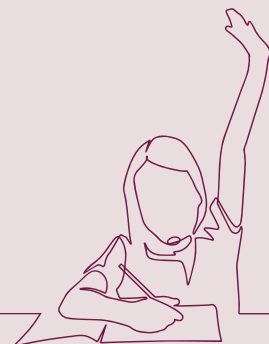


CHAPTER 1



Making the most of your professional experience

“ I don’t aspire to be like the hero teacher you see in movies or any of that. I want to be the teacher that when the kids come to class, they know they are going to learn something and maybe have a laugh or two and actually develop some skills that they could use. You know, they look forward to coming to class.

Source: Paul, a secondary preservice teacher

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After carefully reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- LO 1.1** recognise the influence of your own teachers on your personal philosophy of education and classroom practice
- LO 1.2** list the important activities you should complete prior to your next professional experience school placement
- LO 1.3** plan goals for your next professional experience school placement
- LO 1.4** summarise some advice from preservice and mentor teachers on how to make the most of your next professional experience school placement.

AITSL Teacher Standards

This chapter is aligned to Standards 6.3, 7.1 and 7.2 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017). For more information on the Standards, refer to Chapter 2.



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we outline the importance of developing your own personal philosophy of learning and teaching to guide your actions and reflections during professional experience (section 1.1). You will examine how your current views about effective classroom practice have developed and how they have been shaped by your prior experiences as both a student and a preservice teacher. Understanding the nature of your personal teaching philosophy gives you a framework to measure your progress and improve your classroom practice. It also provides a lens through which you can interpret the events that occur as you proceed through your teacher education program.

In section 1.2 of this chapter, we examine the practical steps you should take to prepare for a professional experience placement. Section 1.3 looks at the importance of setting realistic goals for each stage of your professional experience and we encourage you to think about how you can work cooperatively with your mentors to achieve these goals.

One of our aims in writing this book is to provide you with research-based evidence and practical guidance on how to make the most of your school experiences, so we also examine some of the key aspects of working productively in a school. The advice we offer here will help to ensure that you begin every professional experience placement with confidence and complete it to the best of your ability.

The final part of the chapter (section 1.4) provides some practical advice from preservice teachers and professional experience coordinators on how to make the most of your time at the school.

► Developing your personal philosophy of education

Congratulations on your decision to embark on a teaching career. Teaching is an incredibly rewarding profession which allows you to share your knowledge of content, your passion for helping students learn and your creativity. Teaching is a career for lifelong learners who carefully reflect on their practice to constantly improve the learning outcomes for their students. The decision to become a teacher can be based on many factors, such as a desire to help young people learn, obtaining a professional qualification, making a contribution to society and developing personal knowledge (Bergmark, Lundström, Manderstedt, & Palo, 2018). Whatever your reasons for embarking on a teaching career, we believe it is important for all preservice teachers to identify their values and beliefs about teaching because your teaching practices will be shaped by them in profound ways. The process of carefully considering how you have arrived at the values and beliefs you

LO 1.1

Recognise the influence of your own teachers on your personal philosophy of education and classroom practice

hold is sometimes referred to as *reflexivity*. Part of being a reflexive preservice teacher is to pinpoint the various factors—the people, the contexts and the experiences—that have shaped your views and influenced your beliefs over time. As Le Cornu (2015) notes, ‘We know that if PSTs [preservice teachers] don’t reflect on their own values, beliefs and assumptions, then their teacher education program will have little impact’ (p. 7).

I feel very excited. I'm looking forward to becoming a fully fledged teacher who's gained all the experience and who can manage a class. I can sort of see myself in five years and I'm quite excited to see myself there.

Simon, a primary preservice teacher

REFLECTING ON YOUR OWN TEACHERS

Even before you begin your professional experience, you will have already spent many years in schools and classrooms watching a variety of different teachers at work. Some teachers will have greatly impressed you by their ability to provide stimulating and engaging lesson activities that helped you to learn difficult concepts and master complex skills. You might also have responded to their encouragement and the keen interest they showed in your progress. You might have reacted favourably to the positive classroom climate they engendered by their confident and fair-minded approach to managing student behaviour. It is highly likely that your own decision to become a teacher was based to a large extent on one or more of these teachers and the special influence they had on you when you were in their classes.

Your student days at school and during preservice teacher education have helped to shape your current thinking about teachers and the work that they do, although you may not have realised it at the time (Kearney, 2013). Even now, your memories of these experiences can exert a very powerful influence on your ideas about what constitutes effective learning and teaching (Beswick, 2006). In fact, you may even find yourself saying and doing things in the classroom that your own teachers said and did when they taught you! These prior experiences are significant for preservice teachers like you because they can act as a kind of filter through which you view your professional work. The knowledge, skills and values that you learn about in your teacher education course will be viewed through the lens of your prior knowledge and experiences (Bloomfield, 2010). It is also important to remember that these ideas about schools, classrooms and teachers are essentially from the perspective of the student and they do not take full account of the work that teachers do (Hammerness et al., 2005). You will learn more about the complex nature of teachers’ work as you progress through your initial teacher education studies.

Learning from experience



FAVOURITE TEACHERS

As a preservice teacher, you might find that you begin teaching in ways that are quite similar to how some of your teachers taught you when you were at school.

The following questions will help you to identify your teaching role models and encourage you to reflect on how your teachers have influenced your decision to become a teacher and how you act in the classroom.

- ▶ Who were your favourite teachers when you were at school?
- ▶ Why did you respond so positively to them?
- ▶ What aspects of their style and practice would you like to emulate? Why are these particular aspects of teaching important to you?

As you will soon discover, teaching is a far more complex and demanding occupation than you might have previously imagined. In fact, many of the tasks of teaching are undertaken out of sight of students. Committed teachers carry out a considerable amount of work in preparing and revising lessons, keeping accurate records of what has been achieved in each class, assessing and reporting, meeting with colleagues and parents, and simply dealing with the countless variety of predictable and unexpected events that arise each day.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the role that your own teachers, the exceptional and the not so great, have played in bringing you to the point where you are now about to embark on your own teaching career (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). There is certainly nothing wrong with trying to emulate some of the best characteristics of your favourite teachers and aiming to avoid the things that you found unappealing in those whom you did not regard as effective practitioners. However, to develop your personal teaching style, you will need to challenge your current views about teachers and teaching. Do not simply follow the example of your own teachers uncritically; analyse their practice in light of the lessons you observe during your professional experience (Anderson, Barksdale, & Hite, 2005). Try to observe a range of teachers during all of your professional experience placements, noting their strengths and weaknesses, and use your observations as the basis for personal reflection and professional dialogue with your mentors.

DEVELOPING A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Philosophy is our way of thinking about our world and our place in society by raising questions about the nature of knowledge and reality. In seeking answers to those questions, philosophy can serve as a guide for our thinking and behaviour. Educational philosophies attempt to answer some fundamental questions about the

nature of learning and teaching, and challenge assumptions or practices that are taken for granted. These questions might include:

- ▶ What is the purpose of education?
- ▶ What content should be in the school curriculum?
- ▶ Who decides what should be taught?
- ▶ Why should some content or ideas be taught in schools and not others?
- ▶ How should the curriculum be taught? How is it best learned?
- ▶ What are the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students in schools?

(Martin & Loomis, 2014).

A personal philosophy is a statement about your beliefs and values related to education that can serve as a guide to your professional growth (Mok, 2005). You can develop your own philosophy of education by considering your professional goals and the teaching methods that you think are most effective in helping students learn. One way to begin writing your personal philosophy is to start with some questions like the ones above and write down a couple of sentences that encapsulate your main ideas about them. You could discuss the qualities of an effective teacher, your views on how students learn, the ways in which you know that your teaching has been impactful and some key ideals that you believe all teachers should try to emulate. Explain why you think these are significant and give a couple of examples to illustrate the main points you are making. You could even illustrate your ideas in a drawing (Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk, & Nguyen, 2015) or use a metaphor to describe your ideas (Izadinia, 2017).

During your professional experience, you can observe the culture of each school where you are placed. For example, read the school's Annual Report, ask about the school motto or its Mission Statement, note the ways that school assemblies are conducted and the topics that are discussed, and find out about the range of extra-curricular activities for students. Notice the physical layout of the classrooms, the ways that teachers and students interact with each other and the teaching and learning activities that occur frequently in lessons. All of this information can provide you with insights into the schools' philosophy and you can compare your impressions with your own ideas. You may find that your observations during professional experience confirm some of your personal philosophy while other aspects of the school may challenge you to reconsider your views. In this way, each new professional experience provides an opportunity to deepen your understanding about learning and teaching and expand your thinking about education.

Try to remain open-minded and alert to the possibilities of the many innovative approaches to learning and teaching that have occurred since you were at school. The advances in educational theory and research that you have been studying at your higher education institution are particularly relevant. These ideas can help to guide your own professional development if you take the time to think carefully about what you are learning and reflect critically on educational research in light of

your own experiences, both as a student and as a preservice teacher (He & Levin, 2008). As well, there have been significant developments in resources for teaching and digital literacies that can have a profound impact on your classroom practice if you are prepared to embrace them. Even in the early stages of your career, it is worth remembering that teaching is a profession of lifelong learning for novices and experts alike (Pelletier, 2004).

During your professional experience placements, you will have many opportunities to test and revise your conception of effective teaching in response to your interactions with teachers and students in the school (Webb, 2005). That is why it is so important to view professional experience as a time to experiment with many different teaching methods, even those strategies and approaches that may take you beyond your prior experiences or outside your normal comfort zone.

As Standard 6.3 reminds us, it is important for you to seek out advice and feedback from supervisors and teachers in order to improve your professional practice. Avoid dismissing any new ideas about learning and teaching that you come across or that are suggested to you without first considering them carefully and trying to implement them. This is the moment to test out new ideas while you have the benefit of encouragement and support from more experienced colleagues to guide you. If you simply follow the example of the teachers who taught you or try to mimic your mentors too closely, then you will not have made the most of your opportunities. For most of your professional experience you will not be given a full teaching load, so you have more time to reflect on your teaching strengths and the areas that need further development (Azimi, Kuusisto, Tirri, & Hatami, 2019).

► Before starting professional experience

Professional experience is an important phase in becoming a teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2010) and professional experience placements that are closely linked to initial teacher education coursework help to produce skilled novice teachers (Darling-Hammond & Oates, 2019). It is the time when you begin to build the bridge between theory and practice, becoming a responsible, active participant in the teaching and learning of each student. Research indicates that mentor teachers see their main roles as:

- helping preservice teachers to learn to teach (providing classroom experience)
- demonstrating effective teaching (modelling good practice)
- answering questions about teaching (facilitating reflection) (Roberts, 2006).

Many schools hold orientation sessions for preservice teachers at the start of the placement to introduce you to the school, its policies and procedures. Your mentor can also assist in accessing this information or you may need to ask for it from the

LO 1.2

List the important activities you should complete prior to your next professional experience school placement

professional experience coordinator. Your mentor will also introduce you to the students.

There are many reasons teachers take on the role of mentoring a preservice teacher. Nielsen et al. (2017) used a national data set from 314 mentor teachers to examine their motivations for working with preservice teachers. The authors found that the main reasons teachers choose to mentor include wanting to renew the profession, contributing to teacher education, helping preservice teachers develop professionally, improving their own teaching practice and because they found it gratifying to observe the professional growth of their preservice teachers. Teachers invest a lot of themselves in each class, so they will want your professional experience to be successful, as this means that their students will have also learned well.

Sometimes you pick up nice little things that you like because you're forever learning and you can learn from your preservice teachers as much as they can learn from you.

Betsy, a mentor teacher

REQUIREMENTS FOR YOUR PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Before you start at the school, you should ensure you understand the requirements of your higher education institution that are linked to your professional experience. Becoming fully aware of your role and responsibilities is an important component of your placement. It is aligned to Standard 7.1 and concerns your ability to meet your ethical and professional obligations as a teacher. The case study at the end of this chapter provides an opportunity for you to reflect on how you can do this.

During the first meeting with your mentor teacher, you will be able to hand over any forms and details about your professional experience. Different institutions have different professional experience requirements, so it is important that your mentor teacher understands the specific requirements of your teacher education program. These requirements include the number of days of professional experience in each placement, the structure of your professional experience in terms of days of observation before teaching, the number of hours that you should teach and so on. If this is your first professional experience, then you may have much more observation than teaching, while towards the end of your teacher education program, there will be many more teaching periods so that you are ready for the rigours of full-time teaching. Knowing the requirements will ensure that you are fulfilling the teaching requirements of each professional experience you undertake.

You will also have particular assignments or other coursework to complete during the professional experience. This is especially the case in your final placement, when you will be completing your teaching performance assessment. Planning your time in the school so that compulsory requirements are fulfilled in a timely fashion will mean that you do not have extra work to do at the end of your professional experience.

Know and understand the criteria by which you are going to be assessed.

Alan, a teacher educator

LEGAL ISSUES

Standard 7.2 addresses the need for all teachers to understand the relevant legislative requirements of their work. Each state and territory has its own procedures for Working with Children Checks and police checks, and it is necessary to fulfil the requirements in your jurisdiction.

The Working with Children Checks were created as a direct result of unlawful behaviour by some teachers in their relationships with students. In your relationships with young people, you are required to ensure that the physical and emotional welfare of those young people is safeguarded, and that your behaviour is guided by this duty of care (Groves, 2011). If you are working in country or local communities, you will face additional challenges in managing professional boundaries. You are more likely to meet your students in social settings and you may even visit their homes. It is important that you participate, as these occasions form an important part of community life and are a positive contribution to your own wellbeing.

The Queensland College of Teachers (2017) identifies some teacher behaviours that could be regarded as a breach of professional boundaries. These include:

- ▶ giving preferential treatment to some students without a valid reason
- ▶ allowing a student to become emotionally dependent
- ▶ flirtatious gestures or behaviour towards a student
- ▶ discussing highly personal or inappropriate matters with a student
- ▶ meeting students alone outside of school without a legitimate reason.

Preservice teachers should not be left alone in the classroom, unless it is a requirement of the professional experience. The mentor teacher is legally responsible for what happens in the classroom at all times. If the mentor teacher is absent from school, preservice teachers may teach the class provided another teacher is present in the classroom at all times. If you are left in the classroom on your own, it is important that you discuss the situation with your mentor teacher, the professional experience coordinator at the school or your lecturer.

MEDICAL ISSUES

Teachers also have to know how to treat medical emergencies in school. There are a number that may arise, but common ones are anaphylaxis, severe asthma and diabetic hypoglycaemia. A student suffering from anaphylaxis has a severe allergic reaction that may cause death (*A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia*, 2012). Anaphylaxis typically causes a number of symptoms, including an itchy rash and throat swelling. Common causes include insect bites/stings, foods and medications. Such medical

emergencies need immediate medical attention and may be treated with an EpiPen. Your mentor teacher will take charge of such an emergency, but you should be familiar with the procedures. Such procedures are usually on a case-by-case basis, with individual procedures for each student (Department of Education and Training, 2013). In the staffroom, you will probably see photographs of students who require such special attention. It is your responsibility to know which students have special medical conditions and which staff members to contact when first aid needs to be administered.

Your school may be an Asthma Friendly School and part of a program run by Asthma Australia to improve knowledge about asthma in schools (Asthma Australia, 2013). The student will probably have reliever medication with them, but emergency help should be sought if the situation does not improve quickly.

Diabetic hypoglycaemia is caused by low blood glucose or an insulin reaction (Diabetes Australia, 2020) and, again, your mentor teacher will be aware of students who are likely to have this reaction. It sometimes occurs when students are late getting to recess or lunch or after intensive exercise. Often, the immediate symptoms can be relieved by a soft drink or jellybeans, but your mentor teacher will know how to deal with such an emergency.

Learning from experience



ASSIGNMENTS

Make a list of the assignments linked to your professional experiences and the specific requirements for each one.

Read your professional experience handbook so that you understand what is expected of you during your time at the school.

► Expectations and goals for your professional experience

As we have already indicated, the quality of your professional experience depends to a great extent on the attitudes and dispositions that you bring with you to the school. It certainly helps if you arrive with a positive outlook, acknowledging that you have a great deal to learn, while at the same time recognising that your mentor teachers and lecturers are there to guide and support you in your endeavours. You should expect that they will provide assistance not only to help you establish yourself in the school as a productive member of the teaching staff, but also to develop your potential as a future member of the profession (Dam & Blom, 2006).

LO 1.3

Plan goals for your next professional experience school placement

All preservice teachers are expected to fulfil the required number of days of their professional experience. It is expected that you will be at your school every day unless you are seriously ill or there are other valid reasons. Notify the school as early as possible if you will be absent and email your mentor teacher and your tertiary advisor. If possible, obtain a doctor's certificate. Your mentor teacher will already have a copy of your lesson plan/s and the required materials for any classes you were expecting to teach so that they can teach the lesson.

Make sure the rest of your life is in order so you can concentrate on professional experience.

Sam, a first-year teacher looking back on professional experience

School norms and cultures can vary greatly from time to time and from place to place. The accepted rules and routines with which you were once familiar may now appear somewhat old-fashioned and outmoded. As a result, you may need to rethink your expectations of how teachers and students work together and be ready to adjust to current Australian practices. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017) can provide you with a clear picture of how teachers are expected to operate in today's schools.

GOAL SETTING

It is particularly important to take some time before you commence any professional experience placement to think carefully about what you hope to achieve. For example, Tang, Wong, Li, & Cheng (2020) found that preservice teachers who consider their personal and professional goals are well placed to advance professional learning. The process of setting out some personal goals and writing them down will help to concentrate your mind on what you are about to do and guide your actions while you are at the school. However, remember to be realistic in describing what you can achieve and that you are only just beginning to learn how to be an effective teacher. You will not be able to do everything perfectly right away, so be patient with yourself and set reasonable expectations for your progress while still ensuring that you challenge yourself to work hard and improve. The AITSL Standards (2017) can provide a useful frame of reference for your goals and we recommend that you identify the specific standards that each learning goal addresses.

One approach to creating goals for your professional experience is to follow the five elements of goal setting represented in the acronym SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**imely) (see Table 1.1). There is some conjecture about who first developed the SMART model for goals, but Drucker (1955) is the earliest reference we have found.

You might decide, in the first instance, that you want to learn some useful strategies for remembering students' names or focus on how to settle a class at the

TABLE 1.1 SMART goals

Element	Description
Specific	Your goals should focus on a specific aspect of your professional practice that you would like to improve. For example, 'Learn how to set up a wiki for my class' (Standard 2.6) is more specific than 'Use technology more in my teaching'. Also, avoid using words like 'try to...' or 'I could...' because they are likely to mean your goal is not specific enough.
Measurable	It is important to frame your goals with a mindset of accountability. There needs to be some way of checking progress towards your goals so that you will know when you have achieved them. You also need to think about the benchmarks you will use to judge your success as these can help to frame goals that are measurable. For example, 'I will provide written feedback to at least three students each day' (Standard 5.2) can be more easily measured than 'Provide more feedback to students'.
Achievable	Your goals should encourage you to do better and improve, but they should not be so far out of reach that you cannot achieve them. If they are unrealistic, you are likely to become disheartened and disinterested in your progress. For example, 'Learn the names of every student in the class by the end of the first day' (Standard 4.1) is unlikely to be achievable for most people.
Relevant	Goals need to matter to you and relate to the broad area in which you are trying to improve. So, if your goals are about developing your professional practice as a teacher, keep them relevant to that. For example, 'Observe at least one lesson each day from another teacher' (Standard 6.3) is more relevant than 'Socialise with at least one teacher at recess every day'.
Timely	It is helpful to set a timeframe for your goals that will allow you sufficient time to achieve them, but not so long that you lose interest or miss opportunities to refocus your goals as you continue to improve. It is useful for you to establish some short-term goals, perhaps for each week of your placement so that you can review your progress and revise your goals for the following week. For example, 'My goal this week is to wait until all students are quiet and attentive before I begin my lessons' (Standard 4.2).

beginning of a lesson. There might be a particular technology that you would like to learn to use in the classroom or a lesson activity that you have heard about or devised for yourself that you are keen to implement. No doubt there also will be various aspects of classroom management and methods for dealing with student behaviour in a positive and productive manner that you are already thinking about and want to try. Some other ideas you could start to think about in developing goals for the early part of your professional experience might include the following:

- ▶ developing a bank of excellent teaching resources
- ▶ upgrading your information and communications technology (ICT) skills
- ▶ planning interesting and engaging lessons
- ▶ using appropriate questioning techniques
- ▶ implementing successful strategies for opening and closing a lesson
- ▶ making smooth transitions from one phase of a lesson to the next.

You should also nurture relationships with other teachers and your fellow preservice teachers to build a network of support. Make a positive contribution to the school while you are there by, for example, sharing lesson plans, activities and resources you have designed, found or been given. Consider joining a professional organisation and engaging in the profession.

Remember also that your mentor teacher can play an important role in helping you to formulate your goals and suggesting some steps that you could take to achieve them. It is reasonable for you to assume that your mentor will support you throughout the placement so do not be afraid to start a conversation about your goals early on in your professional experience. We have noticed that mentors are usually impressed when preservice teachers demonstrate that they have thought carefully about how to make the most of the placement by taking the time to formulate their professional goals. So, developing your SMART goals and discussing them with your mentor can set the tone for a productive working relationship.

Learning from experience



SMART GOAL SETTING

It is helpful to think about some personal SMART goals for your professional experience. These goals will allow you to gauge your progress and they can also provide a focus for discussions with your mentor teachers.

Here is a technique that we have found useful in assisting preservice teachers to identify their professional experience goals. We recommend that you use this approach to identify two or three key SMART goals.

- 1 Take a blank sheet of paper and write out the following, inserting your information in the brackets:
By [insert the date here]
I am [write out your SMART goal here, using the present tense of any verbs]
So that [describe the benefit to you, your students and/or your mentor of achieving your goal].
- 2 When you are satisfied with what you have written, share your SMART goals with your mentor and/or lecturer to obtain some feedback.
- 3 On a regular basis during your professional experience placement (we recommend doing so weekly), rate your progress against each SMART goal according to a five-point scale, where 1 indicates that you are struggling to reach your goal and 5 indicates that your goal has been achieved.

For any goal where you score yourself below 5, try to answer the following:

- a. What am I currently doing to achieve this goal?
- b. What is one strategy that I could employ to bring me closer to achieving this goal?

► Practical advice

You are no doubt familiar with some variation of the saying that ‘you only get out of an experience as much as you are willing to put into it’. This is certainly true of your school-based professional experience. Your mentor teacher and other staff are there to help you as much as they can, but you should also acknowledge your own role in ensuring the success of your professional experience. As we have already discussed, there is much that you can do to prepare yourself before you arrive for your first day at the school. And, of course, the time you spend at the school is of crucial importance as well. We believe that a great deal of your success will depend on the attitude of mind that you bring with you to the school and your work ethic while you are there.

Your initial teacher education program is a chance for you to develop professionally and make the transition from being a *student* to becoming a *teacher*. In effect, it is how quickly and how effectively you make this transition that will largely determine the outcome of your professional experiences and your success as a teacher. For example, a preservice teacher’s attitude to professional experience might be one of getting through the experience and ensuring that the minimum requirements are met, but not much more. This outlook might be expressed in thoughts such as ‘so long as I pass’ or ‘I just want to get this over with’. As you can imagine, such a mindset is not particularly conducive to making the most of your opportunities at the school. Instead, we encourage you to be proactive and accept that the ultimate responsibility for the success of your professional experience lies with you. Try to adopt an active role during your time at the school and work hard to foster and promote collegial relationships with your mentor teacher and other staff members.

LO 1.4

Summarise some advice from preservice and mentor teachers on how to make the most of your next professional experience school placement

ADVICE FROM PRESERVICE TEACHERS

To improve the quality of our initial teacher education programs, we surveyed more than 100 preservice teachers from primary and secondary programs across a range of subject areas shortly after they completed their final professional experience. We asked them to reflect on their school placements over the course of their studies because we wanted to know what they had learned. We asked them to offer advice to students in the early stages of their work in schools. From our analysis of the survey responses, six issues consistently emerged as the most important:

- thorough preparation and organisation
- confidence and enthusiasm
- flexibility and a willingness to experiment
- building positive relationships with staff and students
- realistic expectations
- a willingness to reflect on feedback.

Many of the preservice teachers we surveyed mentioned thorough preparation and organisation as the most crucial ingredients for a successful professional experience. Importantly, you need to understand fully the expectations of your lecturers and mentor teachers so that you can work towards achieving these goals. For example, you need to know precisely how you should set out your lesson plans and how far in advance of teaching the class you need to have them ready to show your mentor. During your professional experience you need to be well organised, with resource folders and other materials at hand, and you need to keep accurate records of what you are doing. It is also advisable to reflect each day on your work so that you can document your experiences and use them as the basis for theorising your practice.

We have already discussed how it is natural to feel somewhat apprehensive before starting at a new school, and the preservice teachers we surveyed often commented on the importance of maintaining a positive outlook by acting with confidence and enthusiasm. At the same time, it is worth reminding yourself that you are a beginning teacher. You will not achieve greatness immediately, so do not expect to be fantastic right from the start. You will certainly make mistakes, but that is all part of learning to teach. As one preservice teacher wrote:

Every day gets easier. New skills are gained daily. I'm more resilient than I thought (and) generally the students are wonderful.

With your renewed sense of purpose and confidence you will be ready to take on new challenges, so try always to experiment with a range of strategies for student learning and classroom management. Do not simply keep on repeating the things you can do well, but push on and seek always to develop new skills.

Be flexible, try everything; give it all a go. Don't worry if a lesson doesn't go as planned—just figure out how to improve it.

You should also participate fully in the life of the school so that you can develop a richer appreciation for the work that teachers do. Classroom teaching is, of course, the most important aspect of a teacher's work, but there are many other duties that you should try to experience as well.

Be prepared to try everything a teacher does: teaching of course, but also recess duties, coaching sports, going to staff and faculty meetings and so on. You can also discuss the administrative side of the job: writing reports, accompanying your mentor teacher to meet parents, etc. That will all give you a good idea of the profession.

Many of our respondents also stressed the need to establish and maintain a good rapport with the teachers at their placement school. This is an important aspect of the AITSL Standards—see Standard 6.3. Networking with teaching and ancillary staff was often mentioned as a key to a successful professional experience. This will involve getting out of your classroom or staffroom to socialise and chat with colleagues about your professional experience and other important issues as well. These interactions can help you to feel part of the profession and alleviate some of the stresses you might be experiencing. It will also be easier to ask for help or advice if you are on friendly terms with your colleagues.

You will also want to establish a good rapport with the classes you teach because effective teaching is not only about covering the content of the syllabus, it is also built largely on productive working relations with students. Learn as much as you can about the students you are teaching so you can begin to connect with their interests and concerns. But take care to find the right balance between familiarity and respect. You are at the school to develop as a teacher so, while you can be on friendly terms with your students, you are not at the school to be their friend.

The other feature of the preservice teachers' survey responses was their insistence on the importance of feedback from the mentor teacher. They highlighted the need to accept the feedback with good grace, a determination to reflect on the advice received and a willingness to implement it. Here too, adopting realistic expectations is important. Recognise that your mentors are far more knowledgeable than you about the complexities of teaching and that they have your best interest at heart. Learn to accept constructive criticism without becoming despondent; rather, treat it as a valuable tool to help you improve.

Much of what we have been discussing in this chapter is summarised in this short quote from one of the preservice teachers in our survey:

Keep an open mind. You learn from all experiences, positive and negative. Be early! Be adaptable! Be confident! Smile! Build relationships! Learn all you can!

ADVICE FROM PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE COORDINATORS

We also surveyed some teacher education staff who coordinate professional experience programs to seek their advice about what you should do before your first school placement. Many of their suggestions match those we have just discussed from preservice teachers. They include the following:

- ▶ Understand the criteria by which you will be assessed.
- ▶ Read carefully through all of the documentation provided by your institution before your first day at the school.
- ▶ Know what you must do to complete your professional experience placement successfully.

- ▶ Be willing to attempt a variety of teaching practices because the more you do, the more you will learn.
- ▶ Plan in advance what you will be wearing and keep your attire neat, clean and modest. One coordinator suggested that you ask yourself: 'Will my students and mentors take me seriously as a teacher if I wear this outfit?'
- ▶ Arrive at the school with an attitude of commitment by which you clearly demonstrate your willingness to try out new ideas, learn from your experience and make the most of the opportunities provided to you.
- ▶ Avoid distractions from laptops, smartphones and other mobile electronic devices.
- ▶ Occupy yourself productively at all times.
- ▶ Show your colleagues that you are prepared to do far more than the minimum required of you by looking for ways to offer additional assistance (e.g. you could offer to help in setting up resources, distributing materials, cleaning up the classroom after a lesson or at the end of the day and assessing students' work).

We also want to remind you that effective teaching requires just as much effort before and after a lesson as it does while you are in front of a class. Work diligently in planning and preparing your lessons and in reflecting on them afterwards with your mentors so that you can identify the things that went well or what can be improved. Strive to broaden your repertoire of classroom management techniques by not simply copying your mentor teacher. Understand and utilise your own strengths, because all teachers have different styles and they can all be effective. Similarly, aim to experiment with a range of learning and teaching approaches so that you can develop a full spectrum of pedagogical skills.

CONCLUSION

As you can see from the ideas presented in this chapter, a successful professional experience begins long before you first set foot inside the school. There are many activities that you can be engaged with that will help you to get ready for your school placement. If you take the time to prepare thoroughly, you will feel more at ease and make a more confident start to your professional experience. We have discussed the importance of taking the time to think carefully about your own philosophy of learning and teaching, since this will form the basis of so much of what you do during your professional experience. We have seen how your own teachers have shaped and influenced your ideas about effective classroom instruction and how you may even find that you are mimicking some of their pet phrases or familiar patterns of classroom interactions. You might also find that you start to copy some elements of the style of your mentor teacher. While there is certainly nothing wrong with trying to

emulate the positive aspects of other teachers' work, we have shown how important it is for you to develop your own classroom presence and teaching style.

We also examined goal setting as an important element of preparing for your professional experience. We discussed the importance of setting SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**imely) goals for your professional experience and encouraged you to engage with your mentors to ensure that you work productively towards refining and attaining your professional experience goals.

CASE STUDY



Ben is about to embark on his first professional experience placement. Last week he completed the mandatory Child Protection and Anaphylaxis training programs and he obtained a Working with Children clearance. The director of the Teacher Education Program also held a lecture for all of the students in Ben's class during which she outlined the professional experience program and the expectations of preservice teachers. Ben received details about the name and location of the school and a contact telephone number. He discovered that he would be working with Julie Aram's Year 5 class. The professional experience office also provided Ben with a professional experience handbook and some paperwork for Ms Aram, including the mentor teacher report.

Over the weekend Ben had hoped to read through all of the documents, but he was busy with other things. So, he was still unsure about what he was meant to do during the placement and how many lessons he was required to teach, but he thought that Ms Aram would know. He checked the location of the school and saw that it was near a train station, but he did not find out how long the journey would take or whether he could walk from the station to the school.

On his way to the school on the first morning, Ben was a little apprehensive about the prac and wondered what sort of person Julie Aram might be. He hoped that they would become good friends.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think Ben is ready to make the most of his first professional experience placement?
2. Are his expectations of the school placement realistic?
3. What do you think about Ben's hope that he could become good friends with his mentor?
4. If you were Ben, what could you have done differently to be better prepared for this placement?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How closely should you try to copy the classroom practice of your mentor teacher?
2. Even very experienced teachers sometimes get a little nervous being observed in their classroom. What could you do to make your mentor teacher feel more at ease?
3. Why is it important for you to dress and act professionally while you are at the school?
4. Why is it important for you to understand the administrative and organisational policies of your placement schools?
5. First impressions are crucial in any new professional relationship. What can you do to make a positive start in working with your mentor teacher?
6. What will be your main goal for your next professional experience placement?
7. Why is it important that your teaching strategies are responsive to the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds?
8. What do you believe are the most important qualities for a teacher to possess?
9. Look back over the advice from preservice and mentor teachers on how to make the most of your next professional experience school placement. Identify one piece of advice from each group and explain why you think it is important.

FOR FURTHER READING AND STUDY

The following online resources provide information about some of the issues discussed in this chapter:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/top-tips-for-student-teachers-8421> (articles on a wide variety of topics, including 'Tips for student teachers' during professional experience placements)

<https://teachin.com.au/school-placement-top-tips> ('School placement top tips' for preservice teachers during professional experience)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4REIGnCDIQ> ('Talkin' Chalk' PST Series, Episode 2: Preparation for Practicum. Focuses on professional experience)

<https://www.brite.edu.au> (an online program designed to support resilience in preservice teachers)

<https://www.qct.edu.au/standards-and-conduct/professional-boundaries> (practical advice for teachers on establishing and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with students)

As well as the items in the references list, the following titles provide further information about the issues discussed in this chapter:

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