<center>**Socially sustainable teacher education: Relationships matter**</center>

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Abstract
Social sustainability is increasingly playing a more significant role in the broader contemporary sustainability discourse, requiring the consideration of values, culture, decision-making and democratic processes of the social systems of which we are a part (Hammond, 2009). At the centre of social sustainability, are "inter-relationships and interdependencies built on communication over time…" (Murray, Dey & Lenzin, 2005, p.10). It will be argued in this paper that the principles of social sustainability need to be applied to teacher education if it is to endure the 'changing landscapes' (Clandinin, 2009) in which we, as teacher educators, find ourselves working. It will be further argued that relationships are pivotal.

The paper draws on the findings of a number of studies that have been undertaken at the University of South Australia on reconceptualised professional experiences based around the notion of learning communities. Key findings include the role of reciprocal learning relationships for ongoing professional learning and the role of peer support in the development of resilience (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Le Cornu, 2009). Similar initial findings have emerged from an investigation of 60 Early Career Teachers in South Australia and Western Australia. Based on a preliminary analysis of 120 interview transcripts (the Early Career Teachers were interviewed twice during their first year of teaching), five themes in relation to enhancing Early Career Teacher resilience were discerned. The first theme is Relationships and the need for relationships that are based on mutual trust, respect, care and integrity (Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce & Hunter, 2010).

The paper focuses on the nexus of these studies. It illuminates the role that sustainable and mutually sustaining relationships play in the development of both Pre-service and Early Career Teachers. The paper considers this finding and its implications for teacher education programs and practices.

Introduction
There is no doubt that teacher education is facing a plethora of challenges currently with the 'shifting social landscape' (Clandinin, 2009) and positioned as it is amidst the changing landscapes of both schools and universities. Clandinin (2009) has noted the influences of globalization, refugee populations, immigration, demographics, economic disparities and environmental changes on teachers and teachers' work. She, together with other writers currently (eg Bloomfield, 2009) has also highlighted the impact of government policy decisions, in particular those related to "an increased focus on standardized accountability" (p. 145). For example teachers' work has become even more intense with the added pressures of standardised assessment and national curriculum. Academics' work has become more intense with the increased foci on research and internationalisation. In addition for teacher educators, there is increasing expectations concerning accountability and conformity within professional standards frameworks (Bloomfield, 2009). McMaugh et al (2009) capture the overall effect for teacher educators;

> ...the changing landscapes of universities as workplaces and the work of teacher educators within them is shifting, unsettled and challenging our understandings of what it is to be a teacher educator. (p. 138)

For those of us involved in professional experience in teacher education, the situation is even more complex given the domination of practical and pragmatic concerns associated with professional experience courses including the increasing difficulties of obtaining sufficient numbers of placements

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in schools to meet the requirements of programs and Registration Boards, increased academic and teacher workloads, increasing casualisation of university staff, intensification of pre-service students' lives and the press for flexibility, accountability and standards.

There is a very human impact of the changing landscapes that is evident in the increasing numbers of Early Career Teachers leaving the profession within the first five years (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Moon, 2007) and increasing problems associated with morale and wellbeing amongst teachers and teacher educators (Gu &Day, 2007; Hammond & Churchman, 2008). Most recently, there is also an emerging trend of increasing numbers of student teachers leaving initial teacher education programs (Chambers, Hobson & Tracey, 2010). The increasing attention being paid to the emotional dimensions of teachers' work (Hargreaves, 1998; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006) and teacher educators' work (Hastings, 2008; Le Cornu, 2008) and the role of emotions in identity formation (Zembylas, 2003; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) in the literature is also indicative of the impact that the 'changing landscapes' are having in teacher education. It is because of this human impact that I argue in this paper that the principles of social sustainability need to be applied to teacher education. Social sustainability is increasingly playing a more significant role in the broader contemporary sustainability discourse, alongside environmental and economic sustainability. Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and livable communities (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002). At the centre of social sustainability, are "inter-relationships and interdependencies built on communication over time…" (Murray, Dey & Lenzin, 2005, p.10). The critical role of relationships and how we relate to each other and the natural world has been confirmed in the literature (eg UNESCO, 2002; Hammond, 2009).

This paper begins with some background information including contextual details and then provides a summary of key findings about sustaining relationships based on studies of pre-service teachers (PSTs) and Early Career Teachers (ECTs). A discussion follows looking at the question; 'what makes these relationships sustainable?'

Context
The paper draws on two groups of beginning teachers: PSTs and ECTs. The first group – PSTs – draws on four years of small studies investigating changes to professional experiences in the Graduate Bachelor of Education (primary) program at the University of South Australia. In this program attempts are being made to reconceptualise professional experiences around the notion of *learning communities*. There are many different interpretations of the notion of professional learning community. Many of them build on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999) who conceptualized communities of practice as particular kinds of networks of people who were engaging in a situated learning process. As applied to the UniSA professional experiences, it means that there is a commitment to encouraging pre-service teacher agency and providing increased opportunities for them to engage with their peers and mentors in more collegial ways. The main structural changes have included the introduction of professional experience course teams, clustering in school sites, a site model of support and the introduction of Learning Circles (see Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008, Le Cornu, 2009).

The second group – ECTs – draws on preliminary findings from a longitudinal study which investigates how ECTs negotiate and deal with challenges to their personal and professional wellbeing during their first years of teaching. The study is being undertaken using a critical ethnographic approach with 60 early career teachers in metropolitan, rural and remote areas in two Australian states, Western Australia and South Australia.

Findings
In both the studies with the Pre-service Teachers (PSTs) and the Early Career Teachers (ECTs) an unsurprising finding emerged – that relationships matter. I say unsurprising because as James Comer (2004) wrote;

> …like the real estate mantra of location, location, location – [in schools] it is relationships, relationships, relationships. Good relationships among and between people in the institutions that influence the quality of child life, largely home and school, make good child and adolescent rearing and development possible. (p. 2)

However the studies have provided some insights about the nature of these relationships in teacher education and what is needed for them to be mutually sustaining and sustainable.

In analyzing the data from both groups of beginning teachers there were three sets of professional relationships that were particularly important to the PSTs and ECTs' wellbeing and sense of agency. These were the beginning teachers' relationships with;
> a/ themselves;
> b/ their peers;
> c/ their colleagues.

It should be noted at this point that both groups of beginning teachers also cited relationships with their students and the parents of their students and with their family and friends as supporting them through their teaching experiences but a consideration of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

Relationships with themselves
The relationship that each PST and ECT had with themselves, that is, how comfortable they felt as a person and in their role as teacher, has emerged as a component of how well the beginning teachers were able to sustain themselves – and contribute to sustaining others. Gibbs (2006) explained the importance of this relationship when he wrote; "Teachers who have deep knowing about themselves as people and as teachers, show a sense of security in their personal and professional identities" (p. 77). We know from the literature that personal and professional identities are interconnected and that they are constantly evolving in relation to others. (Jenkins, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). We also know that identity formation involves a "reflexive awareness of a self" (Giddens, 1991, p. 52). These features were evident in the findings from the studies of both PSTs and ECTs. Where the beginning teachers demonstrated a high level of personal awareness, viewed themselves as learners and were reflexive, their resilience was enhanced (Le Cornu, 2009; Johnson et al, 2010). This had a positive effect on their self confidence and their sense of personal agency. This in turn meant that they could play a role in sustaining themselves, as seen in the following quote from an ECT towards the end of her first year of teaching; *"I'm learning...as I'm more confident I'm not second guessing myself so much in the classroom"*. Similarly, a PST, in reflecting on her second professional experience, noted, *"I really challenged myself to build my confidence and believe in myself as a teacher."*

What has also emerged from the studies is that the PSTs and ECTs who demonstrated strong emerging personal and professional identities also were very conscious of the importance of looking after their own wellbeing. They did this by maintaining a sense of hope and optimism, employing proactive coping strategies and were working towards the establishment of a work-life balance. This was not always easy given the challenges and dilemmas inherent in teaching and the negative experiences encountered by some, as indicated in the following interview with one of the ECTs, after she had been teaching for two

terms in a school where she felt unsupported;

> *It was just emotional, everything was emotional... I'd work at school till late and then do more work when I got home just to try and make it better ...I put on weight, I didn't exercise, I was tired all of the time...I was miserable and it wasn't worth it...so I took up twilight hockey, left school earlier, limited what I did on the weekend...In the end my emotional and mental and physical well being is more important than a job ...being able to realise this and not deplete my self esteem or self worth or any of those things has been my biggest achievement.*

Relationships with peers

Peer support has emerged as being central to the development of sustaining relationships. Both the PSTs and the ECTs played a key role in 'keeping each other going' through the highs and lows of their teaching experiences by providing each other with much needed professional and personal support. For example, a PST commented; *"They [peers] kept me sane during prac...helped me to keep going."* And another; *"They helped when I was feeling low and talking improved my mood."* As well as providing much needed emotional support, they helped each other with reflecting, problem solving and sharing resources. The value of dialogue and the importance of time are reflected in the following PST comment; *"We all shared genuine concern for each other's learning...we were willing to discuss issues for as long as it took to help the person."* The following comment from an ECT highlighted the value of an 'outsider perspective'; *"I can ring her up and she has no idea who the kids and she'll say 'what if you do it this way?' whereas if I talk to the other teachers they know who the kid is..."*

There was a major difference in the ways that the PSTs and the ECTs had access to peer support. The PSTs were required to work closely with their peers in the Learning Circles that were established in their professional experience schools and so they had little choice with whom they interacted. This presented particular challenges as can be seen in the following PST comment; *"Two in the group made it difficult at times as they were not team players and would talk over the top of people and undermine them and were generally only 'I' focused."* The majority of ECTs however actively sought out their peers, unless they were in a school which had employed a number of ECTs (which was the case for a minority). For many of the ECTs, this consisted of them maintaining contact with their friends from University and many made use of electronic communication to do this such as Facebook and email. Many ECTs also attended Beginning Teacher Conferences where they were able to establish new relationships with other early career teachers.

Peer support also encouraged personal agency. Where the beginning teachers were able to establish trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationships with their peers, this enabled them to feel more empowered. One of the reasons that the relationships were empowering was because the support was coming from others who were going through a similar experience and so the beginning teachers seemed to be on an 'equal footing' with each other. Many PST comments particularly highlighted this aspect and referred to the non judgemental nature of their peer support network. For example; *"It's good to bounce ideas off each other without fear of being wrong or being judged"* and *"Just simply being on the same page was enough to feel confident to talk freely."* And an ECT said; *"It was good going out to dinner with other grads ...we were all sharing the same doubts and issues...It was nice to be able to talk and think well I'm not different, I'm not not doing a good job."* It would appear that beginning teachers have a unique role that they can play for one another given their equal power base (Le Cornu, 2009). For, as Jordan (2006) has acknowledged, "in order to enjoy full authentic and growth-fostering interaction one cannot be in a position of subordination" (p. 82).

Relationships with colleagues

For both the PSTs and the ECTs, relationships with other colleagues – both within and beyond the school - were another source of support. For the PSTs, this was first and foremost, their Mentor Teachers. We have known for a long time now that mentor teachers play a pivotal role in supporting pre-service teachers on placement (McIntyre, 1991; Zeichner, 1990). There is little doubt that the relationships that they establish with their pre-service teachers, whether they be encouraging or discouraging, have a major influence on the quality of their pre-service teachers' practicum experience (Le Cornu, 2008; Kyriacou et al, 2003; Chambers et al, 2010). The data from the PST studies revealed that not surprisingly, mentor teachers who were seen as encouraging were the most highly regarded. Comments such as these were common; *"My mentor believed in me and nurtured me throughout"*. Others who helped to sustain the PSTs were their University Mentors, School Co-ordinators and other school staff.

For the ECTs, the important role of professional colleagues is captured in the following comment from an ECT at the end of her first year of teaching; *"The big thing is relationships. If you don't have support in your school then you've got nothing really"*. Support from other teachers in the school and school leaders were the most frequently cited source of sustenance, followed by other support staff including Education Support Officers and Advisory staff. It was very apparent from the data that positive staff relationships and emotional support were vital in ECTs' lives. They reported coping better when they experienced support from the other adults in the school including being frequently asked about their welfare and being offered help but also when staff mixed freely with each other in the staffroom and there was a lot of interaction with the principal. For example, *"I wouldn't be able to operate as confidently and at ease in the classroom if I didn't have people around me that I thought I could rely on or just to talk to each day, and have a laugh with in the staffroom"* (ECT).

The role of school leaders has also emerged as a significant one, not only in the relationships they established with their ECTs but also in regard to the culture established in the school. The data illustrated the importance of a culture that promoted a sense of belonging and social connectedness and where there was collective responsibility taken for teacher wellbeing. Such findings are in keeping with the literature on the role of collaborative school communities in providing emotional support for all teachers and fostering a reflexive stance toward teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Wang, Odell & Schwille, 2008; Conway and Clark, 2003). As one ECT commented; *"The school is really supportive, so you're not afraid to make a mistake, you don't feel uncomfortable to try out new things, the leadership is really supportive"*. And in another school, the ECT was part of a Year 7 'learning team', which the ECT found very supportive. He also felt that he had a contribution to make as indicated in the following; *"The support I get from both Year 7 teachers is great and we actually support each other"*. This latter comment reflects the importance of reciprocity in the relationship, which is a feature of effective learning communities (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Discussion: What makes sustaining relationships sustainable?
Many of the sustaining relationships in which both the PSTs and the ECTs were involved related to the experience of being in a professional learning community. For the PSTs, participating in a learning community helped them cope with the challenges and dilemmas of their professional experiences and to maximize their learning from these experiences. It also contributed to their wellbeing and sense of agency. It is well recognized that learning from professional experiences is challenging given the complexity of the role of 'being a student teacher' (eg Calderhead, 1987), the context of student teaching (eg Britzman, 1991) and the 'micro politics of the practicum' (Groundwater-Smith, 1993). The evaluation of the structures set up to engage the PSTs in a learning community (ie being placed in groups in schools and Learning Circles), indicated that there were many benefits for the PSTs from working in this way (see Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Le Cornu, 2009).

For the ECTs, those who flourished or coped better with the challenges of their first year of teaching were those who experienced their schools as professional learning communities, or who were able to access a wider learning community (ie through Beginning Teacher Conferences and/or support groups established by Advisory staff and/or significant others). Research over the last decade has demonstrated the centrality of schools developing as professional learning communities if teachers are to sustain their professional growth (Day et al, 1998; Peters, 2001; Senge et al, 2000, Ewing, 2002). The literature on teacher professional development also highlights the establishment of professional learning communities that provide a positive and enabling context for in-service teachers' professional growth (McLaughlin, 1997; Peters, 2001).

For both groups of beginning teachers then, a learning community provided them with a 'sustaining space' (Clandinin, 2008). By being supported in a learning community, the PSTs and the ECTs were involved in relationships that promoted a sense of belonging, wellbeing and agency. This finding resonates with that of Nieto (2003) who found, in her study of American high school teachers, that what had kept them going was "emotional stuff" and she concluded that in the contemporary contexts for teaching "a learning community is an important incentive that keeps teachers going" (p. 122 cited in Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1304). She wrote;

> In pursuit of learning in the 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998), teachers will consolidate a sense of belonging and shared responsibility, enhance morale and perceived efficacy, develop aspects of resilient qualities, and thrive and flourish socially and professionally. (cited in Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1304)

Jordan's (2006) notion of 'supported vulnerability' is relevant here. She notes that when we are stressed, personal vulnerability increases and that "finding a way to tolerate vulnerability and turn toward others is a significant sign of resilience" (p. 83). We know that beginning teachers find their initial placements stressful as they learn to cope with the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of teacher's work and the micropolitics of workplaces. Given these conditions, their vulnerability is heightened. It is reassuring to see from the data that both PSTs and ECTs readily accessed their peers' and colleagues' support particularly when opportunities were provided for them to do so.

Although there are many interpretations of the notion of community, Westheimer (1998) has identified five common themes in theories of community as applied to teachers' ongoing development: interdependence, interaction/participation, shared interests, concern for individual and minority views and meaningful relationships. These five characteristics are very similar to five recently identified principles of social sustainability: equity, democracy and governance, diversity, wellbeing and interconnectedness (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002). Hammond (2009) clarified the link between the two constructs when she argued that the five principles of social sustainability are enacted within the construct of a community. She wrote; "It was membership within the community that encouraged personal agency, enabling the journey towards social sustainability" (p. 8). The findings of the PSTs' and ECTs' experiences with a learning community support this argument.

Hence I would argue that in order for sustaining relationships to be nurtured and sustained over time, the development of learning communities for both initial and ongoing teacher education are imperative.

It is not possible within the confines of this paper for a full discussion of the implications of such a move. Suffice to say that if the development of learning communities is to be taken seriously, there are implications for teacher educators, teachers, leaders, PSTs, systems personnel and policy makers alike.

Recent calls in the literature for 'altered relationships' (Kruger et al, 2009) or 'de-institutionalised relationships' (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2008) are central to successful implementation. Such relationships require changes to the deeply entrenched ways of relating in teaching and teacher education which continue to thwart innovation in the field. Sustainable teacher education needs the development of relationships based on trust, mutuality and reciprocity. As Jordan (2006) writes; "The importance of these relationships is not just that they offer support, but that they also provide an opportunity to participate in a relationship that is growth-fostering for the other person as well as themselves" (p. 88). Building PSTs' capacities for establishing and maintaining such relationships with their colleagues and peers need to be an explicit focus of initial teacher education. Cohen (2010) drew a similar conclusion in regard to PSTs developing and sustaining a professional identity; 'teacher educators need to pay explicit attention to preparing students for engagement with colleagues as key sites of professional engagement… (p.480). Such preparation needs to include explicit teaching of reflective and dialogic skills and attitudes as well as the provision of opportunities for PSTs to participate in a learning community during their initial teacher education (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Le Cornu, 2009).

Conclusion
It is clear from the findings presented in this paper that mutually sustaining relationships with peers and colleagues played a significant role in the development of both the PSTs and the ECTs. Hence, as explicitly stated in the title of this paper, I want to conclude by stressing the point that 'relationships matter'. Given that relationships are at the heart of social sustainability I would argue that 'socially sustainable teacher education' is needed if social sustainability is to become a reality and if PSTs, teachers and teacher educators are to endure the 'changing landscapes' (Clandinin, 2009) in which we find ourselves working. Socially sustainable teacher education is that which is committed to the principles of equity, democracy, diversity, wellbeing and interconnectedness (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002), It acknowledges "the centrality of the social dimension and the ability of relationships and connections to build knowledge and influence practice over time" (Hammond, 2009, p. 4).

Given the current complex context for teaching and teacher education and particularly given the dominance of standardised accountability measures, one might well ask, is 'socially sustainable teacher education' feasible or is it merely a dream? It is not possible to engage with this question here, other than to say that it would require courage, commitment and resources from every level of Universities and school systems to develop and employ socially sustainable practices and relationships.

Perhaps the really pertinent question is; *How much* do relationships matter?

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