, quality of classroom processes and increased student wellbeing (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

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## Professional practice

An underlying assumption in the broad field of teacher education research is that early career teachers are lacking quality in their teaching and need to be "fixed" (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014, p. 604). However, studies have challenged the assumption that early career teachers are "helpless" (Ulvik & Langørgen, 2012, p. 48) or "not ready yet" (Correa et al., 2015, p. 73), a body of work to which this research contributes. Ulvik and Langørgen (2012) argue that although more experienced teachers have greater knowledge to share with newcomers in the profession, the skills and knowledge that newcomers bring should not be dismissed. Their study found that beginning teachers felt more competent than those more experienced in terms of "(1) having new ideas and being enthusiastic; (2) digital competence; and (3) understanding young people, because they have more common frames of understanding" (p. 49). Recent Australian research from Gore and colleagues (2023) has found that "despite continued government and media focus questioning the quality of new teachers and ITE, we found no evidence to indicate new teachers were inadequate, despite less on-the-job experience" (n.p.).

## Professional networks

Studies have shown that teachers new to the field can experience isolation, both real and perceived (Buchanan et al., 2013), and being part of a professional support network can offer resources and support. This isolation is exacerbated for graduates working in small schools; remote or rural schools; being the only new graduate; the only teacher of a particular subject; teaching out-of-field; or feeling generally unsupported. Such isolation can be crippling to the growth, wellbeing and security of a graduate teacher, especially in a period where they are keen to learn and develop their practice and need someone to lean on (Buchanan et al., 2013).

Therefore, crucial to the GTPLP is the engagement of graduate teachers with like-minded peers at similar stages of teaching experience that offer them a professional support network. The benefits of such engagement relate to the closeness in proximity of experiences, offsetting the power imbalance that might occur in a relationship such as that between a graduate teacher and mentor or other experienced colleague (Le Cornu, 2013). Buchanan et al. (2013) suggest that teachers are often responsive to professional learning with colleagues who have similar concerns to their own, supporting Le Cornu's finding that graduate teachers lean on each other, enabling a non-judgmental reality check that affirms their experiences, concerns and challenges. Likewise, Le Cornu suggests associating within a community of graduate teachers empowers the members to manage conflicts and challenges both professionally and personally and helps them to move beyond what they know and have experienced at this early stage (Beattie, 2000).



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## Geographical context

The OECD (2013) discusses 'urban advantage', showing that there are distinctions in students' mean scores on PISA and TIMSS according to where they live and attend school. Data from TIMSS show that "Year 8 Australian students in metropolitan schools on average achieve significantly higher mathematics and science scores than students in provincial and remote schools" (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 73). This data seems to be uniform across a number of countries. In response, the federal government in Australia commissioned a review to explore and provide recommendations to improve outcomes in regional, rural and remote schools (Halsey, 2018).

The report *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: Who succeeds and who misses out* shows that:

> regional differences exist across Australia, [where] 31 per cent of remote students are at or above the national proficiency standard compared to 48 per cent of regional students and 57 per cent of metropolitan students. (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 51)

Additionally, compared to over 47.2% of young adults living in cities, only 20.5% from regional areas and 16.6% from remote areas would have gained a degree or still be studying at age 24 (Lamb et al., 2020).

In the *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education*, nine themes or factors were identified:

> which have a significant impact on students' achievements and which also provide new opportunities, namely: » Curriculum and assessment » Teachers and teaching » Leaders and leadership » School and community » Information and Communication Technology » Entrepreneurship and schools » Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education, boarding » Diversity » Transitioning beyond school. (Halsey, 2018, p. 3)

The report also states:

> Access to high quality education and training is one of the most effective ways of ensuring that Australians are very well prepared for competitive global labour markets. This need is particularly acute in many if not most RRR locations and communities. (p. 26)

Regional and rural areas also impact on teacher attrition (Mayer et al., 2017). Remote and isolated locations make it a challenge for teachers who want to return to major cities to meet friends and family (p. 115). Other challenges include lower pay and having "difficult working conditions, such as having to teach classes in multiple subject areas" (Hammer et al., 2005, p. vii). These challenges to teacher recruiting and retention are, however, not insurmountable. Mayer et al. further showed that "when schools develop and maintain support systems for beginning teachers that include serious mentoring and induction oriented on improving teachers' practice, teachers are more likely to stay in their school and are less likely to move to other schools or leave teaching". The researchers conclude that "there is a wide consensus among educators that strong, vibrant, professional communities of teachers and administration support are essential for beginning teachers to stay, develop and thrive" (Mayer et al., 2017, p. 115).

## Policy context

Across any number of countries, the teaching profession is often framed in education policy discourses as 'problematic', resulting in ongoing inquiries into ways to increase attraction to and retention in the profession (Lofthouse, 2018; Mockler, 2018; Fox et al., 2020). Many of these inquiries are aimed toward pre-service and early career teachers to enable them to navigate 'praxis shock' as they transition between two spaces – that is, their preconceived ideas of what teaching should be and their lived experiences when they enter the classroom (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Several studies have shown that early career teachers face challenges that can make their time in the classroom stressful, ineffective and short, with perhaps one-third leaving the profession in their first five years of teaching (Cobb, 2022; Weldon, 2018). Thus, initiatives to support teachers in their early years in the profession proliferate education reforms across Australia, as they have in other international jurisdictions.

One such recent policy reform initiative in Australia is the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* (NTWAP). This blueprint outlines five priority areas and 27 actions for attracting and retaining teachers across Australia (Department of Education, 2022). The responsibilities for actioning these plans are spread across various federal and state agencies, with timelines and budgets already in place for several of these initiatives (Department of Education, 2022). For example, 'Priority Area 3 – Keeping the teachers we have, Action 14' states the need to "Develop national guidelines to support early career teachers and new school leaders including mentoring and induction" (Department of Education, 2022, p. 6). Further the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has been tasked with providing "draft national guidelines for consultation by mid-2023" (Department of Education, 2022, p. 19).



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# Methodological Approach

The GTPLP takes up a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative approach was adopted for conducting an online survey to provide insight into the broader patterns of experience of the graduate teachers in the region. A qualitative approach was adopted for the in-person and online programs, which were designed to create the opportunity for the teachers to articulate their current professional lives. While quantitative data collection and analysis enables common stories (or patterns) in the data to emerge, the qualitative data collection enables an understanding of the local, contingent and specific. The corresponding research design aligns with Beyond the Bell's recent measuring impact framework (Nagorcka-Smith, 2020), which outlines the argument for conducting research that is simultaneously designed to understand the 'big picture trends' while attuning to the complexity of everyday experiences of social, geographical and educational inequity.

## Data collection and analysis

Most teacher professional learning programs, in Australia and internationally, are designed to apply to all teachers in the profession. Very few programs are targeted specifically for early career teachers. This program, proposed by graduate teachers and designed by Deakin academics through the Professional Learning Education Hub at Deakin University, is unique in that it targets the specific needs of a particular group of teachers at a particular time. The tight timeline from getting the graduate teacher input to the delivery of the program speaks to its timely relevance for the teachers.

**Beyond the Bell wanted to know:**

*How can we best support graduate teachers in the south-west region of Victoria?*

To find out how to best support them, graduate teachers across the region were invited to engage in the GTPLP in the following ways: a pre-program survey, a series of professional learning programs and a post-program survey. The recruitment process was initiated and organised by the south-west region's principal network. All the principals agreed on the importance of the program and supported the attendance of their graduate teachers. Once all the agreements were in place, an email was sent to principals to forward to their graduate teachers on behalf of Deakin University. The email to the teachers outlined the structure of the program and provided a link to the survey and a link to register for the program.

Data was collected in three phases.

### Phase one: Pre-program survey

The purpose of the pre-program survey was to capture the current professional needs of the graduate teachers in order to design an effective professional learning program. The online survey collected information around their current teacher profile, their intention to stay in the profession, the current professional supports available to them, their current professional needs and their future aspirations.

There was a total of 57 responses to the survey. The survey results were analysed, which formed the foundation of the GTPLP. Based on the survey responses and the expertise of the Deakin teacher education team, the GTPLP was developed around four key themes: professional practice, professional identity, professional wellbeing and professional networking.

**TABLE 2**  Session delivery and content covered

| Workshop A (term 2, 2023) | Delivery | Topics covered |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Session 1 | Online | Metaphors & professional identity |
| Session 2 | Face to face | Problems of practice<br>Professional wellbeing |
| Session 3 | Online | Networks & communities of practice (CoP) |

| Workshop B (term 4, 2023) | Delivery | Topics covered |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Session 4 | Online | Wellbeing & network reconnect |
| Session 5 | Face to face | Principal Q&A – supports available to early career teachers<br>Future learning needs and career pathways |
| Session 6 | Online | Mentors and 'more knowledgeable others' in schools and CoP<br>Southwest Innovative Grad Network (SWIGN)<br>Sustaining this network/CoP in 2024<br>Co-design support ideas for 2024 graduates<br>Where to from here?<br>Goal setting |

## Phase two: The program

In consultation with the principals' network, it was decided that workshops would be spread out and run across terms 2 and 4. The purpose of structuring the learning across six sessions was to be able to offer teachers the chance to put into practice some of the strategies that they learnt in one session and share their practice and reflections when they came into the next session. The teachers were encouraged to attend all six sessions in order to be able to strengthen their practice, develop their networks and build communities of practice.

The program was facilitated by teacher educators from Deakin University.

## Phase three: Post-program survey

The post-program summary sought to capture how the graduate teachers were utilising the tools and strategies they were given across the program.

## Who engaged in the GTPLP?

In total, 24 graduate teachers participated in the GTPLP. Not all of them were able to attend every session. Table 3 shows a breakdown of the number of attendees at each session.

The teachers who attended the GTPLP sessions came from a range of schools across the region. The schools varied in size, from remote schools with two teachers (one graduate teacher and one teacher / principal / business manager) to regional schools with bigger teaching staff.

## How was the data analysed?

The survey data was analysed using quantitative techniques and the program data with qualitative techniques. Together these produced the insights which enabled us to connect what graduate teachers in the south-west region were experiencing with their schools and systems level context, joining the dots between young people's lived experiences and the policies that have potential for greatest impact on their futures.

TABLE 3 **Number of attendees**

| Phase | Year 1–2 | Year 3–4 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-program survey | 40 | 17 | 57 |
| The program | | | |
| Session 1 – 10 & 11 May* | 12 | 4 | 16 |
| Session 2 – 31 May | 12 | 4 | 16 |
| Session 3 – 14 June | 9 | 3 | 12 |
| Session 4 – 11 October | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| Session 5 – 1 November | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Session 6 – 22 November | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Post-program survey | | | 5 |

*Session 1 was held separately for Year 1–2 and Year 3–4 graduate teachers. Given the low numbers, and the focus on networking, the other sessions were combined for Year 1–4 graduate teachers.

**FIGURE 1** **Towns where the schools were located**
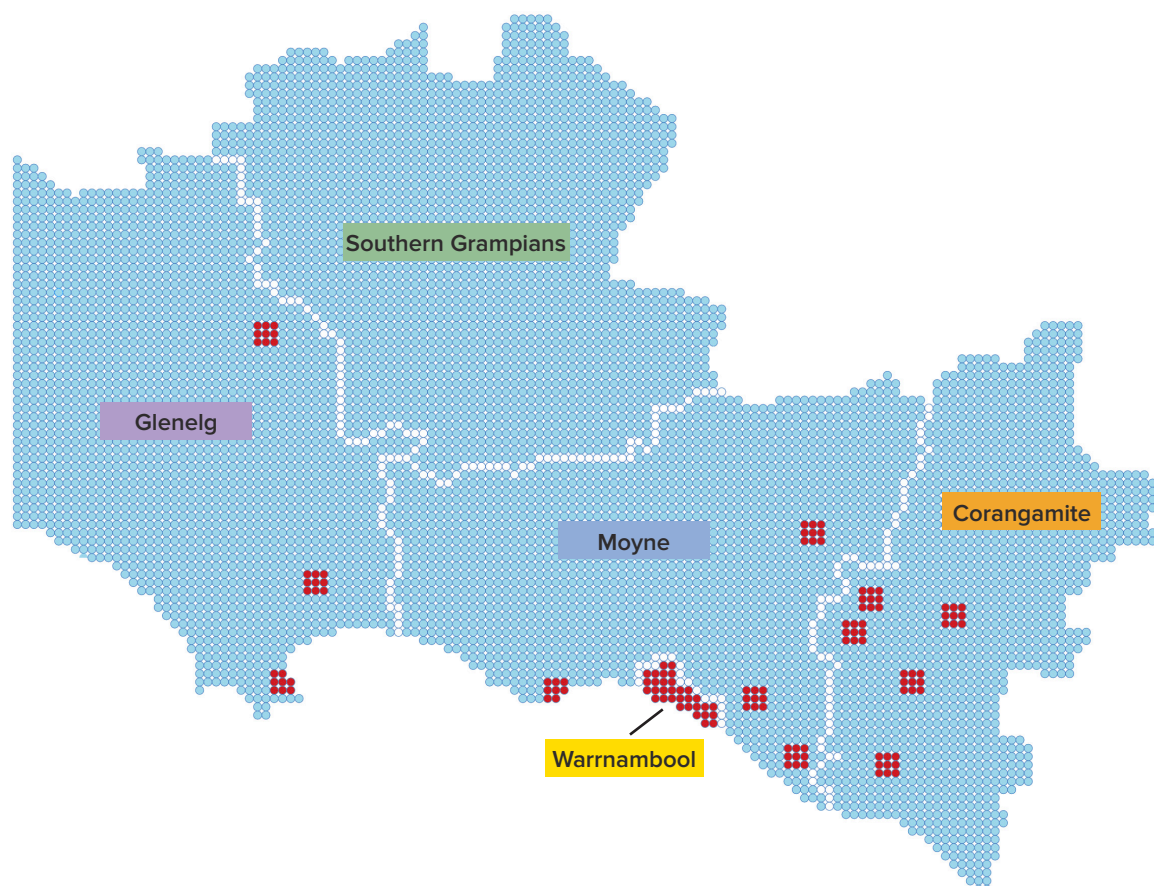
# Findings and Discussion

## Pre-program survey

Prior to developing and implementing the GTPLP, an anonymous online survey was distributed to all graduate teachers in the Great South Coast region of Victoria, which includes the regions of Moyne, Southern Grampians, Corangamite, Warrnambool City and Glenelg. A total of 57 graduate teachers completed the survey.
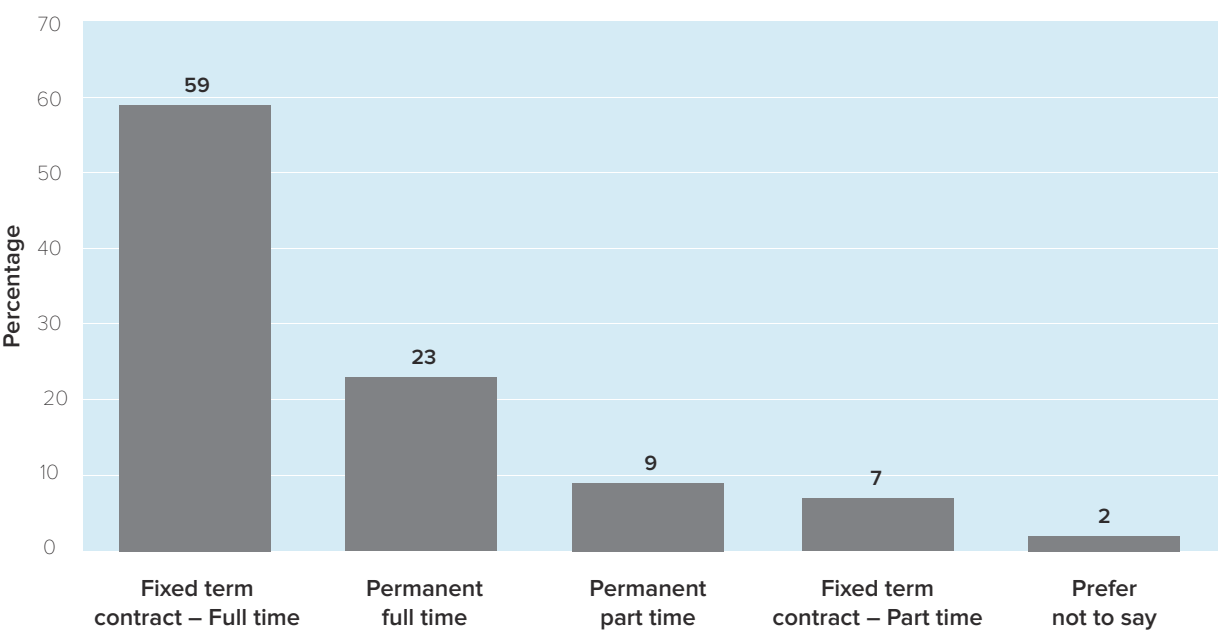
### Employment

Findings showed that most (65%) of the graduate teachers had been employed between one and two years, while just under a third (30%) had been employed between two and four years, and a further 5% had selected 'other'. Most of these graduated teachers were either registered (53%) or provisionally registered (40%) teachers, with a small percentage of teachers (5%) who had been granted permission to teach or had not provided details. Figure 2 presents details of the current employment status of this group of graduate teachers. Results show that over half (59%) of these teachers were employed full time on fixed-term contracts, while only 25% had permanent full-time positions.

Over half (56%) of the graduate teachers were currently teaching in primary schools, while the remaining teachers were teaching in secondary (30%) or Prep–12 schools (11%). Of the primary school graduate teachers, most (69%) were teaching in Foundation to Year 2 and 24% were teaching in years 3 to 6, with the remaining teachers teaching across Foundation to Year 6. Most secondary graduate teachers taught across year levels, with approximately one-third (30%) who taught English, while the remaining teachers taught Health and Physical Education, Psychology and LOTE (each 10%), and Maths, Science, Biology, Legal Studies, Humanities and Special Education (each 5%).

Most (88%) graduate teachers teaching in primary and secondary schools were currently teaching in-field, while 12% were teaching out-of-field. It could be assumed that those teachers teaching out-of-field were graduate teachers teaching in secondary schools. If this is the case, then from the 30% of graduate teachers in secondary schools, 41% of these are currently teaching out-of-field.

**FIGURE 2**  Employment status of graduate teachers (N = 57)

Graduate teachers were also invited to indicate how long they planned to remain in teaching, from seven options presented in the survey item. Figure 3 presents the results from these responses. Results show that an almost equal percentage of teachers indicated either that they wanted to remain in teaching as long as they were able (48%) or were undecided (44%).

## Qualifications

Most (86%) graduate teachers had gained their teaching qualifications in Victoria, while the remaining graduate teachers gained their qualifications in Queensland (7%), South Australia (4%), United Kingdom (1%) or did not specifically state (2%).

Over two-thirds (67%) of this group of graduate teachers currently held a bachelor degree as their highest academic qualification, while 18% had a master degree. A smaller percentage of graduate teachers had either a graduate diploma (7%) or a graduate certificate (3%) as their highest qualification.

**FIGURE 3**  Graduate teacher plans to remain in teaching (N = 57)
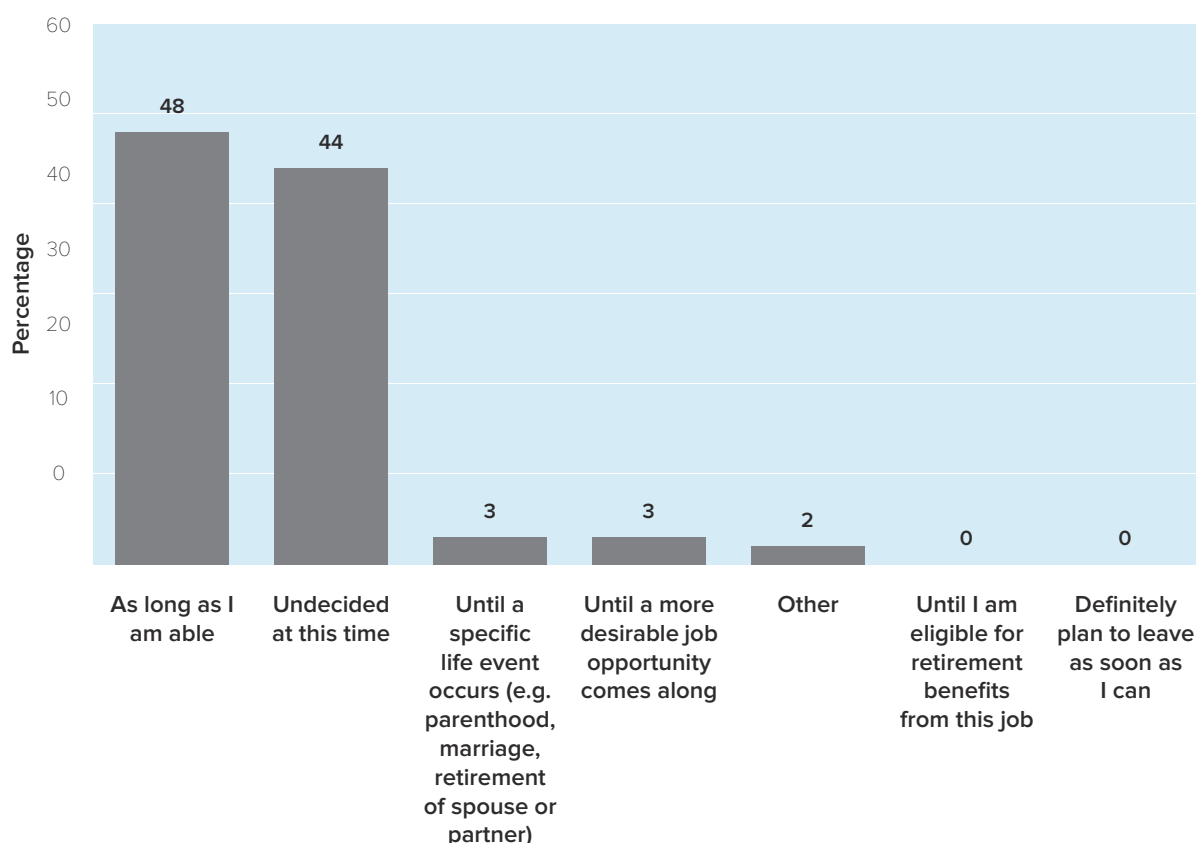
## Support for graduate teachers

Participants were invited to indicate the ways in which their school provides professional supports from a list of six options, including an opportunity to specify alternative ways of support not listed. Results showed that graduate teachers were provided with 'regular professional learning in team meetings' (25%), 'opportunities for peer observations' (22%), 'informal mentoring from more experienced colleagues' (19%), 'opportunities to develop their practice' (19%) or 'formal mentoring from an assigned mentor' (12%). Other responses included 'none', 'internal and external professional development' and 'access to professional development'.

Graduate teachers were also invited to share other ways their school could best support them to develop their practice. A total of 52 of the 57 (91%) graduate teachers responded to this open-ended item on the survey. Figure 4 presents the nine main themes that were identified in the data. Results show that nearly one-third (30%) of the graduate teacher responses highlighted that these teachers felt that they would benefit from mentoring to support the development of their practice. One graduate teacher stated that they 'needed more mentoring from a learning specialist', while another wrote that they would appreciate 'assistance with my data literacy'. Some of the graduate teachers also noted that they would benefit from a mentor where they could engage in 'more critical reflection' and 'practice review sessions to further develop stronger teaching ideas and strategies'. As another graduate teacher wrote, 'as a new teacher in the school and only a second-year teacher, a buddy teacher to asks questions would be beneficial', while another noted the importance of 'more targeted assistance for first year teachers'.

A total of 21% of graduate teacher responses also noted the benefit of ongoing professional development to support the development of their practice. Many of these teachers also made comments of the importance of time to attend or undertake 'local', 'external' or 'online' professional development courses. Peer observations were also noted by 17% of these graduate teacher responses as a beneficial way of supporting their practice. One teacher noted that opportunities to observe classes

was 'what I did last year, and it helped me out a lot', while others commented on the need to 'regularly observe more experienced teachers' and to have 'more observations in the classroom ... to have a point/impact on my learning instead of general chat about students'.

Other themes identified in the open-ended responses in the survey related to 'having more time', to include more 'group planning' and 'a more formal and complete approach to curriculum design'. As one graduate teacher noted:

> my school has no curriculum at all, so I am building the ship as I go. This is an awesome learning experience but, as a newly qualified teacher, it is daunting because I am second guessing myself.

Some graduate teacher responses (8%) showed that they felt that they were already receiving plenty of support and that their school 'is already supportive at this time' and 'they're doing fine'. For some graduate teachers, their responses (8%) showed that they didn't know what support they needed because they were 'unsure as I have only just started at this school so unsure as to the full potential on offer' or 'unsure, I don't know what I don't know'.

> *"Practice review sessions to further develop stronger teaching ideas and strategies"*
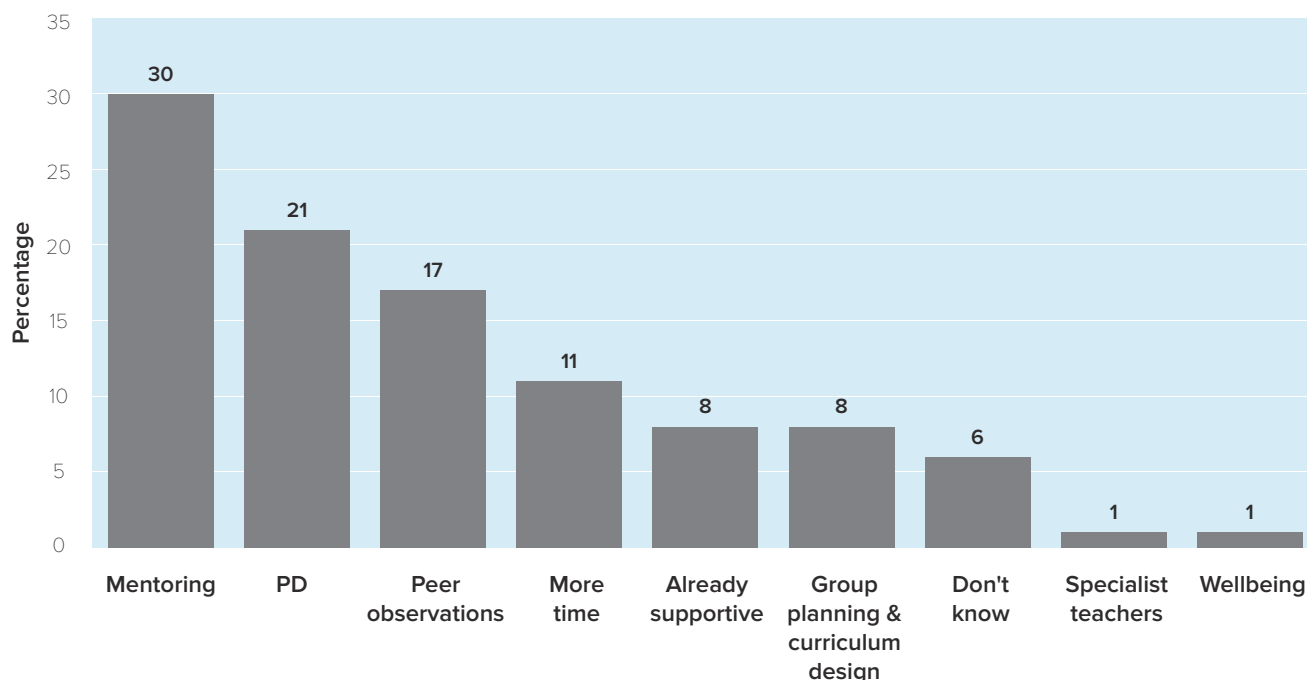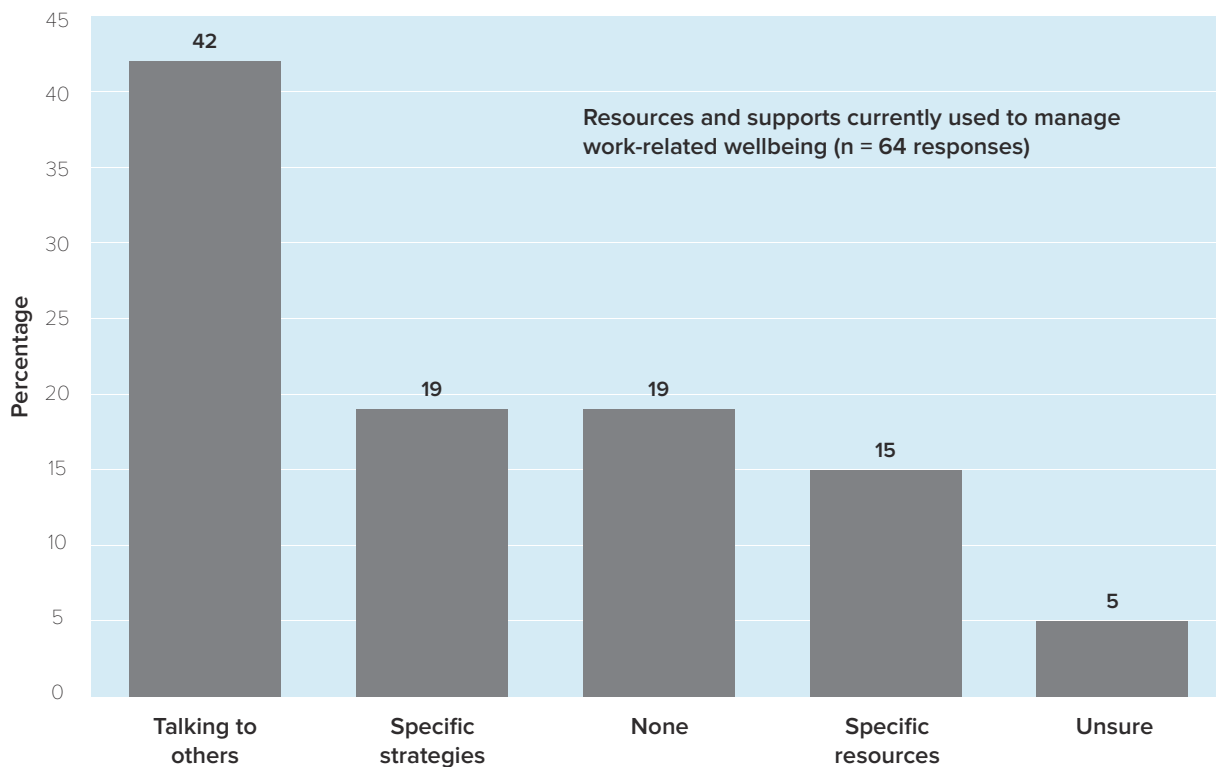
Graduate teachers were also invited to indicate the resources and supports that they currently use to manage their work-related wellbeing. A total of 49 of the 57 (86%) graduate teachers responded to this open-ended item. Five main themes were identified from the data. Almost half (42%) of the graduate teacher responses stated that they spoke to others either at or outside of work.

One graduate teacher noted the need to 'have a safe person to talk to', while others commented that they 'lean on support people', 'discuss with supporting staff and principal when needed', 'have conversations with peers' and have 'informal chats with other staff'. Other graduate teachers commented that they 'debrief [with] outlets at home and in community', have 'social support from family and friends' or seek support with outside agencies such as psychologists.

Many graduate teachers' responses (19%) also indicated that they had developed specific strategies to manage their work-related wellbeing. These strategies included 'trying to leave at a more reasonable hour, exercising to switch off', 'consider carefully how much I am able to take on and have developed the confidence to say no when I do not have the capacity to take on more', use a 'diary' or 'mediation' or 'doing work at work only, leaving it there'. One graduate teacher had commented on several strategies they put in place, stating that they:

> Set termly goals around organisation, work ethic, wellbeing … Complete all immediate tasks during the working week and no work on weekends. Ensure I make time to do activities I enjoy during the work week and on weekends. Plan specialist classes for the term on the school holidays to reduce workload during the term.

**FIGURE 5** How schools are supporting graduate teacher wellbeing (N = 57)



Resources and supports currently used to manage work-related wellbeing (n = 64 responses)

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Talking to others | 42 |
| Specific strategies | 19 |
| None | 19 |
| Specific resources | 15 |
| Unsure | 5 |

Some graduate teachers (19%) did not have any resources or support that they currently used, while 5% were 'unsure' or were 'still figuring it out'. Other graduate teachers (15%) stated that they used specific resources such as 'use of research-based programs', 'health Apps' or 'resource sharing websites' such as 'Smiling Minds'.

Graduate teachers were also invited to state what other resources or support they would need to manage their work-related wellbeing. A total of 49 of the 57 (86%) graduate teachers responded to this open-ended item that included 53 different responses. Overall, the highest proportion of responses (28%) were related to 'general extra support' and 'ongoing support', specific support around 'completed unit plans and assessment', 'administrative details', and 'more support 'for maths and literacy'. Almost a quarter of the responses (23%) related to graduate teachers being 'unsure' or not knowing what resources or specific support they needed to manage their work-related wellbeing. A further 17% of graduate teacher responses indicated that they didn't need any support, while 11% of responses highlighted the need for greater support regarding 'behaviour', 'if the school took a more

proactive approach to discipline' and 'further support to develop strategies for challenging behaviours'. The final three themes identified from the data related to the need for 'mentoring' (6%), 'wellbeing check ins' (6%) or ways for reducing 'workload' or 'not expecting to work out of school [as the] expectation is added pressure' (9%).

A further survey item invited teachers to indicate whether they were currently part of either a formal or informal network which aimed to serve several purposes. Specifically, graduate teachers rated 10 statements according to three types of responses: (1) no, (2) unsure or (3) yes. Figure 6 presents the responses from 52 of the 57 (91%) graduate teachers who responded to this survey item. Results show a similar pattern of responses across all 10 statements, with over half (59% to 79%) the graduate teachers



**FIGURE 6** Professional networks for graduate teachers (N = 57)
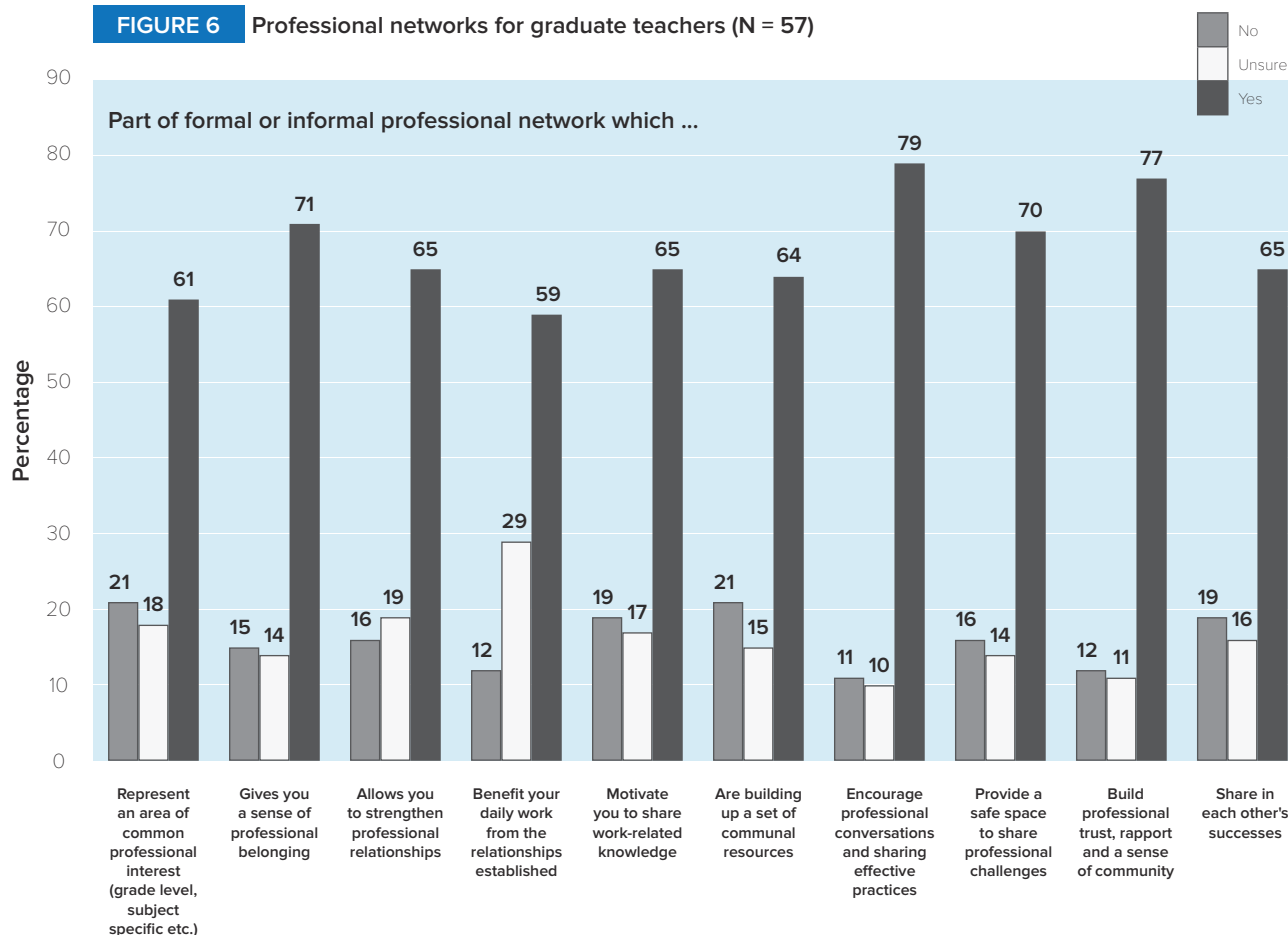
receiving some type of formal or informal support through professional networks. These networks included internal supports such as:

> the school has a meeting agenda that has been mapped/planned for the year to enable teachers from different faculties to gather with each other in small groups and as a whole staff

> strong and supportive relationships

> the staff team at the school

> I am part of the Humanities and English domain and both domains have a good collegiate atmosphere where resources are shared

External networks include 'subject specific Facebook groups', 'MLTAV/VILTA memberships',* 'formal professional learning groups', 'online forums' and 'Deakin Alumni/peers from course, Think Forward Educators'. Some graduate teachers also noted that there were challenges in setting up networks, as in a 'small school it is difficult to share resources', and challenges in teachers' workloads. As one graduate teacher noted:

> One of my teachers is really supportive but I am finding it hard to reach out to them as they have such a big workload too. There isn't much support for planning as I am the only grade 1/2 teacher and I am my team.

However, over a third of graduate teachers were *unsure* or *do not* have a network that benefits their daily work from the relationships established (41%), has an area of common professional interest (39%), builds a set of communal resources (36%), motivates them to share work-related knowledge (36%), shares in each other's successes (35%) or allows them to strengthen their professional relationships (35%).

* Modern Language Teachers' Association of Victoria, Victorian Indonesian Language Teachers' Association.

Photos by John Schnobrich and Sam Bayle on Unsplash

## Teacher preparedness

Graduate teachers were invited to indicate their level of preparedness related to 10 statements from five options ranging from 'not at all prepared' to 'extremely well prepared'. The results presented in Figure 7 show that over 70% of teachers felt either 'well prepared', 'very well prepared' or 'extremely well prepared' on eight of the 10 areas highlighted in this survey item. However, two-thirds (67%) of the 51 graduate teachers who responded to this item felt that they were either 'not at all prepared' or only 'somewhat prepared' to teach multilingual/multicultural students. Almost a third of graduate teachers (31%) also felt less prepared to 'differentiate instruction in the classroom'.

## Professional learning support

Graduate teachers were also invited to indicate the specific professional learning support they needed right now to develop their practice. Fifty graduate teachers (88%) responded to this survey item. Figure 8 presents the five main themes that were identified from the data. Results show that this group of graduate teachers felt that they would benefit from professional learning support in assessment. One graduate teacher working in a primary school noted they wanted support with 'how to better assess students, record assessment and implement assessment into my teaching — develop ways to have a better understanding of exactly where my kids are at'.
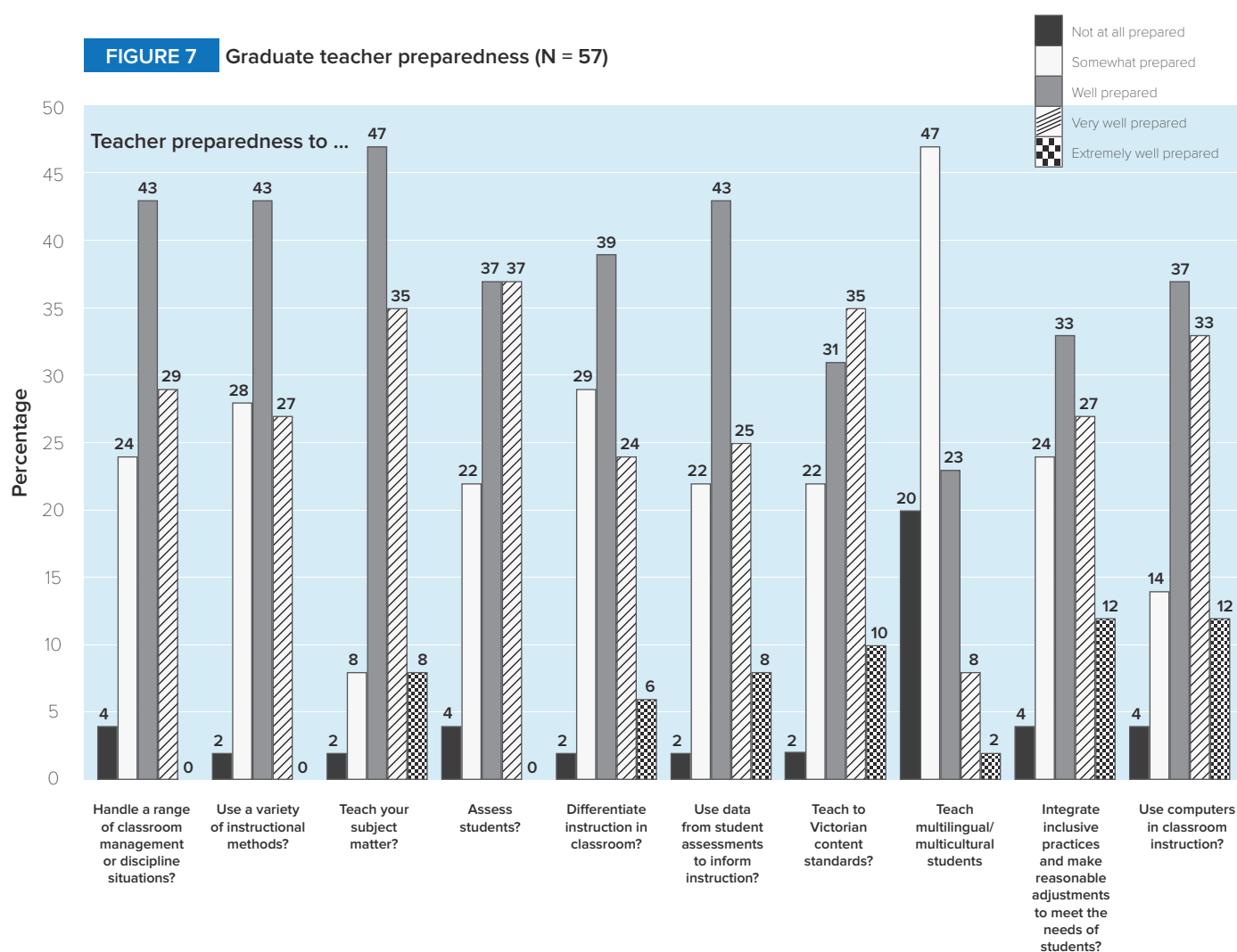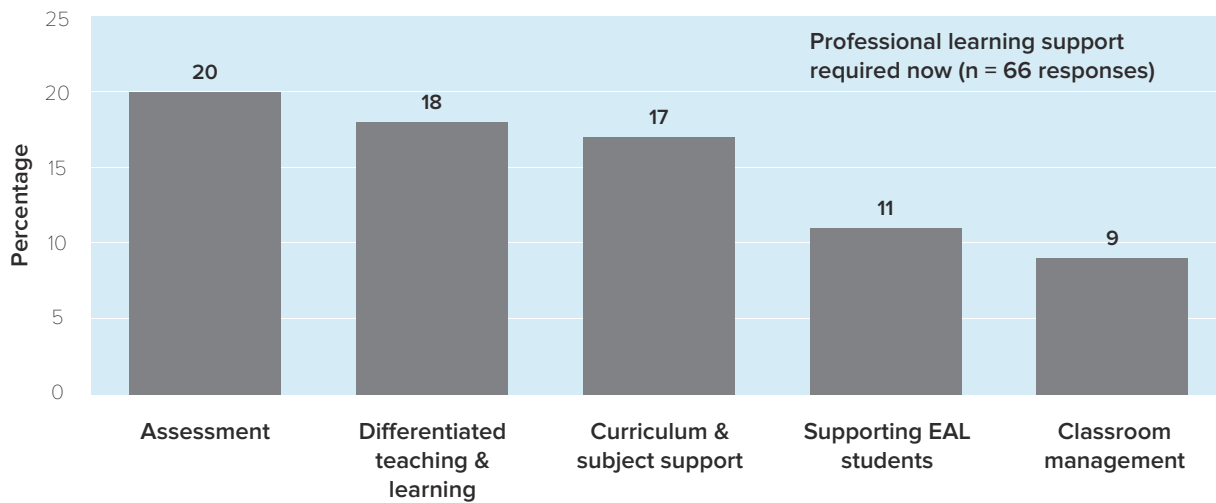


**FIGURE 7**  Graduate teacher preparedness (N = 57)

Legend:
- Not at all prepared
- Somewhat prepared
- Well prepared
- Very well prepared
- Extremely well prepared

FIGURE 8 Professional learning requirements by graduate teachers (N = 57)



Figure shows a bar chart titled "Professional learning support required now (n = 66 responses)" with Percentage on the y-axis (0 to 25).

- Assessment: 20
- Differentiated teaching & learning: 18
- Curriculum & subject support: 17
- Supporting EAL students: 11
- Classroom management: 9

Another graduate teacher working in a secondary school commented that they would benefit from 'more information about Year 12 SACs and assessment'.

The second main theme identified in the data related to the professional learning required by graduate teachers to understand and implement ways to differentiate teaching and learning. One graduate teacher commented on the need for professional learning that helps them to 'provide support and scaffolds for low students who are in need of 1 to 1 attention whilst also teaching the whole class at a different level'. Other graduate teachers highlighted a need to learn more about ways to provide explicit instruction to those students who require it, commenting, 'planning and targeting the needs of intervention students. Implementing structured literacy practices in small group settings' and 'learning more specific effective ways of teaching young children who need explicit instruction'.

The third main theme related to graduate teachers requiring professional learning in curriculum and specific subject teaching and learning. Typical responses included 'writing focus on how to take it to the next step in their writing once they understand the writing features/layout. As well as integrated topics. Where do you start and how do you teach it' and 'teaching reading around the big 6 / effective guided reading'. One teacher noted that there was a need for professional learning in curriculum development because:

> As much as I enjoy the work and the freedom, I don't think my students are best served by having a teacher with IT ... [I need] experience designing curriculum, especially when about 40% of my load is teaching subjects I'm not qualified in and have a limited interest in teaching.

The final two main themes related to graduate teachers' need for professional learning regarding ways to support students who have English as an additional language (EAL), and those who have behavioural challenges. One graduate teacher noted that they needed to know 'how to deal with difficult behaviours', while another commented that 'I have no idea how to support EAL students in my classroom'.

In addition to responses related to these five main aims, some teachers also noted benefiting from professional learning around the use of technology, understanding ways to motivate and engage students, mentoring and time management.

## Projecting to the future

Graduate teachers were invited to share where they see themselves professionally in five years. A total of 49 of the 57 (86%) graduate teachers responded to this open-ended item that included 56 different responses. Five main themes were identified from the data: (1) teaching; (2) in leadership roles; (3) unsure; (4) causal relief teacher; and (5) not teaching. Over half (54%) of the graduate teachers' responses showed that they saw themselves teaching in the next five years with greater knowledge and across different contexts, commenting, 'hopefully in the classroom, experienced and knowledgeable', 'working with a school as a classroom teacher, potentially a disadvantaged school', 'still in a mainstream classroom of a government school, with better professional knowledge and practice, and feel more confident' and 'teaching in Melbourne'. Others indicated that they would like to remain teaching in their current schools.

Almost a quarter (23%) of the graduate teacher responses showed that they saw themselves in positions of leadership within five years. Typical responses included 'a position of leadership, on the fast track towards principal (although I love being in the classroom)', 'potentially moving into a domain lead position or a coordinator' and 'being a leader in a specific area of teaching, being a mentor teacher to student teachers.' One graduate teacher also indicated that they were already in a position of leadership and hoped that they would continue in this role, commenting that they hoped to be 'in a leadership role of some sort or as a year level coordinator still'.

Some graduate teacher responses (18%) showed that they were unsure of where they saw themselves in five years. One teacher noted that they were 'unsure as it depends on what opportunities present themselves', while another was 'hopefully in teaching still but with this burn out most likely to happen I'm not sure'. Only a small percentage of responses showed that graduate teachers didn't see themselves in teaching (2%) or would be in casual relief teacher roles (4%).

In addition to inviting these graduate teachers to indicate where they see themselves in five years, they were also asked to indicate the supports that they would need to achieve these goals. While there were a range of responses to this item, the two main themes identified were the importance of continued mentoring (22%) and professional learning (22%). One graduate teacher acknowledged that 'continued professional development, classroom practice including feedback/guidance, collaborative work with school team members' would support them to achieve their goals. Similarly, another teacher also commented about the importance of mentoring support but highlighted the need to be trusted and given leadership opportunities:

> mentoring, support, observations and leadership being able to trust me to do the jobs I take on. For example sports coordinator instead of micromanaging me and taking over.

The feeling of being valued and trusted was reported by another teacher, who commented on the need to have 'support to be happy staying teaching and feel valued/valuable'.

> *"leadership being able to trust me to do the jobs I take on"*

Other responses showed that graduate teachers seeking possible leadership opportunities in the future would benefit from supports such as 'advice on leadership roles and opportunity to shadow and be mentored by leaders', 'information on what it entails' and 'information about the requirements, the role, the steps I can take to build myself into that position'. Some teachers also reported the need to support their wellbeing, provide ongoing contracts, and provide resources and time to undertake activities that would foster the achievement of their goals.

BEYOND THE BELL

# The program

Based on the pre-program survey responses, relevant research literature and the expertise of the Deakin teacher education team, the GTPLP was developed around four key themes: professional practice, professional identity, professional wellbeing and professional networking. Each topic was scaffolded across the six sessions delivered in terms 2 and 4.

The program was developed as a hybrid model. Delivered across Zoom and in person in Warrnambool, hybridity was a practical strategy that accommodated unique, geographically distanced contexts. While the technological affordances of Zoom enabled a range of participant-centred pedagogical approaches to be included in the program and efficient movement between activities, the in-person events reinforced the embodied work of teaching and provided valuable opportunities for personalised interactions and making connections.

Across the hybrid delivery of the GTPLP there were opportunities to acquaint ourselves with the graduate teachers and for them to get to know each other. The scaffolding of teacher skills, knowledge and understanding was scheduled across an extended period, with opportunities for the participants to take tasks or exit tickets back into their workplaces and working lives.

Driving the design and delivery was the framework of a *pedagogy of support*, an approach combining three well-known, theoretical evidence-based practices: an *ethic of care* (Noddings, 1984; 2005; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Zygmunt et al., 2018), a *strengths-based approach* (Antonovsky, 1979) and a *communities of practice* model (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) is activated deliberately to welcome, support, nurture and hear the program participants' voices through participatory approaches focused on encouraging and acknowledging their journeys. Providing a non-judgmental space was integral to participant safety and to encourage their sharing.

A strengths-based approach (Antonovsky, 1979) acknowledges the individuality of these early career teachers and their respective strengths. Moreover, this approach endorses that they are already making a difference in the lives of the students they work with and the communities they work in. While there are many challenges that they face, and many times they question their own practice, we acknowledge there is also plenty to celebrate.

The third pillar of the pedagogy of support is the development of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As this project spanned seven months, our objective was to support the connection of the participants to each other, to regional supports and to their practices over an elongated period. A shared domain of interest helps to activate ongoing connections in a community of practice and therefore networks are facilitated in this way. Through scaffolded sharing of their experiences via the program activities and pedagogical approaches, participants realised the powerful affinities between them which will likely be sustained beyond the final session.

Here we highlight some of the key features of the program under the four pillars of professional practice, identity, wellbeing and networking.

## Professional practice

In session 1, the teachers were asked:

*What are you most proud of from your first years of teaching?*

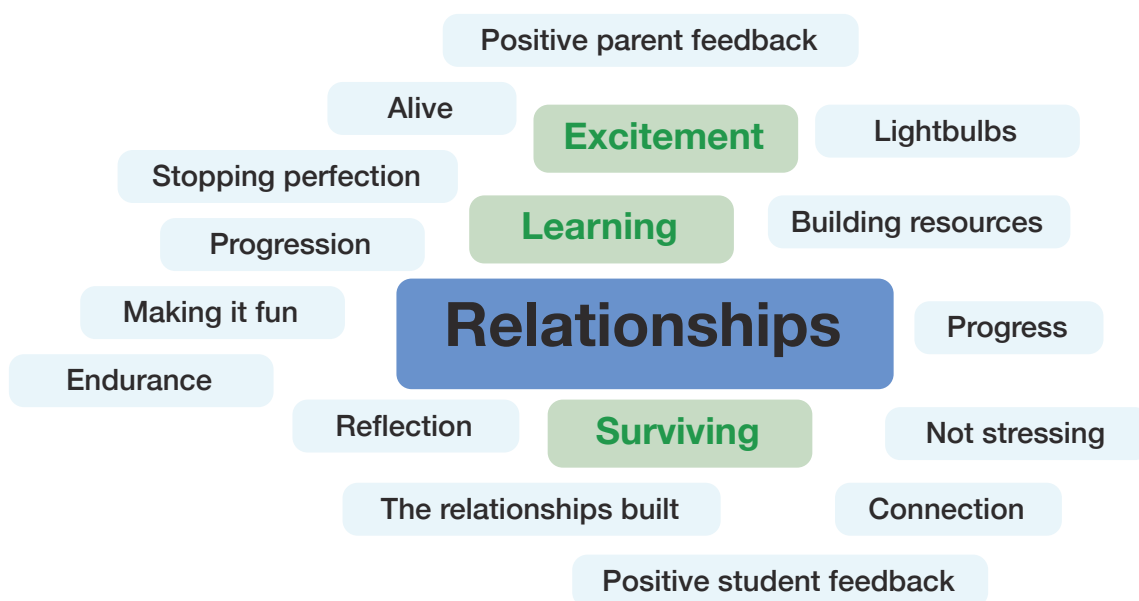We began with a strengths-based activity to set the tone for the remainder of the program.

The graduate teachers were also asked to reflect on their teaching journey so far. One of the facilitators asked:

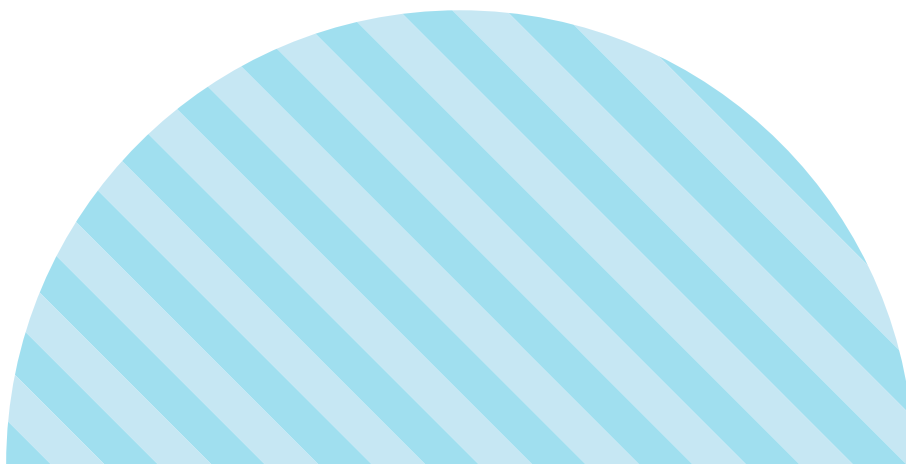*Tell us about progress. What's that look like for you?*

One of the teachers responded:

For me, I guess, progressing in my learning as well as the kids learning. So I guess for me that deliverance in my lessons. And just, I guess in that progression, having a little bit more fun. And yeah, at the end of the day enjoying it, letting the kids have that really weird sense of humour which I kind of encourage at times. But just that yeah, question in a lot of ways getting to know the kids the progression of the relationships with them. And yeah, I guess it's a journey and I quite often remind my kids. I'm still learning just as you guys are learning as well.

**FIGURE 9**  **What first-year graduate teachers are proud of**

Positive parent feedback

Alive

**Excitement**

Lightbulbs

Stopping perfection

**Learning**

Building resources

Progression

**Relationships**

Progress

Making it fun

Endurance

Reflection

**Surviving**

Not stressing

The relationships built

Connection

Positive student feedback

**Wordcloud poll | 27 responses | 12 participants**

At the end of the first session, the teachers were given 'homework' to reflect on their professional practice and bring that reflection to session 2.

> *Think about an experience from your practice that has kept you awake or has really worried you – that you just can't stop thinking about. It could be related to students, to student learning, to colleagues or to parents – anything that you would like to gain greater perspective of.*

In session 2, the teachers used a speaking protocol to share a 'problem of practice' (POP) with two of their peers. The three steps in the protocol involved them (1) sharing their POP without interruption; (2) their peers asking clarifying questions; then (3) an opportunity to collaboratively develop potential solutions in a non-judgmental fashion. This was repeated for each of the three group members.

The following were the themes identified by the teachers as being current challenges in their practice:

- Managing behaviour, especially in children with trauma
- Lack of support for students with additional needs
- Lack of handover at start of year (child safety)
- Mandatory reporting / time constraints / planning time
- Lack of respect and confrontation from some kids
- More responsibilities in small schools including toileting kids
- Lack of respect from principals
- Student engagement / culture of learning
- Differentiation with so many levels in one room

*Think about an experience from your practice that has kept you awake or has really worried you – that you just can't stop thinking about.*

Following the POP session, many teachers commented on the value of this activity, which, in their words 'provided them with a safe space and chance to be heard', meant 'someone at my level who understands exactly how I feel' and was 'an amazing opportunity to hear the perspective of others and develop strategies to manage the situation'.

To reaffirm to the teachers that things do get better with time, the facilitators asked Year 2–4 graduate teachers to highlight key differences they have noticed since their first teaching year. Some of the positive responses included being better at time management, letting things go, balancing work / family / rest, confidence in self, understanding students, no more perfectionism and self-growth.

Session 2 also asked teachers what the best part of teaching was for them. Relationships and connections with students and colleagues, support from staff and great autonomy were top of the list. Some of less desirable things in their teaching included dealing with challenging students (including those from traumatic backgrounds) and parents, personal wellbeing and second-guessing decisions.

In session 3, when asked if they had implemented any of the strategies advocated in session 2, one teacher replied:

> So, with my problem, with practice, it was about having time management and trying to have enough time because of how many kids I've got that are on child protection and mandatory reporting requirements. I took that to my leader teacher and my AP [Assistant Principal], because they asked how the PD went that I came to with you guys. And I said, the big take away with that ... we [the leadership] need to provide more support for you [the teachers]. How can we do that? We had a PD Day, the curriculum day on Friday, which is great, and they ran through with all the teachers' aids how to do mandatory reporting. They had the cheat sheet, we went through [...], which is the program. We used to document it all. They just reinforce that it's not just the teacher. It's if you see it happen, it's actually up to you to do it. And I've noticed a big change in both my teacher aids that they've actually stepped up a lot with the ownership of things and their authority on things. They seem to be a bit more empowered by it all, which is great. So, I think that was really powerful for them to experience it too. So instead of them just writing everything on post it notes and handing it to me, they actually, I can do this when I get home. And I'm going to do this when I get a moment to email it straight through. So, it's good.

Session 3 also addressed the teachers' concerns in supporting children with trauma. The session explored the Department of Education's trauma resources, and the Deakin facilitators helped the teachers navigate and better understand how to use them. According to a primary teacher (Year 3–4):

> Some of it is a little bit contradictory, where yeah, kind of it generally looks like someone's put it together and I wonder how they spent a lot of time in a classroom with children that have gone through trauma because they like, yeah, it works in on paper, but it doesn't work in real life from my experience, anyway.

Some of the teachers were also finding it challenging to navigate the high impact teaching strategies (HITS):

> I think we spent quite a bit of time trying to work out who it was orientated towards, because it's quite a policy heavy document. So at first glance it's hard to work out what is the practical stuff for us in it? Yeah, I'm in the differentiation one. I still, I just feel like, I don't do that well at all. So yeah, I think I spend so much time still trying to get my head around planning and reporting and assessment that there's not much time left over to actually think about. I do my best, but I feel like it's hard.

In session 4, we invited two south-west region principals to speak with the teachers about teaching practice and their rights and responsibilities. Teachers were encouraged to become familiar with the 2022 Victorian Government School Agreement (updated every five years) and the online Policy and Advisory Library (PAL) hosted by the Department of Education. The two principals also strongly advised the teachers to openly communicate with their own principals. The teachers found this enlightening and through this activity made numerous observations about their own practice.

In this session we reinstated the importance of acknowledging their wins and asked the teachers to share some of them.

> I was trying to work on behalf of management and chatted with another staff member yesterday, and he made some suggestions, and he was going to take in some students from my class. Take them in so I could talk with some of the difficult behaviour ones out in the corridor. And it's worked, I guess, or had more respect, or they behave better in the class.
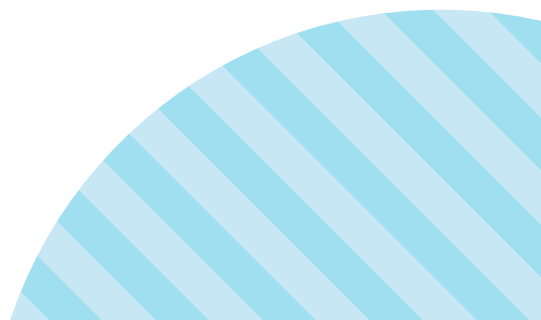
The facilitator highlighted that teaching is a team game, and it is important for teachers to understand they don't have to do everything on their own.

> Things are working my practice at the moment. I've been just working on connecting with the students a lot. And that's been going really well, especially with the I feel like I'm getting a real good relationship with a lot of them. So yeah, I suppose that's a win for me.

> I think it's I think I was doing better on proud of, but I just feel more accepting of myself as a teacher, and not so hard on myself. Like, just really, yeah, just understanding that I am doing the best I can do. And that's that in itself is the win.

In subsequent sessions (5 and 6), we returned to the teachers' practice successes in their classrooms to monitor and support their progress. The relatively small number of teachers meant that all parties engaged with each other's stories of practice, and we repeatedly made spaces for teachers to help each other in an encouraging and strengths-based way.

**Photos by CDC and Brooke Cagle on Unsplash**

## Professional identity

The way in which we see ourselves as teachers and how we understand that others see us form a large part of our professional identity. Literature speaks to the complexity of developing one's professional identity, and despite its importance, in the whirlwind of their first few years of teaching it may not be something they have had the opportunity or cognisance to pause and reflect on. Australian educationalist Garth Boomer famously proposed that "you teach who you are" (cited in Tinning, 2012, p. 228) while Fernandez-Balboa (1998) asserts that "the personal is pedagogical, and the pedagogical is personal: the two are inseparable – what happens in one of these areas deeply affects the other" (p. 127), suggesting the close relationship between the developing professional identity and teacher practice.

This section of the program was designed to help the teachers reflect on their professional identity and how this might play a part in how they see themselves as a member of the teaching profession more broadly. In session 1, the early career teachers were asked to use metaphor to describe their work as teachers:

> *Just think about for a moment what your professional identity is, and how it might play a part in how you see yourselves as a member of the professional, the teaching profession moving forward. What is your metaphor for teaching?*

The slide in Figure 10 was shared to get the conversation started.

FIGURE 10   **Examples of typical metaphors**



**Photos by Jay Heike, Gene Gallin and Earl Wilcox on Unsplash**

BEYOND THE BELL

Teachers saw themselves as working in Jurassic Park, as a duck (calm on the surface but furiously paddling beneath) and as a sourdough starter, juggler or second/third parent. These were shared and teased apart, revealing theoretical framing to their practices. One teacher likened himself to a shapeshifter:

> I am a secondary trained Visual Communications teacher, but I am teaching 2–3 primary special needs. You need to be able to step outside your comfort zone and knowledge area.

Another described themselves as a moulder:

> I'm just giggling at the pottery. I've just done pottery with my kids for Mother's Day and had a little card about moulding and shaping them.

The teachers were encouraged to give further thought to their professional identity as this was revisited in session 3. Examples of their responses are represented in the following vignettes.

> Mine is much changed. I actually was thinking about what I had to look back at what I said at the end of my day, I picked nurturing one like the gardener. But after a little bit I think I'm more the community one, because it's too exhausting. I think I saw myself as a nurturer in the classroom, that if I got everything right, all the conditions right, they would blossom for me. But maybe I'm really getting a little bit jaded. Now that's too tiring, or I don't have as much control over that as I thought, so now I feel like it's more about, I'm part of the community at school, building the house, and different people in the school help the students in different ways. So, I might have my bit of expertise. It helps put a bit in place, but all the other teachers contribute there. I'm secondary, though, so it might be a bit different. (Year 1–2 graduate teacher, secondary)

> I feel like initially is what I thought was nurture, because again, I started in like a nursery and progress my skills to then go into teaching. But I just feel that now I'm more of a moulder because I have to adapt so much on the fly, because a lot of my kids… come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. So, what works for one, is not going to work for another. You're going to wreck that part if you pull it too hard, it's going to fold over and collapse. So, it's really flicking from that. You're still a nurturer, in a way, but it's definitely you've got to fall with the lesson to the people you're teaching. So, I'm more adapted in my teaching now as opposed to when that I thought was going to change everyone's life. And yeah, I was going to create the next Presidents and Prime Ministers and stuff. And now sometimes I'm lucky if I'm telling them to stop looking out the windows. (Year 3–4 graduate teacher, primary)

It's kind of like more providing the tools as well. Now that I reflect back. So, it's like, I have all the knowledge. And then the kids come to me to have what they need, and then together we'll work it out, especially in health class, because they are the ones that have all the concerns. (Year 1–2 graduate teacher, secondary)

In session 4, the visiting principals provided a range of information to support the teachers' development, but also acted to reinforce what they were already doing well as professionals in and outside of the classroom, contributing to strengthening their teacher identity.

In the final two sessions, we referred back to the metaphors as a way of reminding them what they had said and to reflect on their changing professional identity across time. All other identity work was embedded in discussions about their practice and how they were navigating relationships and classroom work. Hearing their stories each week helped them see who they were becoming as teachers and how they differed or were similar to the other teachers in the room.

## Professional wellbeing

The professional wellbeing of teachers has increasingly become a focus of attention due to the complex, interpersonal nature of the work of teaching, the accountability to a range of stakeholders and the time pressures involved. The well-documented workforce shortage has highlighted teacher attrition, bringing attention to the demand for facilitating teacher wellbeing.

In session 1, during a brief wellbeing check-in from the facilitators, many teachers stated that teaching kept them very busy, and many of them did not tend to their own wellbeing particularly well.

One teacher said:

> I was just saying the other day between being a teacher, a mother, a daughter, a wife, there's not much time left for ourselves outside those everyday roles.

The facilitators highlighted the importance of prioritising wellbeing. The 'fit your own mask first' analogy was introduced here to encourage teachers to consider their own wellbeing and its impact on their ability to work with their students. To highlight the importance of scheduling wellbeing activities into their busy lives, the teachers were provided with a Wellbingo card (Figure 11) as an at-home task or exit ticket and were asked to complete at least one line before session 2. The card was designed as a concrete means of instigating thinking about simple wellbeing practices, but with the added layers of proactively prioritising their wellbeing and contextualising it to their own lives.

Each session in the series included wellbeing check-ins together with shared ideas and strategies to support wellbeing. The teachers discussed their progress through the Wellbingo card, in

**FIGURE 11**  Wellbingo card

# WELLBINGO



| Get 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep | Start today like it's a new day | Treat yourself | | Declutter |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Surround yourself with positive colleagues | | Engage in physical activity that you enjoy | Ask for help – it is not a sign of weakness | Embrace change and 'go with the flow' |
| | Eat a healthy meal | | Be present in the moment and give gratitude | |
| Say 'no' to a task | Plan an activity that you can look forward to | Spend some time out in nature and away from technology | | Drink more water |
| Do something that brings you joy | | Connect with family and friends | Sit down, be still and read a book or watch a movie just for fun | Leave your work at school |

Photo by Jeremy Thomas  on Unsplash

particular sharing their ideas for the spaces that we intentionally left blank to instigate their thinking about wellbeing activities appropriate to their own lives. The importance of communicating wellbeing needs with leadership and colleagues in their school was emphasised.

In session 3, when asked how they had gone with Wellbingo, one of the teachers stated, 'from Wellbeing bingo, I've removed emails from phone!', and another said, 'I did leave my work laptop at school for the first time last night!'

Teachers also said that they had engaged in self-care, including booking massages, starting yoga/meditation and so on. One teacher said that they 'try to always have one complete day off each weekend'.

*"I've removed emails from my phone!"*

We checked in throughout the series of workshops and noted with the teachers the natural ebb and flow of the demands of teaching. In the last workshop, we unpacked the work of school reporting and its demands, as well as sharing strategies for easing the burden at this time. The workshop occurred at a time when all teachers were under the pressure of completing their students' reports. The ethic of care remained a focus of our work with the teachers, and we were particularly sensitive to the changes in their work patterns and in individual teacher challenges, supporting them and encouraging them to support each other across these times. As further examples to the sorts of challenges teachers were experiencing and that we responded to, one teacher was coming to the end of a one-year contract and was anxious about what 2024 would look like, and another was having significant challenges with her classroom management. We followed through each of these issues from workshop to workshop to ensure that the teachers felt supported and had strategies to work with these issues.

## Professional networks

In session 1, as the facilitators welcomed the teachers to the online space, they asked the teachers to introduce themselves to each other, highlighting the geographic area in which their school was located and the grades/classes they taught. The teachers were encouraged to connect throughout the hour through private messaging and during the breakout session. Getting the teachers to connect online proved beneficial when they came together during the face-to-face session and greeted each other like old friends. The importance of developing these networks was further elucidated in session 3, when teachers who had attended previous sessions demonstrated openness to participate in the online space, compared to their initial hesitance in session 1.

Across sessions 2 and 3, there was increasingly more interaction amongst the community of practice as teachers supported and shared with each other. We encouraged the sharing of resources, teaching ideas and email addresses, and espoused (and modelled) the mantras that 'teaching is a team sport' and 'we are all in this together' – keen for them to see the importance of having people to lean on.

In session 4, the guest principals highlighted the importance of networking and provided resources to support this work. Beyond those sessions, the teachers greeted each other with greater familiarity, and we were pleased to see successful networking occurring in the second in-person session, supported by activities such as a paired walk-and-talk interview around the beautiful Deakin Warrnambool campus, group brainstorming activities and in the general sharing of experiences and solutions/ideas by the teachers.

Across the program, professional practice, identity, wellbeing and networking were scaffolded. To close the program, we asked teachers to set goals for their work as teachers. They were asked to set very short-term goals for starting 2024, and for the end of 2024, keeping their gaze low and on their practice. We spoke to longer term goals but were keen to keep their focus on their classroom practice and looking after themselves. We also asked them to provide advice to new graduates and wishes for their colleagues and themselves in the south-east area. These reflective exercises helped them unpack their own needs and reflect on their progress.

## Post-program survey

A total of 24 graduate teachers attended the GTPLP, some attending only one session. A link to the post-program survey was sent to all the participants at the end of the final workshop. A reminder email was sent to all 24 participants but due to the busyness of teachers' lives at the time of year (i.e. end of November) only five teachers completed the post-program survey. However, despite the low response rate there are some interesting insights from these teachers that are worth noting.

The five teachers who completed the post-program survey were primary and secondary teachers across rural and regional schools of varying student enrolment numbers. Most teachers had attended at least three professional learning sessions. Table 4 presents the background details of these five graduate teachers.

| TABLE 4 | Background data of post-program survey respondents (n = 5) |
|---|---|
| **Main teaching area** | Primary (2)<br>Secondary (3) |
| **Current registration status** | Permanent full time (1)<br>Registered teacher (1)<br>Provisionally registered (2)<br>Other (1) |
| **School location** | Rural (4)<br>Regional (1) |
| **School size** | 0–20 (1)<br>21–50 (1)<br>51–100 (1)<br>201–500 (2) |
| **Sessions attended** | Session 1 (4)<br>Session 2 (5)<br>Session 3 (4)<br>Session 4 (4)<br>Session 5 (3)<br>Session 6 (3) |

Graduate teachers were invited to comment on the most valuable learnings/opportunities presented at the professional learning program. All graduates valued being able to talk with other graduate teachers to reflect and share their experiences, their difficulties and how their teaching was going. They commented:

> Networking, commiseration, being heard …

> Being able to talk to other people in the same situation …

> Being able to meet other graduates in person to discuss how we are feeling, how our teaching practices are going, how to deal with students' behaviours without the worry of having to say that directly to leaders/your principal. Thinking more deeply about our wellbeing and breaking down the good and the bad involved in teaching.

> Being able to talk through everyday issues with likeminded people, take time for yourself, self-reflection.

> We're not alone in our difficulties, it was good to virtually 'meet' the 2 principals, you do find your rhythm with behaviour management / how you would like to work with the students.

The graduate teachers were also invited to share how they had implemented teaching practices highlighted in the program. There was a range of responses from these teachers. One felt that the program had allowed them 'to be more open and communicate with my principal. It has helped formed relationships and connections outside of school'. Another appreciated 'taking time out, self-care', which meant that they were 'more relaxed and able to focus on the needs of the students more'. Only one teacher felt that they were 'doing a lot of them already, so kind of', suggesting that the program affirmed what they were doing in their teaching practices.

Similar to the pre-program survey, graduate teachers were also invited to comment on the resources or ideas that they would like to explore further in the future. One teacher commented that they would benefit from 'research and learning about ADHD in girls and supporting them in the classroom and learning about developmental language delay'. Similarly, the other teachers also indicated 'further reading on practical practices and resources' as well as 'websites with good resources and connections with other rural/regional teaching staff'.

In addition to resources and ideas, the graduate teachers were also invited to share other supports that would help them to stay in the teaching profession. Similar themes identified in the pre-program survey were evident in their responses. These included 'more time to do the planning', particularly given that they were 'in a small school', and 'just more organisation and support from my actual school. We have the support currently, but the organisation is poor'.

> *"More strategies to work towards a healthy work-life balance"*

The provision of a mentor or mentor program was also an important support for teachers to help them to stay in the profession. One teacher commented that 'a mentor for more than just my first year' is important, while another noted the need for 'more support on the ground. As in more supportive mentors'. One teacher who identified as teaching in a rural school stated that they would like to have 'stability in my job. It was a distance to move not to know if I'm going to have a job after my contract ends'.

The final item in the post-program survey invited graduate teachers to recommend any improvements to the program. Again, the responses were varied but provided great insights into ways the program could be modified, including:

It is hard, but the face-to-face time was more valuable than the online time, so more of that.

More face-to-face, visiting schools and seeing practice, ways to ensure teachers from low staffed schools/distant schools can actually attend.

More meetings, check-ins in between meetings.

Talk about how to transition to a fully registered VIT.

More resource websites/books.

More strategies for behaviour.

More strategies to work towards a healthy work-life balance.

# Attuning to the Voices of Graduate Teachers

**The overarching question guiding the GTPLP was:**

*How can we best support graduate teachers in the south-west region of Victoria?*

The researchers started with a pre-program survey to understand the current needs of graduate teachers and design a program that would address these. The pre-program survey highlighted key challenges graduate teachers were facing around their professional practice, identity, wellbeing and networking. Based on these responses, the program was designed around the three pillars of ethic of care, strengths-based approach and community of practice.

In session 2, the teachers were asked what they would do for graduate teachers if they were the principal. Besides providing chocolates and coffee, ongoing mentoring, regular observations of more experienced teachers, and extra time and support for planning were at the forefront of their needs.

The small number of attendees provided the space for graduate teachers to be heard. During the face-to-face session in Warrnambool (session 5) one of the teachers said that this program was 'exactly what we needed' and another said that it was a 'breath of fresh air'. One of them also said 'from Wellbeing bingo, I've removed emails from phone'. These comments affirm the importance of giving the teachers the space to allow them to share their wins, raise their concerns and feel more confident as teachers.

The positive feedback on this targeted professional learning program from the teachers underscores the importance of providing ongoing support for graduate teachers. Principals need to provide their teachers with the time to engage with this professional learning in order to grow their networks and develop their practice. This report makes the following recommendations.

**Photo by Daniel Sessler on Unsplash**

# Recommendations for Supporting Graduate Teachers in the South-west Region of Victoria

**1** That teachers within their first years in the profession continue to be provided with strengths-based support that focuses on developing their professional identity, wellbeing, practice and networks.

**2** That every effort be made to provide early career teachers in the region with access to fellow teachers at similar points in their career journey, particularly in schools where they may be the only teacher at this point in their career.

**3** The aspect where teachers felt least prepared to be effective within the classroom was their ability to teach multilingual/multicultural students. Consideration should be given to providing interventions to address these perceived skill shortcomings.





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BEYOND THE BELL