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School culture and mentoring relationships, crucial to developing confident professional identities among LBOTE pre-service teachers

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Abstract

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The practicum is of critical importance to the beginning teacher, providing the opportunity to develop his/her potential. It provides the space to link theory to practice and actively engage in the craft of teaching. When well supported the pre-service teacher has the capacity to grow and enhance their developing professional teacher identity. However, for the Language background other than English (LBOTE) pre-service teacher this is often characterized by complex dilemmas that need to be continually managed rather than definitely resolved. For the LBOTE pre-service teacher there is often unrealistic expectations that underestimate the complex and multifaceted challenges they face as they attempt to navigate the often conflicting cultural obstacles in schools, classrooms and staffrooms.

This paper draws from data collected from a two year study on improving the quality of the teacher education experiences, looking specifically at mentoring practices and processes. The study recognised the relational nature of mentoring and the way mentoring relation is affected by the contextual learning situation. This paper will look at the formation of professional identity of a specific group of LBOTE participants (n=7) included pre-service teachers from Malaysia (n=2), Singapore (n=1), China (n=4), Hong Kong (n=1) and Serbia (n=1). Whilst the LBOTE group are small and too disparate in experience to afford generalisation, the perspectives of the pre-service teachers' were a representative sample of the linguistic and cultural diversity of UNSW students from language backgrounds other than English and should provide valuable insights into pre-service teachers' self-perceptions on the practicum experience and its role in the development of professional identities as beginning teachers.

LBOTE pre-service teachers were invited to take part in on-going support groups at UNSW during both professional experiences; they were encouraged to share their stories on the mentoring experience. Data was collected from these focus group sessions in the form narratives. A narrative enquiry approach, which places an emphasis on the role of stories in structuring meaning, was adopted to elicit and explore pre-service teachers' practicum experiences (Craig, 2007; Kooy, 2006; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2005; Shank, cited in Orland-Barak and Maskit, 2011). Two key perspectives: *expectations* of and *realisations* concerning the pre-service teacher readiness for the practicum were reported in relation to specific cultural and linguistic issues identified. The study seeks to contribute to our understanding of how best to support development of confident cross-cultural teaching and professional identity among culturally and linguistically diverse pre-service teachers.