

Program boosts pre-service teachers' spirituality and skills

Australian Catholic University pre-service teachers taking part in a comprehensive mentoring program have experienced a significant drop in anxiety and dramatically improved their Catholic and spiritual literacy, new research shows.

A three-year review of the Spiritual and Pedagogical Accompaniment (SPA) program found pre-service teachers' (PSTs) competency against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs), as well as their sense of belonging in the school environment, also improved.

SPA developer and ACU senior education lecturer Dr Amanda Gutierrez said the program, a partnership between ACU and Brisbane Catholic Education, offered holistic support and mentorship to help PSTs of all faith or spiritual backgrounds enter the profession.

"It gives them a strong connection to themselves, their spirituality, their wellbeing and their understanding of what it means to be a teacher, as well as vital support to have longevity in their careers," Dr Gutierrez said.

"It is a truly authentic and holistic model for effective PST training, connecting stakeholders within and beyond ACU with Catholic Intellectual Tradition at the core."

Among the experiences of 25 PSTs involved in the program between 2019 and 2021, the review found:

- PSTs reported an increase in their Catholic and spiritual literacy of up to 56%
- They experienced an average decrease in levels of anxiety about teaching of 41%
- Their sense of belonging improved by up to 10%
- Feelings of competency against the Graduate APSTs improved by up to 57%.

Under the program, PSTs spend one day per week at a school for between 6 to 12 months in addition to doing their placements there, allowing them to immerse themselves in the school culture, learn from staff, get to know their students, experience the demands of the profession, and, often, secure their first jobs.

Dr Gutierrez said a key part of SPA was pairing PSTs with a one-on-one Spiritual and Pedagogical Companion, who met with them regularly during their journey to offer vital support.

"It's a ramped-up mentoring model," Dr Gutierrez said. "They learn the values that really underpin the Catholic setting and get cared for themselves pastorally – it's a win-win."

This year, about 60 final and second year PSTs, including students from Queensland University of Technology and University of the Sunshine Coast, are taking part in the program, which has expanded into Toowoomba, and will be offered in Cairns next year. There are also plans to grow the program nationally, and internationally.

Brisbane Catholic Education Office Head of Catholic Identity Alain Pitot said the research was additional proof of the program's success, in addition to the positive feedback received from schools and PSTs.

"This partnership program ensures pre-service teachers have the support and necessary spiritual and pedagogical skills and knowledge they need to be successful educators in the future," he said.

SPA alumna Eliza Martin completed the program this year and said it helped her understand students' strengths and challenges, use that information to inform her curriculum planning, and build on her own spiritual literacy.

"I engaged in the Catholic identity of the school, valuing the importance of community and the development of the whole child," she said. "It was great to link in with the spiritual companion and feel very supported."

Spiritual and Pedagogical Companion Kerry Latimer, who mentored Ms Martin, said the program gave PSTs a chance to see a classroom in operation all year and build positive and impactful relationships with students.

"They also get an understanding of what a Catholic school is in that it is more than just academic. Through professional learning they understand the charism of the school and how Catholic schools were established. Their own spiritual development is nurtured as well," she said.

For interviews with those quoted and access to ACU PST case studies from the program:

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Captions for accompanying photos:

Photo 1: ACU teaching student Eliza Martin leads a classroom at a primary school in Queensland where she completed the SPA program.

Photo 2: ACU teaching student Eliza Martin receives support from (L-R) Spiritual and Pedagogical Companion Kerry Latimer, ACU senior education lecturer Dr Amanda Gutierrez, and supervising teacher Kaila Castle.