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Peer Mentoring: A Way Forward for Supporting Preservice Efl Teachers Psychosocially During the Practicum

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Abstract: During the past several years, the importance of practicum as a vital proportion of the preservice teacher education program has been increasingly emphasized. There have been a number of initiatives for supporting preservice teachers. Among these, peer based relationship is increasingly emerged as an innovative strategy to provide additional support to preservice teachers. This paper reports on part of a larger study which investigated the impact of peer mentoring in the context of Vietnam. Using mixed methods research design, the study investigated the impact of a peer mentoring model on the preservice teachers' perceptions of their psychosocial support from their peers during their practicum in Vietnam. A peer mentoring model was implemented with a group of preservice teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Data were collected from questionnaires and focus group interview with both a group of formally peer mentored preservice teachers and a group of formally non-peer mentored. The results revealed the preservice EFL teachers in the experimental group perceived more psychosocial support from their peer than those in the control group. The study affirms the empirical evidence for implementing a peer mentoring model for preservice EFL teachers during the practicum and echoes the need for a reform in the practicum.

Introduction

Language teacher preparation in many countries consists of initial university-based course work with an emphasis on teaching theory followed by school-based student teaching practice in a variety of educational settings. In pre-service teacher education in general, and EFL teacher education in particular, the school-based practicum experience has been identified as one of the most critical components for preparing future teachers (Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013; Dang, 2013; Farrell, 2001; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). However, a growing body of research has indicated a number of problems preservice teachers face during their practicum. Wang and Odell (2002) identified three types of problems that can confront preservice teachers when learning to teach within school settings, namely: (1) emotional and psychological stress, (2) the lack of support, and (3) conceptual struggles about teaching and learning. Thus, there is a growing concern about how to provide more support to preservice teachers during the practicum.

During the practicum, preservice teachers are generally socialized into the profession through relationships and mentoring. Much literature (e.g., Hudson, 2004; Mann & Tang, 2012; Nguyen & Hudson, 2012b; Sempowicz & Hudson, 2012; Tomlinson, Hobson, & Malderez, 2010) has proved the benefits of mentoring in developing preservice teachers'

learning and providing supporting. However, the appointment and support from a mentor alone does not ensure the quality of the socialization process. Moreover, the practicum has also been documented as leading to feelings of isolation and anxiety (Farrell, 2007; Machado & Meyer-Botnarescue, 2005). A study by Capel (1997) regarding this issue has shown that student teachers' anxieties may also be attributed to being observed, evaluated, and assessed. Especially, for preservice EFL teachers, the stress has been added as the result of using English as a medium of instruction in class. As preservice teachers navigate the challenging practicum, they need positive support from different stakeholders who are involved in their practicum (Farrell, 2007, 2008; Hudson, Nguyen, & Hudson, 2008). Providing more support to preservice teachers during the practicum has been considered as a critical issue. "Research has demonstrated that social support is significantly linked to reduced burnout and lower levels of stress" (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012, p. 521). However, in English language teaching (ELT) there is a paucity of research related to specific strategies to provide support to preservice EFL teachers during their practicum. Among different types of support, support from peers is one of unexplored issues. This present study is part of a larger research project which investigated the impact of peer mentoring on preservice EFL teachers during their practicum (See Nguyen 2010). The present study focuses solely on the impact of a peer mentoring intervention on preservice EFL teachers' perceptions of the psychosocial support from peers.

Peer Mentoring As a Strategy for Providing Psychosocial Support

Peers as a source of psychosocial support have been increasingly recognised in the literature. Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman, and Stevens (2009) found that when pre-service teachers were assigned to work with other peers, they reported that they provided each other with emotional support by sharing their ups and downs because they had an equal with whom they could discuss various issues and concerns. This support helped the preservice teachers to build up more confidence in teaching. Several other studies (Goodnough, et al., 2009; Le Cornu, 2007; Slater & Simmons, 2001; Walsh, Elmslie, & Tayler, 2002) emphasised the role of peers in reducing stress and isolation as working with peers in a supportive atmosphere provided them with emotional support. This psychosocial support works to reduce teacher burnout and intimidation, calms fears, and has been confirmed in many other studies which look at the use of peers in teacher education (Bullough et al., 2003; Forbes, 2004a; Heidorn, Jenkins, Harvey, & Mosier, 2011; Kurtts & Levin, 2000; Nguyen & Hudson, 2012a). Recently, Dang (2013) studied that as the result of working with peers during the practicum, preservice teachers experienced qualitative development in their teaching identities.

Speaking openly and frankly with peers is recognized as one stress-reducing factor during the pre-service teacher practicum. Working in pairs reduces pre-service teachers' burnout and stress because peer mentors feel supported and share responsibility for the workload with each other (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 1998; Nguyen & Hudson, 2012a; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). McCarthy and Youens (2005) conducted a study with student science teachers on how they used their fellow student teachers to assist them with addressing their deficiencies. The findings revealed that interactions with their peers encouraged them to take risks. The student teachers said that they would not ask their teacher mentors or their university supervisor as they were afraid of being judged. Although these types of support have not been fully examined in the context of EFL pre-service or in-service teacher education, there is evidence to support the argument that teachers in their relationships with peers during their teaching practice either formally or informally provide

some or all of these types of psychosocial support (Anderson, Barksdale, & Hite, 2005; Hawkey, 1995; Laker, Laker, & Lea, 2008; Le Cornu, 2008). The use of peers could provide a source of support and co-learning, but this appears to be uncommon in such programs. Most commonly, pre-service teachers develop their professional practices through their mentoring relationships with their school-based mentors in their practicum, but it might also be useful for pre-service teachers to support one another through a peer mentoring process.

Peer mentoring can occur in various forms such as peer coaching (Wynn & Kromrey, 2000) peer supervision (M. G. R. Miller, 1989), and peer-observation. Most of these different configurations are based on the model of “peer assistance of equals and do not involve evaluation” (Sullivan & Glanz, 2005, p. 144). The varied use of the term of peer mentoring suggests that there is no universal agreement about its definition. However, an examination of the various definitions of peer mentoring reveals several common themes. In general, peer mentoring refers to a supportive process which is based on an equal or nearly equal peer based relationship in which peers play the role of mutual mentor. Peer mentors are usually equals in terms of age, expertise, power, and hierarchical status, and the interactions are based on reciprocal and mutual beneficial relationships and learning partnerships rather than on the traditional transmission of expertise and experience from experts to novices. In this research, we examine the dynamic of two-way peer mentoring in which “both participants have something of value to contribute and to gain from the other in what is defined as a mutually helpful situation” (Harnish & Wild, 1993, p. 272) and in which both parties can experience being both a mentor and a mentee at different times.

The importance of peer support has been recognized in the literature and the diverse types of support that peer mentoring offers are well documented. Among different types of support, Kram and Isabella’s (1985) framework for peer-based relationships synthesizes most of the aspects of the psychosocial support that peers can offer to each other. According to Kram and Isabella (1985), psychosocial functions support “an individual’s sense of competence and confidence in a professional role” (p. 117), providing such features as “confirmation”, “emotional support”, “personal feedback”, and “friendship” (Kram, 1985, p. 136). Kram and Isabella’s (1985) framework captures the basic traits of peer mentoring relationship as it is grounded in peer based mentoring relationships at work rather than in traditional work-related mentoring relationships where a senior was assigned to mentor a junior. However, this framework was based on the study of long term and informal peer-based relationships in organisational settings which are different from those that occur in educational contexts and that are more formalized. In educational settings, there has been little research which focuses on this type of support apart from a study by Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000) which examined the effects of peer mentoring on types of mentor support, program satisfaction and graduate student stress. They found strong support that formally assigned peer mentoring provided students with both an increased level of psychosocial and instrumental support. However, the study has an exploratory focus and examined students in an educational context. Thus the current study fills this gap by investigating the impact of a peer mentoring intervention on preservice teachers’ perceptions of psychosocial supports they received from their peers during the practicum.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a mixed methods approach to investigate the impact of a formal peer mentoring intervention on pre-service EFL teachers’ perceptions of the psychosocial support received from their peers. Questionnaire data was used to collect their perceptions of the

support received from peers, comparing these results to a group of non-peer mentored EFL pre-service teachers. It is believed that the quantitative results could be better understood with reference to qualitative discussion of these effects. Therefore, in addition to the quantitative techniques, focus group interviews with the participants were employed to collect data for the research. Focus group interview data were also collected and thematically analysed to better understand the process of peer mentoring, and its possible contributions to the support received from peers.

Research Context

This study was conducted within a six-week school-based practicum for pre-service EFL teachers at a University in Vietnam where clusters of pre-service EFL teachers were placed in different secondary schools in Hanoi or nearby areas. The preservice teachers studied EFL teaching methodology courses which equipped them with current trends in English language teaching. The practicum was a one-off period where they experienced firsthand teaching practices found in real classrooms. The pre-service EFL teachers were at their practicum sites for six full days a week. Preservice EFL teachers progressed through these field experiences as a cohort group, and were placed with the university supervisor who had worked with them in their university-based ELT methodology courses. In each school, two or three pre-service EFL teachers were assigned to a school mentor and a form teacher. These school mentors were expected to guide pre-service teachers towards effective English language teaching and class management

Research Participants

Among 200 preservice teachers who enrolled in the fourth year of the teacher education program, 65 preservice teachers participated in the research. The cohort of volunteer research participants were all the preservice teachers in the final year of their pre-service teacher education program at a University in Vietnam. During the program, they study a variety of courses including: language enhancement, linguistics, cultural studies, TESOL methodology. Before they went out on practicum, they studied TESOL methodology courses. During the research project, they were undertaking a six-week practicum at two secondary schools. The key criteria for the selection of volunteer participants were their availability, their capacity and their desire to commit time to the research. From this cohort, participants consisted of an intact treatment group of 32 and a control group of 33 EFL teacher trainees. The treatment group participated in a peer mentoring program which was integrated into their practicum, whereas the control group did not receive a formal peer mentoring intervention. The participants in the control group included 30 females and 3 males, accounting for 90.9% and 9.1% of the sample respectively, while the participants in the treatment group included 31 females and 1 male, accounting for 96.9% and 3.1% respectively. Most of the pre-service teachers in both groups were female, reflecting the common gender pattern in language teacher education. The average age in both groups was about 22 years old. More specifically, in the experimental group, 46.9% of the participants (n=32) were aged 22, 40.6 percent aged 23, and the rest were aged 24. In comparison, 81.8% of the participants (n=33) in the control group were aged 22, 15.2% were aged 23, and the rest were aged 24. In general, in terms of gender and age, these two groups were similar.

A comparison of the characteristics of the two groups (e.g., previous teaching experiences, scores in their teaching courses) found no significant differences between the two groups. (See Nguyen, 2010)

Research Implementation

To prepare the participants for the formal peer mentoring process, the participants in the treatment group were given a peer mentoring training workshop. There were three goals for the workshop. The first goal was to orient the participants to the formal peer mentoring process. Second, the participants were provided with an opportunity to get to know each other and to enhance their awareness of each other's personalities and preferences. The third goal was to train the participants in the necessary mentoring skills. The preservice teachers were able to choose their peer mentor partner from among those in the school. They were assigned to work with the same school mentor, thus teaching the same classes during their six week practicum.

Peer mentors were required to conduct two major activities each week: peer observation and support meetings. Support meetings were an activity that gathered pairs of peer mentors together to examine their learning-to-teaching process. Apart from informal meetings that peer mentors might have, a formal weekly meeting with each other was felt to be necessary and to formalize the mentoring process. These meetings were organized to create opportunities for pre-service teachers to promote regular dialogue, inquiry, and reflection on their field-based experiences. Each pair was required to sit together for about 1 hour per week to discuss the lesson they had observed, review the work done, to discuss both the professional and non-professional issues arising during the week and to negotiate an action plan for the following week.

Methods of Data Collection And Analysis **Questionnaire**

In this study, questionnaire data was used to collect perceptions of the support received from peers, comparing these results to a group of non-peer mentored EFL pre-service teachers. This questionnaire, using a five point Likert-style response scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", was designed to explore the participants' perceptions of psychosocial peer support and assess how effectively the participants rated such functions. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items measuring psychosocial support functions provided by peer mentors, and asked participants to evaluate how effectively they felt these functions were fulfilled. Items included in this section were either taken directly or adapted from a questionnaire developed by Lankau(1996) to measure peer mentoring support functions in a teacher education context. Based on Kram and Isabella (1985)'s research, Lankau (1996) developed two scales to measure vocational and psychosocial support offered by a peer mentor. This paper reported on the psychosocial support which included five items such as "My peer and I listened and counselled one another when stressed or raising difficulties regarding issues about work", and "My peer and I trusted one another".

All response categories used a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). An additional five items were added asking the participants to evaluate how effectively they felt these functions were fulfilled; for example, items included "My peer and I were effective in sharing our expertise with one another" and "My peer and I were effective in considering one another friends". According to Lankau (1996), the scale had good internal consistency; the Cronbach alpha coefficient reported 0.90 for the seven item instrumental scale and 0.90 for the five item psychosocial support scale. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.87 for the psychosocial support scale, and 0.87 for the evaluation of psychosocial support. This suggests very good internal consistency reliability.

The survey was distributed to both groups at the end of the practicum. An independent samples t-test was used to make comparison between the control group and treatment group on the psychosocial support offered and how they perceived they effectively

performed such support functions in their peer mentoring. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and the findings from the t-tests. None of the required statistical assumptions for the t-tests were violated. An effect size was calculated to determine the practical significance of the result. According to Cohen (1988), the guidelines for interpreting this value are 0.01= small effect, 0.06=moderate effect, 0.14= large effect.

Data from questionnaires were collected and then entered into SPSS 16.0 for Windows for analysis. Data were entered item-by-item for each participant for the pre- and post-questionnaire items and statistically analysed to test the differences in the participants' perceptions of their peer support. An independent samples t-test was used to make comparison between the control group and treatment group on types of support offered and how they perceived they effectively performed such support functions in their peer mentoring

Focus Group Interview

In order to compare and contrast the participating group members' perceptions, two post-practicum focus group interviews were convened. The focus group interviews were conducted by the researcher using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were conducted a week after the participants finished their practicum. All the participants in the treatment group and control group were invited to attend one of six 60-minute focus group interviews after their practicum. The focus group interviews centered around the impact of peer mentoring on their perceived support during the practicum. This section reported on their perceptions towards their peers' psychosocial support during the practicum.

The qualitative data were analysed using content analysis that resulted from the use of the constant comparative method. This method involves a line-by-line analysis of the transcribed text to describe the context in which issues occurred and to identify the themes that emerged. The transcripts of the twelve focus group interviews were analysed inductively, allowing the themes to emerge from the participants' words rather than beginning with a hypothesis or theory that needed to be substantiated. More specifically, a constant comparative analysis method was used that involved unitising, defining and categorising the data, to bring the information together. The qualitative data were then organized according to group categories (treatment group and control group (See Nguyen 2010 for further information). Data collected from both types of participants were compared, and a cross-group analysis was performed to generate new insights about how the data could be organised and to look for patterns. Regarding peer support, two major themes and subthemes from cross group analysis were common between the treatment group and the control group. Their perceptions of peer support fell into the major subtheme: psychosocial support. While the categories within each subtheme for the two groups were similar, the frequency and content in their comments were different.

Findings

Findings from Quantitative Data

It can be seen from the Table 1 that the participants who attended the formal peer mentoring intervention reported significantly more psychosocial support ($M=3.33$, $t=2.79$, $p=0.007 < 0.05$) than the participants who did not participate in the intervention (psychosocial support, $M=2.92$). More specifically, regarding psychosocial support, the results indicated that the participants in the treatment group reported significantly more psychosocial support in terms of listening and counseling, trusting, and considering one another friends than the control group. In terms of other psychosocial support functions such as sharing personal

concerns and emotional support, although the treatment group perceived they received slightly more support than the control group, the differences in the responses were not significant.

Regarding their perceptions toward how effectively they fulfilled such support function with their peer(s), the participants reported a similar pattern of findings. The results suggest that the treatment group perceived that they were significantly more effective in performing psychosocial support functions ($M=3.28$, $SD=0.61$, $t=3.52$, $p=0.001<0.05$) than the control group (psychosocial support, $M=2.77$, $SD=0.54$). The large effect size of 0.19 and 0.16 (see Table 2) indicates the practical significance of the results.

	Group	N	Mean	t	p	Eta squared
1. My peer(s) and I listened and counselled one another-when stressed or racing difficulty regarding issues about work.	Treatment	32	3.31	3.20	0.002	0.13
	Control	33	2.70			
2. My peer(s) and I trusted one another.	Treatment	32	3.38	2.34	0.022	0.07
	Control	33	2.94			
3. My peer(s) and I shared work and personal concerns with each other.	Treatment	32	3.19	0.62	0.537	0.00
	Control	33	3.06			
4. My peer(s) and I considered one another friends.	Treatment	32	3.47	3.80	0.000	0.18
	Control	33	2.94			
5. My peer(s) and I supported one another by being available to listen to each other's ideas, feelings, or problems.	Treatment	32	3.28	1.92	0.059	0.05
	Control	33	2.94			
Psychosocial support (Total 1-5)	Treatment	32	3.33	2.79	0.007	0.10
	Control	33	2.92			

Table 1: Treatment and Control Groups' Perceptions Towards the peer Support

	Group	N	Mean	tt	pp	Eta squared
6. My peer(s) and I were effective in listening and counselling one another - when stressed or racing difficulty regarding issues about work.	Treatment	32	3.19	3.43	0.001	0.15
	Control	33	2.52			
7. My peer(s) and I were effective in trusting one another.	Treatment	32	3.25	2.63	0.011	0.09
	Control	33	2.79			
8. My peer(s) and I were effective in sharing work and personal concerns with each other.	Treatment	32	3.28	1.92	0.059	0.05
	Control	33	2.94			
9. My peer(s) and I were effective in considering one another friends.	Treatment	32	3.38	3.48	0.001	0.16
	Control	33	2.79			
10. My peer(s) and I were effective in supporting one another by being available to listen to each other's ideas, feelings, or problems.	Treatment	32	3.28	2.49	0.015	0.08
	Control	33	2.82			
Evaluation of psychosocial support (total 6-10).	Treatment	32	3.28	3.52	0.001	0.16
	Control	33	2.77			

Table 2: Treatment and Control Groups' Perceptions Towards the Quality of Peer Support

Regarding the perception of how effectively they fulfilled such individual psychosocial support functions with their peer(s), the results were summarised in Table 2. For the listening and counselling (6), results for the independent-sample t-test identified a statistically significant difference between responses of the treatment group ($M=3.19$) and the control group, $M=2.52$; $t(63)=3.43$; $p=0.001$ (above 0.05). The magnitude of the difference in the mean (mean difference $=0.67$, 95% CI: 0.19 to 1.06) was large (eta squared $=0.15$), supporting the practical significance of these results. A similar pattern of results occurs for some other psychosocial support functions. The participants in the treatment group believed they were significantly more effective than the control group in performing the support functions of listening and counselling, trusting, considering one another friends, and supporting each other by being available for listening their peers' ideas, feeling or problems. The large size effect of eta squared supports the practical significant of the results. It can be seen from Table 2 that there was no significant difference in the perceptions between the two groups toward how effectively they performed the function of sharing personal concern (8), $t(63)=1.92$, $p=0.059$, eta squared $=0.05$.

In general, the results indicate that the treatment group reported significantly more psychosocial support from their peer than the control group. In addition, the participants in the treatment group reported that they were significantly more effective in performing such support functions. These views may be attributable to the fact that the participants in the treatment group were committed to the peer mentoring activities and were trained on how to mentor each other, while the control group only were not formally involved in the peer mentoring process.

Findings From Focus Group Interviews

With regard to psychosocial support, the core categories that formed this theme were identified as “emotional support”, “sharing”, “talking”, and “befriending”. The comparison of findings from the two groups revealed that the pre-service teachers in the treatment groups said they gave their psychosocial support to their peers more frequently than did those in the control group. Except for views on talking, the other three categories had relatively low frequencies of occurrence. More importantly, it was particularly obvious during the group interviews that the pre-service teachers’ comments highlighted major differences in their perceptions of the degree to which their peers provided psychosocial support. This is described in detail in the following sections.

Emotional Support

Both groups valued the role of their peers in providing emotional support; however, treatment group members were much more effusive in expressing their feelings than those in the control group. Whereas the pre-service teachers in the treatment groups perceived the role of their peers as providing emotional support through five major categories including “being supportive”, “comforting”, “encouragement”, “caring”, and “being a listener”, those in the control group perceived emotional support to be limited to “being supportive” and “comforting” only. In addition, there was not much group interaction on this issue in the control group interviews. Responses from the control focus groups were random and not as intense as those in the treatment groups.

Sharing

The pre-service teachers in the treatment group differed from those in the control group as they had more ideas and made more frequent comments concerning their perceptions of their peers’ psychosocial support in terms of sharing. There was not much agreement among the two groups concerning the frequency of their comments in the category of sharing. In addition, most of the pre-service teachers in the treatment groups reported that they frequently shared a lot of things with their peers such as personal experiences, their private lives, problems, stresses, and feelings of happiness in teaching, whereas only a few pre-service teachers in the control group claimed that they supported each other by sharing personal problems and feelings after each lesson. The discrepancy in the responses between the two groups highlighted the nature of the peer interaction practiced between the two groups. There was a level of awareness in the treatment group where pre-service teachers tended to support others through sharing all aspects of their lives, more than what occurred in the control groups.

Talking

Although both groups were outgoing in commenting on the category of talking and recognised that they talked most with their peers during the practicum, there appeared to be little similarity between the types of responses from the two groups. In the sets of comments concerning the reasons for this, the pre-service teachers in the treatment groups mostly cited the reason that they were assigned to work together and it became their daily routine to talk to each other, while those in the control group noted that they talked most with those who were

in the same class or who worked with same mentors; talk among control group members initiated spontaneously and was less serious. There was agreement among those in the control group that they usually gossiped and spoke about trivial topics with those whom they met frequently and they rarely talked about professional issues. Regarding how this issue was expressed in the focus group interviews, a few responses indicated that they sometimes gossiped with one another, but most of the treatment group's comments were related to how they enjoyed talking with their peers and indicated some major topics which seemed to be more practicum-oriented or about different aspects of life. Yet, most of them did not consider this sort of talk as gossip, but saw it as professional talk or the sharing of personal anecdotes. Additionally, treatment pre-service teachers tended to extend their talk to other members in the group, creating a community, while those in the control group seemed to talk only with those in the same class or who had the same mentors. These findings shed light on the differences between the treatment and control groups in terms of extending their peer relationships. It can be explained by the fact that the treatment group members were given more opportunities to work with one another on professional matters and their talk was naturally derived from this assigned relationship, while there was no requirement or structure which facilitated the participants in the control group working together, thus leading to less professional interaction, and more casual talk.

Befriending

Regarding the category of befriending, there were prominent differences in their contents and frequency of comments between the two groups as identified from the interview data. The pre-service teachers in the treatment group overwhelmingly commented on how they developed a friendship with their peers during the practicum. On the other hand, only four pre-service teachers in the control group claimed that they started and developed a friendship with their peers. This finding was not surprising due to the dichotomy between peer interaction and the peer working environment of the two groups. These findings pointed to the underlying reasons that may explain the limitations that pre-service teachers in the control group placed on support.

Discussion And Recommendation

The results indicate that the intervention had impacted on the participants' perceptions toward the amount and quality of their peer psychosocial support. These findings seem to corroborate Kram and Isabella's (1985) theory on the existence of psychosocial support functions in the field of pre-service EFL teacher education as the findings document that this type of support was received from peers in both groups.

In addition, the findings provide further evidence that this type of psychosocial support was perceived to be at a higher level in the formally peer-mentored group than in the non-formally peer mentored group. This research finding parallels the only previous empirical research which fully examined psychosocial supportive functions of peer mentors (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2000). However, the current research studied a reciprocal peer mentoring model which tended to be more equal than the peer mentoring model used in Grant-Vallone and Ensher's (2000) research which paired first year students with more advanced students. Second, the current study is one of the first studies to examine empirically how formally and non-formally peer mentored pre-service EFL teachers perceived the

psychosocial support received from their peers, while Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000) studied formally peer mentored graduate students.

Apart from the psychosocial support functions found in Kram and Isabella (1985) in an organisational context, the qualitative data from the current study found that talking was an additional support function. Both groups believed that talking was a source of internal group support. In the context of a practicum where pre-service teachers, as adult learners, had a number of demands placed on them as well as opportunities to meet one another, it is not surprising that they reported that talking with one another helped them to meet their psychosocial needs. In mutual learning contexts like this, talk with peers may provide an additional means of psychosocial support.

Another finding in this investigation is that the nature of talk seems to have been different between the non-formal and the formal group. While the non-formal group's talk was reported to be mainly in the form of gossip, the formal group tended to focus more on professional issues. As such, talk among peers in the formally peer mentored group served as not only a source of support but also as a mirror through which pre-service teachers could view their practice and develop their confidence. This finding supports the notion that creating a friendly and supportive environment where pre-service teachers can work together could provide support mechanism which would allow them to express themselves without fear of being judged. This finding is aligned with Miller's (2008) recommendation on the potential value of creating a context in which pre-service teachers can learn from and support each other while engaged in talk.

The study supports and extends the arguments of other researchers (Forbes, 2004b; Goodnough, et al., 2009; Le Cornu, 2008) by showing that working with peers enabled pre-service teachers to provide each other with psychosocial support. The importance of peer support in practicum has been increasingly recognised in the literature. However, few formal structures have made use of peers as a valuable source of such support for each other (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). The results of this study provide ample empirical support for the notion that participation in formal peer mentoring has an effect on the participants' perceptions of the psychosocial support they received from their peers during the practicum. In other words, it supports the argument that peer mentoring should be a formal support mechanism embedded within the practicum experience.

The findings from this study have several important implications for pre-service teacher education in general and pre-service EFL teachers in particular. They suggest that the integration of a formal peer mentoring program can have an impact on the psychosocial support they received from their peers. It is recommended that there be the provision of consistent opportunities and a well-organised structure for pre-service teachers to allow them to work collaboratively with each other, and that this could develop more mutual support.

Generally, most pre-service teachers feel stressed when facing with the realities of teaching and find it difficult to handle the situation in classroom teaching. The findings provided by this study may be used as a catalyst for restructuring the TESOL practicum to provide preservice EFL teachers with more support through a formal peer mentoring process. Giving this dearth of empirical studies on peer mentoring for EFL teachers and the need for effective implementation of these approaches, in this paper I argue that if preservice teachers were involved in a well-structured scheme in which they could mentor each other, it would provide them with extra support from critical friends. This type of support is critical in enhancing preservice EFL teachers' positive experiences at their practicum school.

The exploration shows that there is potential for further development of this peer mentoring– at both the practical and theoretical levels –in other contexts. Although Vietnam was chosen as the site for this research, the findings from research in this paper can be replicated and applied in other Asian contexts as the diversity of problems facing Vietnam's

teacher education in general and teacher mentoring in particular resonate with common educational problems in the Asia-Pacific region.

Although this study succeeded in demonstrating the positive impact of a formal peer mentoring intervention on preservice teachers' psychosocial support, it involved only one group of pre-service EFL teachers in a specific context in Vietnam. The participants in this research were not representative of the population as a whole. As this was a small, purposeful sample, it is difficult to make inferences from these findings to the whole population. In other words, for the findings to gain generalisability, the study needs to be replicated and evaluated in other contexts. There is now growing evidence to suggest that mentoring/peer mentoring which is strongly embedded in the Western cultures should be further studied and understood in Asian contexts which have different values and assumptions about practices of teaching. This study suggested further studies into the impact of this peer mentoring intervention on other aspects of the preservice teachers' learning to teach process during the practicum in other contexts.

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