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Critical peer collaboration for EFL preservice teachers.

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Local Context

There is an increasing demand worldwide for more competent English teachers and effective approaches to teacher preparation. In the Asian context, reforms in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education, including field experiences (practicum), aim to raise the standard for and quality of EFL teachers. In particular, EFL education in Vietnam calls for a reform in preservice EFL teacher education with a clearer focus on effective teaching practices (Le, 2007). Tertiary education in Vietnam has been criticised for giving inadequate attention to preservice EFL teaching practice while focusing too much on the transmission of knowledge and teaching theory. These critiques suggest that preservice EFL teachers are inadequately prepared or trained for classroom practice (Pham, 2001).

For many years, practicum has been a compulsory component within preservice EFL teacher education programs, providing opportunities to practise teaching skills in authentic situations. Preservice teachers are expected to apply their university understandings to these real-life school contexts and work collaboratively with their teaching supervisors (mentors). While practicum plays a critical role in developing preservice teachers' professional practice, there are challenges in the mentoring arrangements.

Challenges in Mentoring

The quality of mentoring is limited by many factors including the need for substantial investments of time, money, effort, and resources. An important constraint on the traditional mentoring process is the availability of teachers as role models and mentors for preservice teachers. Some preservice teachers have claimed that their school-based practicum experiences were inadequate because of poor or limited mentoring (Morton, 2004). Consequently, there is a need for alternative approaches to develop preservice teachers' learning during the practicum. In addition, EFL teachers may not display personal attributes conducive to effective mentoring; characteristics such as sharing, reflection, and collaboration among colleagues are generally absent among Vietnamese EFL teachers (Le, 2007).

Considering the existing problems and issues with mentoring and university supervision, this study investigated alternative measures that may advance a preservice teacher's professional growth towards becoming an effective classroom practitioner. It focused on the application of a group of preservice teachers engaged in mentoring each other during a practicum in Vietnam, due to the limited opportunities for preservice teachers to develop teaching practice through mentoring by classroom practitioners.

Theoretical Ground

The quality of school-based mentoring for preservice EFL teachers relies on collaboration and reflection on teaching practices. Preservice teachers involved in one study (Nguyen & Luong, 2007) considered their peers as a most useful source of support that provided a way to acquire new pedagogical skills and knowledge. Other studies (e.g., Le Corne, 2005; Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010) have investigated paired placement, peer supervision, peer observation, peer coaching, peer mentoring, and learning circles as formal peer collaboration during preservice EFL teachers'

practicum experiences. These studies have documented the favourable outcomes and benefits of preservice teachers working together and supporting one another throughout a practicum.

Some school-based mentoring research has taken on the term *peer group mentoring* (PGM), in which *peer* includes those working on a similar level, *group* is a collective of more than two, and *mentoring* is the vehicle for engaging in professional learning. PGM refers to the supportive process in which a group of peers are involved in mentoring one another.

Franzak (2002) advocates that a group of critical friends can work together collaboratively to improve the day-to-day teaching-learning process. Participants in these groups use structured protocols to explore teaching strategies, conduct peer observations, and analyse evidence of their students' achievements. When preservice teachers meet, they examine each other's practices and give feedback on improving their work, which implies a reciprocal learning. This interaction is underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, contending that meaning is constructed through first-hand experiences and as a social exchange between individuals. In this process, each participant interprets, transforms, and internalises new knowledge as a result of collective dialogues.

The PGM model in this research focused on peer observation and the provision of constructive feedback. It employed specific turn-taking rules and promoted constructive criticism from peer observations to ensure equitable arrangements for all concerned.

Context for Peer Group Mentoring (PGM)

Based on the key principles and practices of mentoring, the following model of PGM was integrated and implemented for preservice EFL teachers during a

TESOL practicum in Vietnam. At the beginning of the six-week practicum, the preservice teachers ($n=28$) attended one three-hour orientation meeting during which they self-allocated into groups of three or four. The orientation included an explanation of the program's goals, philosophy, requirements, and expectations. The participants were required to observe their peers' teaching with the agreed observation criteria to be used during feedback meetings at least once a week. During each feedback session, the participants discussed what they had learnt from each other's teaching performances, and what they thought should be improved.

The process was intended to encourage: (a) observation of practice, (b) feedback on areas that appeared successful and those requiring improvement, (c) amendments to future planning, implementation of changes, and (d) peers observing this implementation for further feedback. Important to the PGM process was the alignment with reflective practices. The program aimed to provide the preservice EFL teachers with additional supportive strategies for developing their professional practice during their practicum.

A qualitative approach is used to explore the research inquiry. It permits the researcher to study a selected issue in depth and in detail (Patton, 2002) and "can be used to obtain the intricate detail about the phenomena such as feelings, thoughts, processes, and emotions that are difficult to enact or learn from more conventional methods". Six one-hour focus group interviews with four-to-six participants in each group were conducted to explore the participants' experiences in their peer group mentoring. Data analysis followed an iterative process employed in qualitative research where data analyses were revised and refocused based on emergent themes (Hittleman & Simon, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

The findings in this study will be discussed along the following themes: (a) changes in teaching methods, (b) changes in work practices, and (c) sources of emotional support.

Changes in Teaching Methods

Participant comments that related to changes in teaching methods were categorised. The comments revealed that the preservice teachers considered the peer observations and subsequent meetings valuable and helpful for developing their teaching methods. Additionally, the majority of the preservice teachers across the six groups seemed to value their peer observation practices and feedback sessions. One of them claimed, “I learned from my peer observation more than from that of my school mentor.” Most of them said that they valued the role of peer observation as an impetus for their self-reflection. Some reflected on their own lessons when observing their peers teaching a similar lesson:

I always taught a lesson two days before my peer’s same lesson. When observing her, I realized that her lesson was more successful than mine.

The reason was that she used more interesting games . . . Observing peers helped me reflect on my own teaching.

Working with peers and using peer feedback was said to have enabled these preservice teachers to report, to reflect, and to identify issues and concerns. Most of the preservice teachers claimed they reflected on their strengths and weaknesses when receiving their peer’s feedback. The following quote illustrates what many preservice teachers expressed on the same topic: “I used to speak too fast, so the students didn’t understand what to do. Also, I tended to move around too much in the class. My friend observed my lessons, and her comments helped me realize those weaknesses”.

Study participants believed that their peers' feedback aided them to reflect on their lessons more accurately because they could not identify areas for improvement as readily themselves. Most of them agreed that peer observations were effective in helping them develop their teaching practice and cited reasons they believed this was the case, including mutual learning from peers, drawing benefit for improving their own lessons, and identifying teaching mistakes. They also mentioned some specific aspects of teaching that were improved such as motivational techniques, flexibility in teaching, use of the blackboard, time management, teaching behaviours, student management techniques, and effective communication strategies.

Changes in Work Practices

Another category of comments regarding preservice teachers' experience in the PGM concerned the development of positive work practices. One of the changes in their work practices was establishing skills to share practices. Some of the participants claimed that through being involved in the PGM process, they started sharing both personal and professional issues with their peers, and sharing became part of their professional practice. One of them remarked: "I think this intervention was very effective because it engaged us in working in groups. Otherwise, we worked on our own and did not care what others did. Now, we could build up our sharing habits in our groups".

Some of the preservice teachers claimed that they shared their feelings with their peers after the lessons, although this was an infrequent occurrence and only evident when peers were friends previously. One preservice teacher said,

I shared my feelings about the lessons with Trang (my close friend at university), but not every lesson. It is a kind of stress relief for me. I never

talked like that with other friends in the groups. We just met and talked about trivial things.

Some other preservice teachers from two different groups commented that they and their peers in the same class sometimes shared their personal concerns such as money problems. Sharing was reported to emerge as an important element for their learning culture.

Three preservice teachers reported that they liked observing their peers more than once per week even though it was not compulsory to do so. They said that observing their peers' lessons could be an effective work practice for their future professional development. Other preservice teachers reported that they were more disciplined as a result of working with their peers, especially in areas involving time scheduling for assigned work and responsibilities for completing work together. A preservice teacher commented, "I felt I needed to complete the work we discussed even though I felt too tired sometimes". The act of collaborating on work that had shared goals and similar concerns within the EFL context enabled them to develop positive work practices. Collaboration appeared to lead to changes in perceptions of working as beginning professionals in an academic environment.

Preservice teachers commented on their opportunities to participate in a community of practice. Most participants agreed that the PGM process enabled them to engage in a wider circle of learning among peers in the same school. With a total of 18 specific mentions of this involvement, the preservice teachers reported that they not only worked with their assigned peers, but also extended their interactions to other peers at the school. One teacher commented, "If I could not observe my peer on that day, I went to see others' lessons. I felt I could work with everyone in the group, and we did not only work in pairs". Two participants in the same focus group agreed with

the previous comment. Some participants also reported that the effect of working in groups extended to a wider community of practice in which all preservice teachers worked together and challenged each other to create more effective teaching practices.

Additionally, it was observed that the PGM process may develop skills that prepare preservice teachers to participate in similar communities of practice in their future careers. This skill development was noted by a preservice teacher, “I liked the way our group worked together. It helped me to realise how important it was to share our issues together and work through them. I felt everyone in the group were my friendly colleagues”.

The initially imposed collaborative arrangements of PGM facilitated in peers a professional relationship built on trust. In addition, working collegially with peers built confidence to work more extensively with other peer groups. To illustrate this point, one preservice teacher commented:

I think working in pairs like this enabled everyone to be close to each other; everyone felt that they had a friend, and we felt close. At first, we worked together as a requirement of the program but gradually it became automatic. Everyone not only worked in their pairs; but worked together in the larger group, the whole group, not just individual pairs.

Sources of Emotional Support

Most of the preservice teachers participating in the six focus group interviews reported that they received emotional support from their peers. This support assisted them to “feel better”, “reduce stress”, not feel “alone”, and “made the practicum go smoothly”. Their peers instilled in them emotional strength to deal with the various problems they faced during the practicum. One focus group participant commented, “I got more emotional benefit from interacting with peers . . . When I encountered

trouble, for example, I complained. Even though no one could help me out, there was a person [peer] who listened to it. I felt less stressed”.

The nature of this emotional support was further detailed in the comments about peers comforting each other. Practicum was a stressful time for many of the preservice teachers, and although they worked as peers, many considered the relationship as a friendship. One participant praised her peer’s role in supporting her emotionally as follows:

We often had some pressure, when we talked with our friends, we felt less pressure. In general, I felt supportive in any aspects. I think if there had not been friends there for us, we would have found it harder to go through this practicum. My friends made the practicum go smoothly.

It was not a surprise, therefore, that the preservice teachers valued their peers’ help in dealing with tensions by listening to each other’s challenges and providing emotional support accordingly. As another preservice teacher remarked:

Apart from sharing teaching knowledge, my peers’ emotional support was very important. In the beginning weeks, we faced difficulties in teaching, for example, Trang and I did not teach well, and our mentors criticized us a lot . . . We felt disappointed but we were always there to comfort each other. It, therefore, helped us feel better.

The similarities of their collective situations and levels of pedagogical development allowed these preservice teachers to empathise strongly with each other: “I had to comfort my friends and said that everyone was the same and not to worry too much. Everyone had problems, the same as each other, not to worry. I think my friends felt better”. Teachers often remain isolated in classrooms with little adult interaction

during teaching periods. These preservice teachers had opportunities to provide support in peer mentoring arrangements, which was largely emotional support that aimed at building confidence and sharing experiences. Emotional support from their peers at this formative stage of development provides an avenue for confidential and non-threatening dialogue that may lead to more successful subsequent teaching experiences.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The current study provided evidence that PGM can work effectively for preservice EFL teachers in a TESOL practicum in Vietnam where the process of learning to teach traditionally featured the transfer of knowledge and experience from seasoned teachers (mentors) to preservice teachers. The PGM intervention was reported to have positive effects on preservice EFL teachers' teaching practices, including the provision of professional and emotional support and enhancement of reflection on practices. These preservice teachers embraced the PGM framework, particularly as the feedback through professional dialogue with their peers appeared to advance their classroom teaching.

As a collective connected to the same university with similar coursework experiences, the preservice teachers had commonalities among them and therefore were better able to elicit empathetic understandings from each other. Unlike the conflicting positions that can occur with supervising teachers, who in effective mentoring roles may be assessors and confidants, these preservice teachers had no conflict of interest for supporting each other's pedagogical development. They could be confidants for one another without feeling they were jeopardising their potential opportunities within a school. Furthermore, they were not in a position to formally assess their peer's performance, hence the assessment pressure was diminished. Peers,

understanding each other's stages of development, were sensitive to criticism and couched their own comments in a constructive rather than destructive way.

Facilitating PGM

PGM can open discussions to issues that are common among a particular group of preservice teachers. PGM can present another level of support when classroom teachers--in their roles as mentors--may not be readily or willingly available to guide preservice teachers' practices. However, it is important to recognise that mentoring through the PGM model must not be haphazard, unbalanced, or uninformed. If preservice teachers are to undertake PGM, they need to be educated on effective peer mentoring attributes and practices.

PGM can be further facilitated through purposeful guidance to support preservice teachers' roles as co-mentors. To capitalise on PGM effectiveness, preservice teachers will require a mentoring framework to guide their interactions (e.g., see Hudson, Nguyen, & Hudson, 2009). Factors within the mentoring framework include: the mentor's personal attributes that can assist in facilitating the mentoring process, mentoring to the education system requirements, articulating pedagogical knowledge, and modelling of effective EFL teaching practices. For example, it is argued in this study that a preservice teacher can learn about successful personal attributes employed for mentoring (e.g., being supportive, instilling confidence and positive attitudes, and being an attentive listener), which would facilitate the mentoring process more effectively. As another example, preservice teachers need to be astutely aware of the syllabus requirements and policies within their school. If there are discussions about an issue within their school, preservice EFL teachers need to know how to access school policies and other information that would allow them to deal with the issue. They must be able to access valid and

reliable information that supports their discussions; otherwise, preservice teachers in their formative stages of learning may not necessarily be accurate in their advice and deliberations with peers. Therefore, PGMs require checks and balances to ensure the advice provided and received does not conflict with school policies and practices. A university liaison officer or school site coordinator (lead mentor) can be a *sounding board* for the peer group to clarify ideas and information.

Conclusion

In this study, participation in the PGM during practicum enabled preservice EFL teachers to interact positively with each other. The study provided further evidence for the position that learning does not take place in isolation but rather through interaction; in other words, learning occurs through communication and collaboration with other people in social settings. This study also raised awareness of the need for well-structured support for interaction among peers through which knowledge of effective mentoring can raise the standard of mentoring within peer groups. Teacher educators, policy makers, and teachers can use PGM as a supplementary source of learning and support for preservice teachers during practicum. A PGM program can support preservice teachers by facilitating collaborative construction of meaning through reflective insights that aim to develop effective pedagogical practices.

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