Complexities and Tensions ESL Malaysian Student Teachers Face during their Field Practice

TAGHREED EL MASRY
MOHD RASHID BIN MOHD SAAD
University of Malaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The study aimed to understand the tensions and complexities that student teachers encounter during their teaching practice by focusing on the social aspects of their course. The four participants who were purposively selected to participate in this study had gone through three interview sessions, at the beginning, mid-point, and end of their teaching practice school attachments. The early emerging themes can be classified into three concerns: the crisis of confidence, social relationships, and support seeking. The discussion indicates that the lack of opportunity to get socially engaged within the given context and the inability to negotiate one's worries, values, and understandings are the key reasons for the respondents' tensions. The study recommends bottom up and top down reforms to enhance student teachers' engagement with/at the teaching practice site.

KEYWORDS: student teachers, teaching practice, practicum, acquisition metaphor, participationist metaphor

Introduction

The journey student teachers/pre-service teachers (PSTs) undertake to become teachers requires them to overcome a number of challenges (Danyluk, 2013; Merseth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008) and to take advantage of opportunities (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004) affecting the construction of their professional identities. While Teacher Education programs are designed to equip student teachers with the content and pedagogical knowledge to put into practice (Dowling, 2009; Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008), student teachers still encounter tensions and conflicts when moving to their school-based practice (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Bearing this in mind, it is imperative to see how these tensions and conflicts affect the Malaysian government's reforming steps in its educational policy to improve the quality of the trained teachers. Research indicates that the challenges that ESL Malaysian student teachers face are in common with what other student teachers in other settings face. They too are affected by the sociocultural context of their preparation to become teachers (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; Lee, 2011; Zeichner, 1993). They have to be prepared to negotiate a number of complexities and tensions that could negatively affect the readiness of these trainees to work as professional teachers (Khalid, 2014). Understanding such complexities helps to pave the road towards more feasible policies to prepare effective teachers who are able to respond to the challenges in school (Goh & Matthews, 2011).

Literature Review

Studies have reported a number of tensions and confusions resulting from moving from the community of learning at a university to the community of practice in schools (Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Basmadjian, 2007; Brown, 2006; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Clarke & Collins, 2007; Cooper & He, 2012; El Masry, 2007; Fairbanks, Freedman, & Kahn, 2000; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008; Slick, 1998a, 1998b; Veal & Rikard, 1998). For instance, Cooper and He's (2012) participants swung between being content knowledge facilitators and becoming authoritative figures in their classes. Responding to their students' needs in the 21st century conflicted with their images of ideal teaching and model teachers which they constructed based primarily on their prior experience as K12 students.

This new identity role is further complicated with the school setting which focuses more on completing the syllabus on the allocated time rather than utilizing student-centered activities such as role-playing, drama and games. Student teachers experience the tension of whether to focus on student-centered activities or to deal with the subject content within a specific time as mandated in the curriculum (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007). Brown (2006) investigated the anxiety and uncertainty student teachers felt about who they wanted to become. He reported that the emergence of different identities (as a student, a teacher, a trainee, among others) added to the confusion student teachers encountered on their journey.

In the literature, there is considerable focus on power relationships within the social context of the teaching practice site (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Clarke & Collins, 2007; Slick, 1998a; Veal & Rikard, 1998). Student teachers are subject to power relationships within their triad with their mentors and university supervisors. They usually conform to the 'authority of experience' (Munby & Russell, 1994, p. 10) at the practice site as they proceed through their training. Kayi-Aydar (2015) and Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008) assert that their participants had some dissatisfaction with their mentor teachers' practices. However; they chose to follow those mentors' directions to avoid possible clashes with them. Kayi-Aydar (2015, p. 101) warns that such passive resistance at the practicum site may result in the emergence of a 'non-powerful'

teacher identity. This identity formation may result in those teachers being unable to achieve any changes in their teaching later when they start their careers. Moreover, student teachers may not consider teaching as a future profession (Pfitzner-Eden, 2016).

Tension also prevails when university supervisors on the practice site advocate university perspectives and try to impose them on mentor teachers and trainees (Veal & Rikard, 1998). Such dysfunctional power relationships can negatively affect student teachers' ability to construct their own professional identities. Their journey to become teachers could depend on their survival at this stage; they are mainly concerned with the assessment and evaluation of their teaching practice instead of working towards developing their professional identities. Whether these conflicts and tensions would hinder PSTs' learning to teach could depend on the student teachers' perceptions.

Conflicts and tensions resulting from contradictory perspectives between the university context and the school site could result from two different learning metaphors: acquisition metaphor and participationist metaphor. These metaphors help understand 'how knowledge is generated and understood' (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, p. 456) within those two contexts. A knowledge of how to teach at university is sophisticated, theoretical, generalizable and decontextualized-abstract; while knowledge at the school sites has a major focus on the day-to-day teacher duties and practical class challenges (Sutherland et al., 2010). In this research, the focus is to examine whether similar duties and challenges are also present in Malaysia.

To date, very few studies have been conducted in Malaysia to explore student teachers' complex experiences through their preparation programs. Khalid (2014) aimed to understand the social factors that affected developing student teachers' professional identity. The study reported the role of school students to have the most impact while mentors, supervisors and colleagues' assistance came second. Participants' families, friends and previous experience motivated them to become teachers. Goh and Matthews (2011) explored the concerns student teachers had while on their practicum sites. Classroom management, institutional and personal adjustment, and teaching and learning quality were identified as the major concerns. Bearing in mind the impact of such experiences on a student teacher's successful professional growth, more studies need to be conducted.

The current study attempts to capture the complexities PSTs encounter through their field practice at Malaysian public schools. Those complexities are related to student teachers' self-confidence, their social relationships within the training context and their seeking support.

Theoretical Framework

The acquisition and the participationist metaphor
The acquisition metaphor underlies interpreting human learning as an individual process of receiving transmitted/abstract/theoretical knowledge to be acquired and assimilated in the brain and later applied in other contexts. It presents the traditional understanding of the process of learning (Sfard, 1998). Dowling (2009) believes that designers of traditional teacher education programs and teacher educators perceive transmitted knowledge as objective and non-negotiable. Abstract knowledge is delivered from one person (e.g., teacher educator) to another (e.g., student teacher) through linguistic channels such as writing and speaking (Pagis, 2010). Dowling (2009) and Shoffner and Brown (2011) contend that equipping student teachers with knowledge about language and teaching theories does not necessarily result in good teaching practices. Hence, the

final stage of a teacher education program requires a different type of knowledge (i.e., the experiential) to help student teachers develop their teaching skills.

The participationist metaphor, on the other hand; challenges 'decontextualized learning' and 'stand-alone learner' concepts (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). Learning is situated both in the physical and social context. The teacher preparation program as a learning space is expected to engage student teachers in sociocultural communities to actively participate and negotiate their learning. What those student teachers experience during their teaching practice can guide their learning. Being given the opportunity to transform their received knowledge into experiential knowledge helps the student teachers obtain/acquire power and ownership of what they learn. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, pp. 8-11) describe four major qualities of knowledge generated in communities of practice: this knowledge 'lives in the act of knowing'; is 'tacit as well as explicit'; 'social as well as individual' and 'dynamic'. Within the context of teaching practice, student teachers' knowledge is not an object they seek to acquire and internalize in their brains.

While theoretical knowledge 'leads to *knowing that*', experiential, or as Pagis describes it as embodied/experiential knowledge, 'is about *knowing how*' (2010, p. 471). Knowledge is evolving, and it changes according to the sociocultural context the student teachers are involved in. Their interaction with the others will help them (re)construct this knowledge in iterative cycles and add to their understanding of their learning and professional identities (Sutherland et al., 2010). Hence, this discussion emphasizes two aspects: relationships within the practice context; and participation (or non-participation) in activities within the social context of the practice.

The previous part was devoted to laying out the theoretical basis of the current study. The next part is devoted to the practical aspects of the study focusing on its goals, questions, participants and methodology.

The Study

The present study is part of a larger PhD research project which aims to understand how student teachers construct their professional identity, informed by their individual adaptation processes and sociocultural context. It focuses solely on the complexities and tensions student teachers encounter after they move from the university context to the school field practice.

Research questions
This study is guided by two main questions:
1. What complexities/ tensions affect student teachers' learning to teach during their field practice?
2. What contextual factors hinder their learning to teach process?

Participants
A purposive sample of four Malaysian student teachers aged between 22-23 years participated in this qualitative study. They were in their third year of study at the university and moved to their field practice at two public secondary schools. They were under the supervision of the second author during the third semester of the academic year, which was from June to September 2015. It is worth noting that prior to their field practice course; student teachers take a simulated teaching class. In this class, they are given the opportunity to conduct microteaching lessons. The student teachers write and prepare lesson plans, prepare audio visual aids and activities to teach their classmates as if they were at school. The simulated teaching course represents the first bridge between theory and practice within the safe environment of the university. However, for

the current small-scale study, the focus was on the field practice stage that follows the simulated teaching course.

Methodology

A case study design was chosen to capture the complexities the participants encountered while undergoing their field practice. Creswell (2012) recommends that recruiting fewer than four or five participants in a case study provides "ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis"(p. 157). Semi structured interviews were conducted to seek the required data about student teachers' understanding of their field practices at school. The interview questions attempted to elicit data regarding participants' teaching practices, social relationships and confidence level as teachers (see Appendix A for a sample of interview questions). To allow for new themes and ideas to merge (Merriam, 2009), the researchers remained open-minded about the terms they used and the content of the data, giving them sufficient space to express their views and understandings by interviewing them three times. The three interviews were conducted at the beginning, mid and end of their teaching practices.

Data collection

After getting the participants' written consent to participate in this study, three interviews per participant were conducted at the practicum site. The timings of the interview (i.e., beginning, mid and end of the practicum) were selected in order to capture any possible changes in the student teachers' perceptions of the complexities they encountered as they proceeded through their training. Each interview lasted between 40-50 minutes and was recorded for transcription and analysis.

The first author visited the schools several times (6-8 times for each school). Those regular visits helped the researcher build good relationships (Merriam, 2009) with the participants. The researchers had several informal talks in addition to the formal interviews. Generally, the participants were willing to share their experiences, especially the negative ones, with the researcher.

Data analysis

Preliminary and ongoing analysis were conducted while collecting data to develop investigation by deciding on what other questions to ask or other data to collect. It also help the researcher avoid repetitions in data collected (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The constant comparative method was used to inductively analyze the data but not to build a grounded theory as recommended by Merriam (2009). To do so, three steps were conducted: (1) reading through all data to gain general understanding, (2) reading to identify codes (open coding), (3) comparing codes to construct themes (axial coding) (Creswell, 2009).

Results of the study

The complexities and tensions that the participants encountered during their practicum were grouped into three subcategories: (1) confidence crisis, (2) social relationships and (3) seeking support. Pseudonyms are used in the discussion below.

Confidence crisis

The participants went through three cycles pertaining to their confidence level in their ability to handle their responsibilities at school. On their first visit to their school sites, the participants felt pleased and encouraged. "After their (teachers and administrative staff) warm welcoming and encouraging words, I felt capable of teaching the students at this school. I can't deny that the

simulated teaching classes I had gone through at university in the previous semester added to my confidence in my abilities," said Noor.

The second interview conducted at the midpoint of their practice showed a changed attitude among the participants. "You know it wasn't real what we learnt at our university… I mean the context there was idealistic. It has nothing to do with the real classes like here at school." reported Lina. They started to doubt their ability to juggle their teaching and administrative responsibilities. "We can't decide what really pleases the students inside the classroom," Alia complained, "You know sometimes they're responsive and interactive; other times they just don't want to work. Really confusing!" This fluctuation in the school students' motivation and behaviour puzzled the participants and lessened their self-confidence. The participants in Khalid's (2014) and Goh and Matthews' (2011) studies expressed similar concerns in the Malaysian context. The participants of the current study also reported that the training environment was physically and emotionally draining as they were supposed to teach their classes and cover the absent teachers too. On one of the school sites, the study participants were responsible about extracurricular activities. On the other school site, the other two participants were asked to give remedial classes for poor students who were not their students. That affected the PST participants' abilities to prepare well for their classes either at school or at home. Iman reported,

> I have to admit that sometimes I also lose my confidence, sometimes I feel tired, so… maybe because I feel tired I lose confidence. It affects me. This is also because I don't know what to do at certain times like when the students finish their worksheets, sometimes I don't know what to do besides walking around the class and checking students' answers. When they have nothing to ask I don't know what to do.

As the participants proceeded with their training, they started to get used to the school context and the administrative tasks. They also managed to build some good relationships with their students and other teachers. Consequently, the PST participants' worries gradually lessened. They showed more realistic expectations of their field practices and saw the need for more negotiation with the others on the site to grow as teachers. Lina said,

> I think we have to accept that the school site and the classroom have their complexities but we can't isolate ourselves from the others. I don't know, but I feel we need to talk more with the others around us.

Noor felt that her mentor's positive comments on her teaching boosted her self-confidence, "I know those who are supervising me are the ones with experience, so when they give me positive comments, it means I did something good." However, she did not like the idea of being isolated from the other teachers,

> We didn't really talk with other teachers. We are separated from them because they are at the staff room while we are at this room. It's quite hard to see each other or to get close. … I think we should get into contact with them and work together as teachers. We could seek their advice on solving the problems we face.

At this stage, they had greater focus on their university's assessment period. They claimed to be more confident in their abilities and were proud of their achievements. Iman, for example, said,

> At the beginning of our field practice, we were focused on administrative work and extracurricular activities we were assigned by school administration. But now, since we

have learnt how to manage such works, we also learnt how to handle our worries and pressure. I can focus more on planning for my lessons and creating interesting activities. I even feel more relaxed while teaching because I know the better my activities, the easier for me to attract my students' attentions.

However, they could not judge whether they wanted to make teaching their preferred profession. Alia reflected,

I believe that I grew as a teacher, but after all the difficulties we went through this stage I don't feel too enthusiastic about taking teaching as a profession. I may become a teacher but I know that it is not an easy job to do.

Social relationships

According to the social theory underpinning the Participationist metaphor discussed earlier in this paper, social practices (here teaching practices) are socially mediated. Teaching Practice is an interactive process that is contextually situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The participants in the current study reported feeling comfortable to go for their teaching practices after a warm welcome from the school staff. However, they gradually started to feel alienated and neglected in their classes. Their mentors had heavy workloads (administrative work and training courses) that kept them busy. Those mentors, as reported by the participants, were unable to respond to their trainees' need for teaching guidance. When Iman was asked how often she met her supervisor, she replied,

…sometimes, after assembly or during activities for 5-10 minutes. I ask her what to do and she tells me things I can teach to students. Actually, she attended one of my classes but she hadn't given me any comments. She said generally my class was acceptable but I had to be firm with form 4 students (16 years old). I expect her to pass her written comments today, but I have a class now.

Lina, who was training in another school, reported the same issue, "I took over my mentor classes but she can't come to observe me because she already has heavy administrative work to do."

Their relationships were based on unseen observations (i.e., the mentor did not go into the PST participant's class but listened to her description of it before or after the class.) on the contrary, in teacher education, unseen observation is used in in-service teacher development. "The trainer does not go into the lesson but listens to the teachers' version of it after the event. S/he sees the class through the eyes of the teacher and relies on the teacher as a professional." (Quirke, 1996, p. 18). This strategy aims to encourage teachers' self- monitoring and self- reflection. The current study mentors attended the participants' classes only twice for assessment purposes. The participants reported getting suggestions on what and how to teach from their mentors during the brief unseen observation sessions. When asked if they met regularly to do so, Lina replied,

I have good relationship with my mentor. We communicate with each other. I ask her about what to do and report my classes to her. But because we are both busy all the time, we just talk after assembly or during extracurricular activities.

Another participant in our study also reported those communication difficulties. She even described more complex situations at the practice sites. What their university expects them to do

through teaching practice may differ in some aspects from their mentors' expectations. Lina complained,

> She can't understand that I have other things to do. I'm a student and have my university instructions on how to write a lesson plan but she wants me to write another version similar to hers. Why to waste time and effort.

However, the participants did not express their frustrations to their mentors. They preferred to maintain good and calm relationships with their mentors for fear that complaining could affect their assessment. Alia admitted that the staff and the mentor teacher were her major concern in the training,

> They are my major concern; truthfully, we depend on them for our marks. It's not that we don't care about students, but our mentors are more important to satisfy. We have to restrict our teaching to their scheme of work. They won't be satisfied if we departed away from their scheme to do some fun activities. It happened with me when I wanted to do some listening activities but my mentor prevented me from doing that. She restricted my lesson plan. I had to accept that because I know at the end of the day she will assess me.

This complicated social context within the practice environment drove student teachers towards their peers and students for socialization and support. When Iman described her relationship with her mentor or other teachers at school, she used the third singular pronouns "she" or "they". On the other hand, when asked about her relationship with other student teachers, she used the first plural pronoun "we". The same linguistic usages can be noticed in Alia's quotation in the previous paragraph. This choice of vocabulary can indicate that the participants are not fully engaged in the culture of their teaching practices. They feel the social and psychological boundaries between them and the others at the school. Alia revealed that,

> We don't really communicate with each other. Sometimes I want to ask an experienced teacher how to solve a problem but then they have their own work. I wait for my mentor to come and visit me but actually, I never initiate to invite her. She is somehow strict and I prefer to avoid being around.

Lina also reported the distance she felt between the school staff and herself,

> You know there is a new project at school for us as trainees. I was assigned four poor students who can't read or write and I have to work with them at the library. I even don't teach them English but the principal decided on that. That takes much of my time but I couldn't complain, neither for my mentor, nor for the other teachers or the administrative staff.

This can partly be explained by the concept of power relationships (e.g.,Bullough & Draper, 2004; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Though the participants had their objections towards their tasks at school (e.g., covering absent teachers, working with poor students and handling extracurricular activities), they preferred not to resist that to avoid any clashes with school administration. Kayi-Aydar's (2015) participants acted the same way on their practicum site.

The current study participants perceived their relationships with their students as productive and inspiring. This is despite the difficulties that they had to deal with in terms of the students' discipline and behavior problems. They believed that their interactions with those students were

based on camaraderie. When asked at the end of her teaching practice whether she still wanted to become a teacher, she replied,

> I like teaching, I really like it. Because when you get response from students, I feel very satisfied. Prior to starting my field practice, I was concerned about how to introduce myself to my students and what their attitude towards me would be. Now, our relationship is really strong. Yes, they still cause some discipline problems but they are just kids.

Cooper and He (2012) also reported that some of their participants built good relationships with their students during student teaching. On the contrary, the other two participants who were training at an all-boys school became skeptical about their genuine desires to become teachers in the future. That school exposed them to a challenging sociocultural context.

Seeking support

Noticeably, both the mentor teachers and the university supervisors played a minor role in the process of guiding the student teachers to teach effectively. The participants received sufficient support at the university from their lecturers and classmates. They celebrated those times their mentors talked to them, listened to their problems regarding teaching and handling their classes. Despite the fact that the comments and advice they received from their mentors guided them during their teaching practices, they found themselves alone in the field. Iman explained, "I could ask my teacher for help at any time and my classmates and other senior students, they were there to support. Here… I feel I'm totally alone walking in the desert." Even with the presence of other teachers and their mentors, participants were unwilling to ask for advice for fear of being judged. Alia asked me to stop the recording of the interview because she wanted to talk about the tensions between her and her mentor,

> She is very strict and gets easily upset with my comments because I didn't want to prepare two different lesson plans, one according to her standards; one according to university guidelines. I try not to consult her all the time, I know she will judge me negatively if I do.

They reported they needed experienced teachers to be in their classes to observe and guide them. However, in reality, they liked being left alone in their classes. That, according to the participants' points of view protected them from the embarrassment and confusion in front of strangers. "I face many difficulties managing my class and time… better I have no visitors… maybe later when I overcome those difficulties.", commented Lina. They never initiated inviting their mentors to their classes or asked to visit their mentors' classes. They thought it would be socially impolite to do that without an explicit offer of help from the senior teachers. Lina thought, "I think it's not polite just to go and ask to attend the others' classes."

They perceived their university supervisors as their assessors with no role in guiding their learning at the school site as they thought that the supervisor's role ended when they left university for their practicum. "Why would I call my supervisor and ask for help. I mean it's not her job. I have to handle my issues alone," Noor explained. On the other hand, the participants found support in their classmates who got placed at the same practice site. No matter how many times they were asked about who they consulted, who they confide their difficulties or share their worries with, whose suggestions they sought, they would mention their peers.

They were of the view that being at the same level, facing the same difficulties and experiencing the same fluctuating feelings of frustration and satisfaction meant that they were able to really understand each other. They believed their peers would not be judgmental because "they face [similar difficulties] as what I face. They have the same problems," said Lina who continued with "They also seek my help and I give them my suggestions." Such positive peer support was unfortunately reduced by the workload the participants were given at the schools. "We're supposed to exchange class visits and discuss our procedures of teaching but most of the time we have no real time to do so," Iman said.

Discussion of findings

Placing the teaching practice within its social context means that the knowledge generated during the teaching practice is negotiated between its members (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). However, the participants experienced a number of complexities that hindered their ability to observe other teachers' and student teachers' teaching, try out different practices and (re)construct their understanding of the teaching process. The participants reported that their teaching practices drained their strength due to workload other than teaching and learning to teach. This kind of tension was reported in a study carried out by Ong, Ros, Azlian, Sharnti and Ho (2004).

Seemingly, the administrative staff considered the presence of the trainees as an opportunity to lessen the teachers' workload. Instead of being given the chance to discuss their classes and reflect on their strategies, they were expected to contribute to school's administrative duties. In addition, the school and mentor teachers' role in assessing the PSTs had negative impact on PSTs, preventing them from asking for support. Turbill and Kervin (2007) contend that PSTs are exposed to real situations during their field practice. Those situations need to be 'pressure free' (p. 581), so that PSTs and their mentors focus more on issues of support and constructing practical knowledge. On the contrary, in the current study, the extra responsibility resulted in the participants' experiencing a confidence crisis, which is also a recurrent theme in the literature. Researchers considered student teachers' gain of confidence in their abilities to teach as a sign of their professional growth (Chong, Ling, & Chuan, 2011; Pfitzner-Eden, 2016).

In countries such as Australia, student teachers move gradually through their training as they first observe classes then they are involved in small group teaching and later they start teaching under their mentors' supervision (Bloomfield, Taylor, & Maxwell, 2004). This way, student teachers gradually gain experience and confidence to teach. On the contrary, the participants in the current study experienced a number of challenges in the process of building their confidence, depending on their understanding of the context around them.

The perception of student teachers as 'second class citizens', by both the student teachers themselves and the school staff (Jusoh, 2013), created a learning environment that was not conducive for fostering more productive relationships. A formal relationship dominated the student teachers' interaction with their mentors. Although such a relationship was good as reported, it was not strong enough to allow any constructive discussions between the PST and her mentor. A one-way communication was manifested in the practice contexts as the student teachers avoided discussing their practices or understandings with their mentors. They listened to their mentors and silently accepted whatever they were told.

They passively resisted, similar to Cooper and He (2012) report of their own participants, and chose not to get into a discussion that may affect their assessment. Though one of Yuan's (2016) participants tried to assert her agency through negotiating her mentors to use a specific approach

to help students in their learning to write, Yuan found that generally his participants' agency was confined due to their concerns about their assessment by the mentors. Similar to Yuan's Chinese participants, my participants were brought up in a context that is entrenched in power relationships. For them, it is impolite to challenge their seniors or approach them without being invited by those seniors to do so. That attitude kept their interaction to the minimum to allow enough interaction for them to obtain some form of feedback but not to the extent that they feel comfortable to negotiate their concerns. On the other hand, a more cooperative and productive relationship was reported with peers and school students. Those who are at the same level and experience similar tensions are less judgmental and more understanding. To survive the teaching practice, student teachers found building good relationships with their students as an effective means to reduce the tension that resulted from discipline problems and students' lack of motivation.

The issue of confidence and incoherent relationships directed them to those whose support they needed. School mentors who were supposed to be the main source of support were absent from the trainees' classes in the study. Castañeda (2014) reported that his participant considered absence of her mentor from her classes as a key reason for her lack of teaching achievement. Some of those mentors did not even allow the student teachers to deviate from mentors' work scheme. Similarly, participants in a study conducted by Pillen, Den Brok, and Beijaard (2013) reported feeling helpless because their mentor teachers prevented them from applying their theoretical knowledge in their classes. That could explain why the current study's student teachers perceived their peers as the best option to rely on when voicing their concerns and finding solutions to the conflicts they faced. They reported their peers were more informative and understanding of what they go through. A two-way relationship was clearly identified in their interaction with each other. Khalid (2014) emphasised the great impact that peers had on a student teacher during practicum; however, in this study, the participants were not given enough time to attend each other's classes and to have regular discussions on their practices. Though discipline problems reduced the student teachers' ability to deliver good quality lessons, the strategies and suggestions they discussed within their peer group helped them handle this issue better.

Implications and Recommendations

This study has a number of implications that need to be underscored. First, the social context and social relationships are crucial to enhance student teachers' confidence pertaining to their ability to act and affect in the teaching practice. PSTs can share their theoretical knowledge with their mentors and other schoolteachers. They can bring new ideas and techniques to the training context resulting in pedagogical changes. Though the student teachers are partly to be blamed for the lack of initiative, the sociocultural context in society in general and at the school sites in particular, is found to encourage such passivity. The positive outcomes student teachers get from their reciprocal interaction with their peers prove that received knowledge is not enough to successfully negotiate a complex context such as the teaching practice.

Instead, experiential knowledge, which requires the student teachers' full engagement and participation within the teaching context, can result in their professional development. Becoming a member of a community of practice does not necessarily mean they become full participants in that community. Hence, clear policies on how to engage those student teachers in their communities is key to their participation. At the bottom up level, universities are responsible for the theoretical preparation of their student teachers. However, highlighting the practical issues such as managing classes, and responding to 21st century students' needs to reduce discipline

problems are important. Gerardo and Contreras (2000) suggest that teacher preparation programs invite experienced school teachers to share their stories and experiences with program designers. They could also participate in the simulated teaching classes where they can pass their experiences and comments to the PSTs.

In addition, teacher educators need to start addressing the administrative issues and extracurricular activities that are assigned to student teachers. It was noticeable in this study that those two aspects had exhausted the participants because these extra duties were fairly new to them. Just after the mid of the 14-week practice course, the student teachers managed to master those administrative skills and started to focus more on their learning how to teach. On the contrary, Khalid's (2014) participants reported considering such tasks as invaluable for their experiences to become teachers. Since the interview conducted near or after the end of their practice, we assume that Khalid's participants may have overlooked the complexities they encountered because of administrative and extracurricular activities. Interviewing the current study participants several times enabled capturing a more realistic vision of their tensions.

The "sink or swim" (Avery, 2015, para.7) method totally neglects the importance of allowing the trainees to voice their concerns to the relevant parties and reflect on their own attitudes and values in teaching. Blaming mentors who themselves are overloaded with work, for not allowing or encouraging such negotiations to take place may not be fair. Ideally, only trained and committed mentors should be selected. Finally, a clear policy from the Ministry of Education can provide a blueprint that marks the journey of student teachers to ease their transformation from university students to become schoolteachers. This blueprint can provide a clear path of action to illustrate how they can learn to teach.

Conclusion

This study reported a number of tensions that student teachers encounter in the Malaysian context. Confidence crisis, social relationships and seeking support formed the major forms of tensions. The results suggest a need to establish a system that creates more opportunities to involve the student teacher in the practice context and maximize their participation. Bottom up and top down measures are required from universities, schools and the Ministry of Education to facilitate more social interaction and negotiation of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to prepare teachers to address the difficulties in the teaching career.

Finally, a mention of some limitations of the study is necessary. The limitations are connected with the research design. Firstly, we chose a case study which focused on the experiences of a small number of participants in a given context. This can limit the generalizability of the findings. As Merriam (2009) suggests, the goal of this study was to create local knowledge that can add to the literature exploring the complexities ESL student teachers encounter while learning how to teach. Secondly, the process of learning how to teach starts long before student teachers start their practicum and continue through the first year of their career. Additional longitudinal research can yield better understanding of such a journey. The last limitation is all the participants of this study were female PSTs. This requires more studies that include male participants within the Malaysian context to give a richer picture.

References

Anagnostopoulos, D., Smith, E. R., & Basmadjian, K. G. (2007). Bridging the university–school divide horizontal expertise and the "Two-Worlds Pitfall". *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(2), 138-152.

Avery, M. W. (2015). Sink or Swim: A closer look at teacher preparation. Retrieved from http://blog.wheelock.edu/sink-or-swim-a-closer-look-at-teacher-preparation/

Bloomfield, D., Taylor, N., & Maxwell, T. W. (2004). Enhancing the link between university and schools through action research on teaching practicum. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 56*(3), 355-372.

Brown, T. (2006). Negotiating psychological disturbance in pre-service teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 22*(6), 675-689.

Bullough, R. V., & Draper, R. J. (2004). Making Sense of a Failed Triad: Mentors, University Supervisors, and Positioning Theory. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(5), 407-420.

Castañeda, J. A. F. (2014). Learning to Teach and Professional Identity: Images of Personal and Professional Recognition. *Profile Issues in Teachers` Professional Development, 16*, 49-65.

Chong, S., Ling, L. E., & Chuan, G. K. (2011). Developing Student Teachers' Professional Identities– An Exploratory Study. *International Education Studies, 4*(1), 30-38.

Clarke, A., & Collins, S. (2007). Complexity science and student teacher supervision. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 23*(160-172).

Cooper, J. E., & He, Y. (2012). Journey of "Becoming": Secondary Teacher Candidates' Concerns and Struggles. *Issues in Teacher Education, 21*(1), 89-108.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Reseach design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*: SAGE Publications.

Danyluk, P. (2013). The role of the prepracticum in lessening student teacher stress: Student teachers' perceptions of stress during practicum. *Action in Teacher Education, 35*(5-6), 323-334.

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012). Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Practical advice for teaching staff. *Sydney: Office for Learning and Teaching*.

Dowling, S. (2009). Using online communities of practice for EFL teacher development. Retrieved from http://web4learning.net/tag/ocops/

El Masry, T. (2007). *Investigating EFL student teacher, university supervisor, cooperating teacher relationship.* (Master Degree), The University of Manchester, Unpublished paper.

Fairbanks, C., Freedman, D., & Kahn, C. (2000). The role of effective mentors in teaching to learn. *Journal of Teacher Education, 51*(2), 102-112.

Gerardo, A., & Contreras, E. (2000). Self-Storying, Self-Understanding: Toward a Narrative Approach to EFL Teacher Education. *TESOL Journal, 9*(3), 24-27.

Goh, P. S., & Matthews, B. (2011). Listening to the concerns of student teachers in Malaysia during teaching practice. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 36*(3), 91-103.

Horn, I. S., Nolen, S. B., Ward, C., & Campbell, S. S. (2008). Developing Practices in Multiple Worlds: The Role of Identity in Learning To Teach. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 35*(3), 61-72.

Jusoh, Z. (2013). *Teaching practicum: student teacher's perspectives.* Paper presented at the FLLT 2013 conference downloaded from litu. tu. ac. th/FLLT2013/www. fllt2013. org/private_folder/.../865. pdf.

Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015). Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service classroom teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 45*(0), 94-103.

Khalid, F. (2014). The impact of teaching practice experience in shaping pre-service teachers' professional identities. *Mediterranean Journal Of Social Sciences, 5*(20), 1921-1927.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning : Legitimate peripheral participation*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, Y. A. (2011). What Does Teaching for Social Justice Mean to Teacher Candidates? *The Professional Educator, 35*(2), 1.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research : A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Merseth, K. K., Sommer, J., & Dickstein, S. (2008). Bridging Worlds: Changes in Personal and Professional Identities of Pre-Service Urban Teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 35*(3), 89-108.

Munby, H., & Russell, T. (1994). The Authority of Experience in Learning to Teach: Messages from a Physics Methods Class. *Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(2), 86-95. doi: 10.1177/0022487194045002002

Ong, S., Ros, A., Azlian, A., Sharnti, K., & Ho, L. (2004). *Trainee teachers' perceptions of the school practicum.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the National Seminar on English Language Teaching.

Pagis, M. (2010). From Abstract Concepts to Experiential Knowledge: Embodying Enlightenment in a Meditation Center. *Qualitative Sociology, 33*(4), 469-489.

Pfitzner-Eden, F. (2016). I feel less confident so I quit? Do true changes in teacher self-efficacy predict changes in preservice teachers' intention to quit their teaching degree? *Teaching and Teacher Education, 55*, 240-254.

Pillen, M., Den Brok, P., & Beijaard, D. (2013). Profiles and change in beginning teachers' professional identity tensions. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 34*, 86-97.

Quirke, P. (1996). Using unseen observations for an in-service teacher development programme. *The Teacher Trainer, 10*(1), 18-20.

Ronfeldt, M., & Grossman, P. (2008). Becoming a Professional: Experimenting with Possible Selves in Professional Preparation. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 35*(3), 41-60.

Sfard, A. (1998). On Two Metaphors for Learning and the Dangers of Choosing Just One. *Educational Researcher, 27*(2), 4-13.

Shoffner, M., & Brown, M. (2011). From understanding to application: The difficulty of culturally responsive teaching as a beginning teacher. In L. Scherff & K. Spector (Eds.), *Culturally relevant pedagogy: Clashes and confrontations* (pp. 89-112). UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Slick, S. K. (1998a). A University Supervisor Negotiates Territory and Status. *Journal of Teacher Education, 49*(4), 306-315.

Slick, S. K. (1998b). The university supervisor: a disenfranchised outsider. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 14*(8), 821-834.

Smagorinsky, P., Cook, L. S., Moore, C., Jackson, A. Y., & Fry, P. G. (2004). Tensions in Learning to Teach: Accommodation and the Development of a Teaching Identity. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(1), 8-24.

Sutherland, L., Howard, S., & Markauskaite, L. (2010). Professional identity creation: Examining the development of beginning preservice teachers' understanding of their work as teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(3), 455-465.

Turbill, J., & Kervin, L. (2007). *Developing a professional identity: first year preservice teachers inschool experience project*. Paper presented at the Australian Teacher Education Association Conference, University of Wellongong.

Veal, M. L., & Rikard, L. (1998). Cooperating teachers' perspectives on the student teaching triad. *Journal of Teacher Education, 49*(2), 108.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. USA: Harvard Business Press.

Yuan, E. R. (2016). The dark side of mentoring on pre-service language teachers' identity formation. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 55*, 188-197.

Zeichner, K. M. (1993). *Educating Teachers for Cultural Diversity*. NCRTL Special Report.

Appendix A

A sample of interview questions

1. Tell me about your experience as a school/ university student. Who is/was your role model as an English teacher?
2. Can you tell me why you decided to become a teacher.
3. Can you describe your first days on the practicum site?
4. Did you feel prepared with subject content and pedagogical knowledge when you went for your teaching practice?
5. Has your sense of preparedness changed over time of training? How?
6. Do you feel confident of yourself as a teacher? How has this sense changed over time at school site?
7. Can you describe your relationship with other people on the practicum site? (Peers, mentor, supervisor, students, school teachers, principal and administrative staff).
8. How often do you discuss your teaching practices and tensions with your supervisor, mentor, peers or others? How helpful would this be?
9. Who do you consider the most supportive for you during your training? Can you elaborate?
10. At the end of your teaching practice, do you feel your identity as a teacher has changed? How?
11. Would you like to tell me about any other worries or tensions you faced during your teaching practice?

Note: More follow up questions were used according to the participant's input.

Author information

Taghreed El Masry is a PhD student in TESL at the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya. She has worked as an English teacher in an EFL context for twenty years. She has moved on to work as an English supervisor and a teacher educator since 2010. Her area of interest and expertise is preparation of EFL Pre-service and In-service teachers.
.
Mohd Rashid Bin Mohd Saad, PhD, is a senior Lecturer at the Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya. His area of expertise is Private and Public Education (TESL; Education Policy and Assessment). He has been serving at the university since 2005 and now focuses more on the development of English Language education for rural students. His full biodata can be read at https://umexpert.um.edu.my/msaadmr