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Jiheha Maddamsetti

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Perceptions of Pre-service Teachers on Mentor Teachers' Roles in Promoting Inclusive Practicum: Case Studies in U.S. Elementary School Contexts

Abstract

This case study examines a Chinese and Korean-Chinese pre-service teachers' perceptions of their mentor teachers' role in supporting inclusive practicum experiences in U.S. elementary school contexts. The findings demonstrate that a mentor teacher's open conversations and willingness to host those students bring positive influence on their learning and growth. The findings also indicate that the facilitative roles of mentor teachers in the promotion of inclusive environments are intersected with the socio-cultural and political contexts of practicum schools and universities. The study concludes with implications for enhancing the inclusion of diverse pre-service teachers through collaborative roles of multiple practicum stakeholders, including pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, practicum schools, and universities.

Keywords: teaching practicums; mentor teachers; international pre-service teachers; elementary school contexts

Introduction

Practicum is a key experience for pre-service teachers to enhance their knowledge, skills, and critical awareness (Zeichner, 2010). Multiple practicum stakeholders offer guidance for pre-service teachers to reflect on their prior values and beliefs in a unique practicum school context (Yuan, 2016). Despite the benefits of practicum, studies also have recognized the challenge in providing an inclusive practicum for diverse pre-service teachers (Felton, & Harrison, 2017). For pre-service teachers from non-English speaking countries, practicum experiences in English-dominant contexts can be filled with tensions, conflicts, and negotiations with respect to cultural and linguistic repertoires in learning and teaching (e.g., Author, Year; Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2011).

Three main challenges faced by international pre-service teachers are (1) language barriers; (2) a lack of cultural knowledge and skills in K-12 school contexts and workplace; and (3) professional relationships with various practicum stakeholders (Marom & Ilieva, 2016). In particular, mentor teachers' roles are significant in mediating pre-service teachers' cultural and linguistic learning. McCluskey (2012) suggests that mentor teachers should be able to support inclusive practicum environments with empathy, acceptance, and respect for cultural diversity and identities. In so doing, diverse teacher candidates would be able to openly share and discuss cultural differences without fear and anxiety. However, mentor teachers do not always consider mentoring pre-service teachers as significant in their professional work (Klieger & Oster-Levinz, 2015). Likewise, many international pre-service teachers are likely to be expected to take full responsibility for their own learning without much mentorship from their cooperative teachers. Such responsibility often includes their proactive pursuit for communications and assistance, which can be in conflict with their cultural background, such as East Asian cultures (He, Levin & Li, 2011).

Few studies have examined how international pre-service teachers from East Asian backgrounds perceive the roles of mentor teachers in providing inclusive practicum experiences in the U.S. school settings. The current study aims to deepen our understanding of pre-service teachers' perceptions of their mentor teachers' roles in building inclusive practicum. This study

also highlights the collaborations of multiple practicum stakeholders in helping individual pre-service teachers and mentor teachers to create and participate in inclusive practicum experiences.

Research Design

Drawing on larger ethnographic case studies, the current study reports on two participants' practicum experiences in U.S. elementary schools. With purposive sampling of a case study approach (Creswell, 2013), participants were drawn from a larger teacher education program in a Midwestern U.S. city with the consent of the university's institutional ethnical review board. Ling (pseudonym), a 21-year old female Chinese, and Mei (pseudonym), a 22-year old female ethnic Korean-Chinese, shared similar interests and career goals in that they had studied elementary education with the intention to work in U.S. schools. During their practicum, Ling taught 3rd graders in a suburban elementary school while Mei taught 4th graders in an urban elementary school. Both of their mentor teachers were seen as experienced in classroom teaching and professional in hosting the pre-service teachers' practicum. The participants were asked to share how their mentor teachers, if any, provide sources and strategies for supporting their inclusive practicum experiences. The primary data sources include semi-interviews and the researcher's field notes. A total of 16 semi-structured interviews for 60 to 90 minutes each, were conducted during the 2014 to 2015 school year. Also, the researcher documented 12 field notes to describe the participant's interactions with their mentor teachers, and critical incidents regarding their school contexts over the year. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Then, both interview and field note data were chronologically organized to see participant's evolving views on relationships with their mentor teacher. Then, the interview data were analyzed with specific themes (e.g., mentor teachers' pedagogical advice to include her mentee's cultural backgrounds; mentor teachers' communication style and frequency). Field notes were useful in contextualizing the participants' descriptions. The researcher shared her preliminary and final analysis with the participants as ways of member checking.

Findings and Discussion

Both Ling and Mei noted their awareness of the importance in establishing mutual respect in their relationship with their mentor teacher through effective communication. However, in the beginning of their practicum, Ling and Mei expressed their sense of intimidation in communicating with their mentor teachers in the proactive and outspoken ways that are often preferred in Western contexts (Soong, 2015). For instance, while Ling described her hesitance to ask her mentor teacher for collaborative teaching in language arts units, Mei noted her anxiety in asking her mentor teacher for explicit feedback on her teaching.

More importantly, the findings suggest how their mentor teachers, respectively, showed different levels of willingness to provide culturally sustaining support for international students. Ling noted that her mentor teacher made explicit efforts to learn her cultural and linguistic backgrounds and also encouraged Ling to incorporate her backgrounds in teaching practice. For example, Ling taught her students how to read and write Chinese numbers, and incorporate Chinese abacus in teaching math. Ling's teacher also facilitated regular conversations with Ling around her specific needs and strengths to teach in the U.S. In so doing, Ling demonstrated her growing confidence in openly addressing her cultural and linguistic backgrounds as assets with her students as well as with her students' parents.

In contrast to Ling's case, Mei described that her mentor teacher appeared to be less willing to accommodate her needs and understand her vulnerabilities. For example, Mei recalled her mentor teacher's frequent comments on Mei's accent and its possible influence on teaching *native* students. Mei noted that prior to her practicum, she was quite proud of speaking three languages (Korean, Mandarin Chinese, and English) and learning to teach in her third language, English, in the U.S. However, Mei's frustration had increased when her mentor teacher often indicated that one's perceived English language proficiency was directly linked to their professional teaching competence. Furthermore, Mei noticed that her mentor teachers did not appear to have sufficient time or energy to particularly care for inclusive learning environments for her students, let alone for pre-service teachers, in a school where most teachers strove to meet the standardized test results due to the state demands. Mei described insufficient feedback and conversations with her mentor teacher. Accordingly, Mei's struggles became more apparent regarding establishing collaborative professional relationships with her mentor teacher. It is possible that identifying mentee's strengths and challenges could have been time-consuming and emotionally demanding work for her mentor teacher; however, a lack of quality guidance created a sense of pressure for Mei that she had to be the one who solely should shoulder a responsibility for making the most out of her practicum.

Mei's case provides evidence that even an experienced teacher could be less willing to provide inclusive practicum, combined with increasing pressure from the school, and deficit-saturated views on teacher candidates from a non-English speaking backgrounds. In contrast, Ling's mentor teacher facilitated regular conversations around Ling's needs in learning to teach, considering her cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ling's practicum school context was also inclusive and flexible to take Ling's trajectories of learning to teach into account. As a result, Ling found her practicum a positive experience, engaging in collaboration and reflections on her cultural and linguistic backgrounds in her teaching. Mei, however, found herself cast as the *Other* who may be insufficient to teach *native* students in the U.S. despite her qualifications.

Implications and Conclusion

The two pre-service teachers' accounts may not be sufficient to generalize the experiences of all international pre-service teachers in geographically and culturally different institutions and school contexts. Furthermore, this study only focuses on the perceptions of the participants without juxtaposing the perspectives of their mentor teachers. However, the findings of this study have implications for mentoring ethnic and linguistic minority pre-service teachers in the U.S. context and other similar contexts. First, mentor teachers need to take an active role in facilitating open and respectful conversations around international pre-service teachers' perspectives and experiences on learning and teaching. Yet, to enhance individual mentor teachers' awareness, it is also important that institutions support those mentor teachers to offer inclusive practicum experiences (Felton, & Harrison, 2017). Thus, both the university and practicum school administrators should collaborate to attract mentor teachers who would appreciate advising diverse teacher candidates. Reward and recognition (e.g., fiscal; showcasing for professional development for other in-service teachers) of such mentorship can be also used.

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of the importance of mentor teachers' roles for successful practicum experiences of pre-service teachers. This study also acknowledges that multifaceted individual and contextual factors may influence the professional relationships between mentor teachers and pre-service teachers, such as combinations of mentor

teachers' personality and dispositions, socio-cultural contexts of practicum school, accountability-based educational policy, and pre-service teachers, race/ethnicity, cultures, and language backgrounds. Further research can examine multiple perspectives from practicum stakeholders, including pre-service teachers, universities, and practicum schools, accounting for how they collaboratively support of *all* pre-service teachers' learning and growth during their practicum.

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