International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Edu

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Received 19 January 2016
Revised 28 February 2016
19 March 2016
11 April 2016
12 April 2016
Accepted 13 April 2016

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine changes in eight preservice teachers' professional identity and the factors contributing to such changes during a four-week block practicum.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative case study design was used and the data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with preservice teachers and their mentors, reflective journals and observation checklists. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Findings – The findings showed high levels of confidence and development of teacher voice by the end of their four-week block practicum. The findings also suggested that positive mentoring relationships contributed to changes in the preservice teachers' teacher identity.

Research limitations/implications – Despite focussing on a relatively small number of preservice secondary teachers during the first four-week practicum of a single teacher education program at a Western Australian University, this research highlights the need to maintain constructive mentoring relationships with preservice teachers to provide positive influences on their professional identity. In order to facilitate this, preservice teacher education programs should provide thorough training for mentor teachers.

Originality/value – This work highlighted the crucial role of mentor teachers in creating positive impacts on preservice teachers' professional identity, such as development of their confidence and teacher voice. This paper provides useful insights for researchers, mentor teachers, and preservice teacher education policy developers.

Keywords Practicum, Preservice teacher education programmes,
Preservice teacher-mentor teacher relationship, Teacher identity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The development of a teacher identity, defined as the conceptualization, conscious or not, that teachers have of themselves (Singh and Richards, 2006), is a central process in becoming a teacher (Alsup, 2005; Friesen and Besley, 2013). The significance of teacher identity lies in the fact that it influences teachers' effectiveness (Sammons *et al.*, 2007), decision making (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004), and their educational philosophy (Mockler, 2011). As such, researchers have examined extensively the impact of different factors that contribute to the construction of teacher identity in preservice teacher education. They found that, for instance, use of variables such as reflective writing, collaborative reflection and action research (Maclean and White, 2007; Vavrus, 2009) as well as factors such as context (Findlay, 2006; Legard Larson and Kalmbach Phillips, 2005), and motivation (Schepens *et al.*, 2009) significantly impacted preservice teachers' identity formation. The growing importance attached to the concept of preservice teacher identity, and the increasing number of studies in this area suggest that preservice teacher education is an important stage and an ideal starting point for the development of teacher identity (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009).

Among the factors contributing to the development of teacher identity in the context of preservice teacher education, is preservice teachers' interactions with significant

International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education
Vol. 5 No. 2, 2016
pp. 127-143

2046-6854
DOI 10.1108/IJMCE-01-2016-0004

others such as teacher educators. Teacher educators, including mentor teachers, have the potential to help preservice teachers considerably in the process of socialization into the profession (Glenn, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991) by creating social spaces and practices that empower preservice teachers, give them a sense of agency, and foster their active participation (Cattley, 2007; Edwards, 2005; Engle and Faux, 2006) in their learning process. Whereas collaboration with an expert is essential for professional growth (Vélez-Rendón, 2010), sometimes tensions arise during such collaboration resulting in negative feelings on the part of preservice teachers (Pillen *et al.*, 2013; Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2004). There are a number of studies on the relationships between preservice teachers and their mentor teachers during practicum that do not deal specifically with teacher identity issues, yet report on the tensions experienced by preservice teachers. Some of these studies have documented the existence of a hierarchical, imitative, superficial, inflexible, and requiring relationship (Beck and Kosnik, 2000; Chaliès *et al.*, 2004; Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Lesley *et al.*, 2009), while others have described positive relationships between the two parties (Boswell *et al.*, 2015; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2004).

Although many of the factors that contribute to the process of identity construction in preservice teachers have been widely researched, less research has been undertaken on the impact of a positive or a troubled relationship between mentor teachers and preservice teachers on identity formation of prospective teachers. It is said that the relationship between these two parties and the quality of mentoring are important factors in teacher change and professional growth (Devos, 2010), yet there is limited research on the extent to which this relationship can play a role in the development of a professional teacher identity in preservice teachers (Devos, 2010; Izadinia, 2013, 2015b; McIntyre and Hobson, 2015). The aim of this study was first, to examine the changes in preservice teachers' professional identity after a four-week block practicum; and second, to investigate the role of mentor teachers in creating changes in their professional identity. By examining the contributions of mentor teachers, this study highlights the crucial role of mentors and the significance of improving a mentor-mentee relationship so that it could positively affect prospective teachers' professional identity. Moreover, the findings of this study help preservice teacher education programs in establishing more effective selection and eligibility criteria for recruiting mentors who are passionate about their teaching job and mentoring role. The questions addressed in this study were:

(1) What changes occurred in preservice teachers' professional identity after a four-week block practicum?

(2) What factors did the participants identify as important in facilitating changes in their identity?

(3) To what extent did the relationship between mentor teachers and preservice teachers during the first four-week block practicum contribute to the development of preservice teachers' professional identity?

The present research is part of a larger study on identity development of the participants. Whereas the main study examined the impact of the mentoring relationship on identity formation of the preservice teachers during their one-year program, this study only focussed on the first four-week practicum (please refer to Izadinia, 2015a, b for more information about other phases of the study).

For this research, Izadinia's (2013) definition of preservice teachers' teacher identity was used as the basis for interpreting the development of preservice teachers' identity.

She defined preservice teachers' teacher identity as their "perceptions of their cognitive knowledge, sense of agency, self-awareness, voice, confidence and relationship with colleagues, pupils and parents, as shaped by their educational contexts, prior experiences and learning communities" (p. 708). In her literature review on preservice teachers' teacher identity, Izadinia (2013) explained that the recognition of variables such as teacher voice and confidence as components of teacher identity contributes to a better understanding of the elusive construct of teacher identity and its developmental process. Therefore, in order to examine teacher identity development in the present study, the author examined changes in components of teacher identity and encouraged the participants to elaborate on the above-mentioned aspects when reflecting on the development of their teacher identity.

The term "teacher educators" in this study is used as an umbrella term for those who guide, teach, and support preservice teachers (Koster *et al.*, 2005), including university lecturers and mentor teachers. The term "mentor teachers," also referred to as "cooperating teachers" and "associate teachers," is used for the teacher of the class who works with preservice teachers during the practicum. The terms "preservice teachers" and "mentees" are used interchangeably in this paper.

The mentor teacher-preservice teacher relationship is defined as any form of interaction developed and maintained between preservice teachers and their mentor teachers during the practicum.

Theoretical framework

Professional identity develops as preservice teachers engage in daily interactions with significant others such as their mentor teachers during their practicum experience (Johnson, 2003). This view, which is based on social constructivism, reflects the idea that learning happens in a social process in which learners gain new skills and knowledge through interactions with other people such as teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). It was assumed that a social constructivist approach would adequately guide the researcher to examine how preservice teachers' professional identity would change or be affected by their interactions with mentor teachers, because its three main tenets could be easily applied to a mentoring relationship (Graves, 2010). In other words, the three tenets of: knowledge is constructed by learners; learning involves social interaction; and learning is situated (Beck and Kosnik, 2006) can be interpreted as: preservice teachers go through the learning-to-teach process and gradually construct their teacher identity in their daily interactions with significant others, such as their mentor teachers in the context of the practicum.

Method

Participants

The present research was conducted in one of the largest teacher education programs in Western Australian University. The first group of participants in this phase of the study comprised eight secondary preservice teachers (five females and three males) from the disciplines of music (five) and drama (three) and in an age range of early 20s to early 30s. They were all enrolled in a one-year Graduate Diploma of Education, Secondary course. The participants were recruited during orientation day, and also in the first week of the program. The second group of participants comprised nine mentor teachers (six males and three females) with teaching experience from 3 to 34 years. Four of the mentor teachers were new to the mentoring role and the rest had mentored

preservice teachers over their teaching experience ranging from 5 to 25 years. One preservice teacher had two mentors, and other students had one mentor while they had the chance to observe other teachers and occasionally teach their classes. Therefore, in the first interview, nine instead of eight mentors participated. All participants volunteered to take part in the research study knowing that their names and any identifiable information would be removed from the data, that they would be assigned pseudonyms, and that they would be able to withdraw from the research at any time.

Data collection

The eight preservice teachers attended a semi-structured one-on-one interview held on the campus in early March 2014, shortly after the first semester started. The interviews were conducted before the units started so that the participants' ideas were not influenced by their involvement in the learning community. The aim of this interview was to understand the preservice teachers' ideas and perceptions of their teacher self before they started the program. A second interview was held with the preservice teachers in July 2014 after the end of the first four-week practicum, to ascertain the changes that occurred in their teacher identity and how the mentoring relationship contributed to such changes (see the Appendix for interview questions). The mentor teachers were also interviewed at their respective schools before and after the practicum. The aim of these interviews was to examine mentors' perceptions of their mentee's teacher identity development. The interviews lasted 20-50 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The preservice teachers were also invited to keep a reflective journal and reflect on their experiences and development process as they went through their course. All but one of the participants produced two journal entries: one during the first semester and one at the end of the practicum. The participants were asked to reflect on issues such as their experiences of teaching within their schools, their first impression of their mentor teacher, their perceptions of their progress, and whether or not they saw any changes in their teacher identity. The participants were also given the leeway to write about any issues of interest and significance to them.

In addition to interviews and reflective journals, an observation checklist was used to determine the dynamics of the interactions between the preservice teachers and their mentors. Items such as "way of giving feedback," "collaboration," "giving confidence," and "open communication" were among the items on the checklist. The frequency of the actions as well as examples of behavior were recorded by the researcher during the observations. Two classroom observations were conducted on each participant's teaching. Since the unit of analysis was the interaction between mentors and mentees, the researcher also attended debriefing sessions following each solo teaching. The checklist and notes helped the researcher to pinpoint specific patterns of interaction between the participants. For instance, ease of communication and the way verbal and written feedback was offered indicated the extent to which rapport, respect, and support was provided and established. The debriefing sessions lasted 10-30 minutes depending on the depth of feedback.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, which is regarded as a fundamental method used in qualitative research and is a "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was used to interpret the data. To analyze

the interview data and reflective journals, the researcher took the following steps as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): transcribing verbal data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. More specifically, after transcribing the interviews, the interpretation of the data was attained in an iterative manner as the reflective journals and interview transcripts were read multiple times to find codes that reflected the main concepts. Recurring issues were consolidated into new codes. For instance, codes such as "open communication," "encouragement and support," and "close bond," which were related to positive aspects of mentoring, were named "mentoring relationships." Next, key quotations were selected to represent the identified themes. The observation checklist was also used to provide further evidence for themes previously identified in the data.

Although the richness of the data helped to identify factors that can impact future research and practice, there are a number of limitations to this study. First, as mentioned earlier, the findings of this paper emerged from the data gathered in the first four-week practicum. Therefore, the duration of the research might suggest small and temporary changes in the participants. Second, there are a number of factors at play that inform preservice teachers' identity formation in a learning community like the practicum. While the significance of all these factors, including the role of other members of the community and the school context, is acknowledged, the present research only considered the impact of the mentoring relationships on the preservice teachers' identity formation. Therefore, some changes in preservice teacher identity might have occurred due to other external factors that were not examined in this research.

Findings

In this section, first, I will focus on the perceived changes in participants' teacher identity and also the mentors' perceptions of their mentees' professional development. In the next section, I will present the findings related to the factors contributing to perceived identity changes in participants.

The eight preservice teachers participating in this research began their course filled with self-motivation and a deep passion for their subject and teaching. Feeling positive about teaching, they all had an ultimate goal to share their passion and knowledge with their students, make a change in their lives, and help them find their talents and strengths. As motivated and excited as they were, they also had fears, doubts, and expectations of the program. For example, they worried that they were too lenient, idealistic, lacked confidence, did not have a sense of control, and felt more like a student than a teacher. However, they anticipated that some changes, such as growing in their subject, building confidence, and finding a more realistic view would occur as they went through the course and the practicum (see Izadinia, 2015b for more about the participants). The analysis of the data suggested that some participants experienced subtle changes in their confidence, voice, and vision. The next section will report the changes in some aspects of the preservice teachers' identity.

Changes in aspects of teacher identity

Confidence. All preservice teachers reported a boost in their confidence. Some participants explained that they gradually overcame their fears and gained more confidence throughout the practicum. For instance, Simon pointed out:

> I was just as nervous as all hell, kind of doing it, it was really, really scary, I had never kind of done that thing before, and the first feedback he [the mentor] gave me was really positive,

> it was like "Look, I think you did a great job, I really liked what you did here, here and here", and then just gave me some really simple suggestions to improve, and that kind of kept ongoing throughout the whole prac. So even when I thought I maybe did a bad lesson, there was a lot of encouragement, and at the same time a lot of, like, really simple suggestions to help me improve.

Sara, Anna, Chelsey, and Eden also felt more confident; Chelsey mentioned that when her mentor looked at her lesson plan and did not feel anything needed changing, she would feel really confident. She also referred to her university supervisor's comment, which also indicated a boost in her confidence: "I have found it [confidence], I think. That was my feedback from the supervisor actually that I had a confident presence." Eden also described how feedback that was gradually shrinking in size and suggesting progression made him feel confident:

> So the first one [feedback] was a page of things I needed to improve […] The next one was like a quarter of a page of things that I needed to improve, and half of page of things that were working well, and then by the end of it, it was just all things that had worked well.

He concluded that the result of watching that progression on paper so clearly was that "I could not be anything but more confident." Liz, who had worked with and observed other teachers besides her mentor, compared their different mentoring styles and argued the freedom her mentor gave her to teach increased her confidence and helped her improve:

> There were some teachers in [name of the school] who rather than just letting you take the class, would constantly jump in and say things […] Matt [her mentor] was not like that. It did not really matter what I did, Matt was quite happy to sit back and let me take care of it and let me handle it […] so he'd address any issues afterwards […] he would not cut in the middle of the class and sort of like knock me off my little pedestal, because not only does that make me look like a tit in front of the students, it does not do much for your confidence either […] He definitely gave me my own space to develop.

Teacher voice. A teacher's voice is considered "as the measure of the extent to which a person can articulate a personal practical identity image of himself/herself as a teacher" (Sutherland *et al.*, 2010, p. 456). Other researchers have defined teacher voice as the authority that allows a teacher to talk about their practices and how voice should be constructed and implemented (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 1995; Kirk and MacDonald, 2001). In this research, the development of a teacher voice was one of the most recurring themes in the interview data and reflective journals and it was interpreted by the preservice teachers as a sense of authority. The participants frequently mentioned that they had started to develop their "own style," their "own flair," their "teaching personality," and their "teaching methods," and were better able to explain themselves, take more ownership, and make more decisions. Among the participants was Anna who wrote in her journal before the practicum that "I find it hard to differentiate myself from the students as I feel I could dress up in the uniform and be one myself." Her reflection indicated that her teacher identity was not established before the practicum because she lacked the authority she needed to function as a teacher. Anna (23-years old), did not know how to control the class and lacked a teacher voice. In the first interview Anna said that if she could not have a sense of control she would leave teaching. However, in the second interview held at the end of the practicum she declared she had found her teacher voice and she felt "more like a teacher": "I had a bit of trouble with that [having a voice] at the start of prac. I was much more quiet in the classroom, but even my mentor said that I have developed it [a voice] a lot."

Similarly, Liz claimed that after doing the practicum she could see herself in an authoritative role and not only could she "keep everything together in the classroom" but also felt she could be "someone that students can come to who they can trust and talk to." In other words, Liz could envisage herself as a teacher who could help her students in every way. Simon, who had observed and worked with two mentor teachers in the first practicum, compared his mentors' mentoring styles in his journal and expressed how much he enjoyed working with one and disagreed with the approach of the other. He explained that with the freedom he was given in one mentor's classes, he was able to initiate ideas and teaching methods. He further noted that he was treated like a colleague by his mentor, which made him "feel like a working teacher" and helped him "blend ideas together and present good lessons."

Vision. Another frequently recognized theme was a change in participants' vision. Five out of eight preservice teachers argued that the kind of teacher they wanted to be, or their image of a teacher and their responsibilities, had altered. The "enthusiastic," "energetic," and "bubbly" character of Anna's mentor teacher inspired her to want to gain that connection with her class: "The way I envisioned myself as a teacher has changed in the sense that I want to be more of a consistent, enthusiastic teacher every time I walk into the classroom." Anna explained that the way her mentor "could switch from happy and enthusiastic person to 'this is my serious mode, are you going to mess with me?' " made Anna want to be a teacher like her mentor. Similarly, Sara remarked that her approach to consequences and punishment had become more rigid and she no longer thought, for instance, yard duty was a bad thing. She did not want to give punishment out when she started off.

A few preservice teachers revisited their ideas about the teaching career. Alex realized that teaching is "a very tough job" and "some teachers looked like they were just completely snowed under and bored." In addition, Alex thought the way media (Alex's major) was taught within schools was "at times very boring." He explained that although he enjoyed teaching "but the majority of [his teaching] was like 'Really?' " Alex finished the practicum thinking, "I do not know if I could be a full-time teacher forever" and "I just do not know whether I can do this, because I would just go crazy." In the second interview held at the end of the first practicum, Alex repeatedly mentioned that the practicum was very challenging for him.

Chelsey's practicum occurred in a low socio-economic school. She observed teachers who were worn down by the everyday challenges of teaching, and often witnessed all the hard work that the teachers were putting in was not being translated into results. These experiences made Chelsey think at times "Oh gosh! I do not want to be that jaded." Chelsey found it "quite dispiriting to keep teaching [students] things where they [the students] were completely disinterested and unmotivated." Chelsey confirmed that her identity had changed in some ways and she had realized that "for some kids, school is very difficult" and she needed to be more pragmatic and realistic. She had realized that "people have big lives and your class is just a small part of that life," and declared that she would not want to teach anymore if she got to the stage where she was not enjoying it. Reconsidering his decision to be a full-time music teacher, Simon expressed in his reflective journal that although the practicum reaffirmed his decision to be a music teacher, he was starting to realize that being a full-time classroom teacher may not be for him:

> I witnessed my mentor teacher and other music teachers have to deal with a lot more than just "teaching". Dealing with crazy parents, balancing budgets, relief, lesson planning and administration matters seemed to take up a lot of time.

Simon further explained that he could help his students best if he stuck with his current one-on-one piano tutoring, fitted his teaching with individual students' needs and taught whatever he thought the student was interested in.

Mentors' perceptions of preservice teachers' teacher identity development

In the last interview, taken at the end of the practicum, mentors were asked to comment on the degree to which they believed their mentee had developed a teacher identity. Almost all mentor teachers were adamant that changes had occurred in their mentee's teacher identity. These mentors asserted changes in their mentees' voice, teaching techniques, their relationship with pupils, and authority. One mentor pointed out that his mentee had become very comfortable with his class, and had tried different techniques and injected his own humor, which to him was "a show of someone who is actually feeling quite comfortable." Another mentor commented: "I think she [the mentee] did make a good transition from someone who'd done nothing of it [not having any experience in teaching] to being reasonably comfortable and learning what is necessary." Two other mentors referred to the development of their mentee's voice. One of them remarked:

> It has been really clear to me in observing her that she is being much more direct now. So her directions and her explanations are much more concise […] Her expectations of discipline and student interaction are much more clear now, so she is starting to define herself based on her experiences, what kind of teacher she is going to end up being.

And the other one mentioned: "when she [the mentee] first came in and she was just so lovely and so nice and quiet and petite, and now I think she's just got so much more commands out of the students."

As the above quotations showed, all six mentors believed their mentees had developed a sense of teacher identity to some extent.

Factors contributing to preservice teachers' identity formation

Feedback. Mentor teachers' feedback was found to play a key role in the development of teacher identity in the preservice teachers. All preservice teachers emphasized the importance of feedback and some even asserted that without receiving feedback they would not be able to identify their weaknesses and overcome them. Anna maintained, "Obviously I might not even notice that I was not actually as loud as I could be or authoritative as I could be without his feedback." Likewise, Eden explained that if the feedback was not there, there would not be any opportunity to improve:

> As soon as I got feedback from a lesson […] I tried it out in the very next lesson […] that was incredibly difficult, that course, but it gave me a kind of feel for how important that cycle of teach, feedback, reflect, act on feedback, how important that was, and it did work.

Sara and Chelsey also emphasized the role of feedback and attributed it to their professional identity development. Sara pointed out that her mentor was very generous with her feedback and she (Sara) would reflect and work on her mentor's feedback. Chelsey also regarded discussions with her mentor and trying to work out what fitted well with her personality as important factors in finding her preferred teacher role. Liz cited a similar reason for finding her teacher identity. She stated that her mentor's detailed feedback and other teachers' feedback, even when they were conflicting,

definitely helped her. Alex also referred to his talks with his mentor and his mentor's comments on his teaching as helping him find his teacher voice:

> I have developed my own way of teaching, own way of presenting, so I would say what's helped it is me speaking to my mentors […] because they were saying to me, "You are doing well, this is what you could improve and this is what you are doing well".

Other evidence to support the importance of mentors' feedback in preservice teachers' identity development was present in the observation checklist and notes taken by the researcher from debriefing sessions. These sessions, usually held in classrooms or staff rooms, were quite informal and friendly with conversations going both ways. In almost all cases the mentors started with positive comments about the mentee's teaching with comments such as, "You did very well," "the activity went really well," "you did exactly the right thing," "I liked the way you […]," "You were pretty good at […]," "I am impressed with your knowledge of […]." After giving a list of positive comments, the mentors would typically provide some suggestions for improvement such as, "It is a good thing to […]," "Perhaps you have done it and I have not noticed, but […]," "You could use strategies like […]." There was also considerable encouragement given to the preservice teachers by their mentors: "You have definitely improved on […]," "Your feedback is getting better," "The technique was awesome, thumbs up," and "That was perfect! You did it!"

Mentoring relationship. Although the preservice teachers were given the chance to identify factors contributing to their identity development, they were also specifically asked to comment on their mentoring relationship and the extent to which their expectations of the mentoring relationship were met by the end of the practicum.

In the interviews and the reflective journals written at the end of the practicum, preservice teachers frequently asserted that they felt "very lucky" and were thankful for their mentor's support and encouragement during the practicum. Alex wrote in his journal after the end of practicum that his mentor has been of "outstanding support" to him and he (the mentor) had been just what he needed. Alex referred to an incident where he felt tired and overwhelmed by teaching a difficult class and added how he regained his confidence after a talk with his mentor: "Luke (the mentor) restored my confidence in what I was doing and explained that 'on some occasions teaching can be a thankless task […] but you must stick to your guns.'" Similarly, Liz noted in her journal that her mentor helped her overcome any doubts she had of teaching classical content, of which she had limited knowledge:

> He [the mentor] truly helped me develop. He was very supportive throughout the entire process […] he said to me once when I expressed my concern with teaching classical content […] "I can't be expected to know all the content straight out of the gate. It takes years for teachers to learn everything they need to be teaching".

Simon also expressed a deep satisfaction with his mentor who made him feel "included and welcome." He wrote in his journal that his experience was "extremely positive" and his strong relationship with his mentor "contributed immensely" to his success during the practicum. In his interview Simon claimed he had quite a lot personal experiences with his mentor which contributed to their relationship:

> And another time he was driving a couple of students to [name of a school], and he invited me along and we had a chat on the way there and on the way back and he bought me chips and coke […] asking me what I wanted to do/and where I saw myself in 20 years, and just really taking an interest.

The preservice teachers referred to many incidents that mentor teachers' support and encouragement during the practicum had left them with feelings of appreciation and satisfaction. Comments such as, "We had a very good rapport," "We had a lot of fun," "I felt supported," "We got along very well on a lot of levels," "I had an incredibly positive relationship," "I could work well with him," suggested the existence of a positive mentoring relationship for all preservice teachers.

Discussion

The literature on teacher identity suggests that identity is subject to change (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Beijaard *et al.*, 2004) and is affected by different factors within a learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Relatedly, the findings of this research revealed that preservice teachers experienced changes in their teacher identity as they went through their first placement. Their confidence and teacher voice grew and their vision of the teacher they wanted to be altered. As discussed in the introduction, these variables are regarded as components of teacher identity and thus, the perceived changes in participants' confidence, teacher voice and vision are indicative of development of their teacher identity. For instance, changes in participants' vision suggested a clearer understanding of their role and the type of teacher they wanted to be. The energetic character of Anna's mentor, for example, made her want to be an enthusiastic teacher. This observation highlights the significance of having mentors who are highly motivated and passionate about their job as they communicate hope and optimism (Rowley, 1999), and who influence preservice teachers' views about teaching (Graves, 2010).

However, three participants did not experience promising changes in their vision, although this still indicated formation of a teacher identity. Chelsey started to think she did not want to be as "jaded" as other teachers and she would leave teaching if she was not enjoying it anymore. Simon came to the realization that he could not be a full-time teacher and it was only through teaching one-on-one that he could attend to his students' needs and wants. As these examples show, preservice teachers' work, practices, and identity are subject to transformation and reconstitution (Devos, 2010). In other words, the novel experiences associated with practicum inform the dynamic nature of preservice teachers' teacher identity (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009) and bring about changes, however undesirable, in their perceptions and understanding of their role as teachers. Moreover, as Beijaard *et al.* (2004) believe, professional identity formation is an answer to the question "Who am I at this stage?" and "Who do I want to become?" When preservice teachers begin to think about the kind of teacher they want to be and obtain a more thorough understanding of their role and what it entails, they actually take essential steps toward creating a teacher identity. However, mentor teachers can facilitate this process and help preservice teachers overcome their doubts by setting an inspiring example like Anna's mentor and convey enthusiasm and passion for the job.

The second aim of this study was to investigate those factors that contributed to the perceived changes in participants. The participants were asked to reflect on their mentoring experience and identify the key elements. It was found that the negotiation of feedback was one of the most significant factors. Feedback is regarded as fundamental to successful mentoring relationship (Bates *et al.*, 2011; Beck and Kosnik, 2002; Leshem, 2012). For instance, in a study by Beck and Kosnik (2002) it was found that student teachers had high regards for feedback and viewed it as an essential aspect of the practicum experience. Other studies focussed on the importance of honest

feedback, constructive feedback, ongoing feedback, and critical and positive feedback (Glenn, 2006; Knox and McGovern, 1988). The preservice teachers participating in this study were found to be very satisfied with the amount and quality of feedback they received from their mentors, talked about "detailed feedback" and "generous feedback" they received, and regarded it as influential in developing a teacher identity. The data from observation checklists and notes taken from debriefing sessions also confirmed mentor teachers' high level of genuine commitment to providing detailed feedback.

The second contributing factor was maintaining a positive mentoring relationship with mentor teachers. All participants mentioned that they received outstanding support and encouragement from their mentors, established a good rapport with them, and got along very well. The participants were fully engaged in practices associated with effective mentoring relationships (Izadinia, 2015b; Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Jacobi, 1991) such as encouragement and support and developing personal and professional relationships. Research shows the existence of a collegial relationship enhances learning (Fullan, 1995) and helps mentees in their learning-to-teach process (Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2004). Other studies also reflect preservice teachers' desire for working with mentors who care for them personally as well as professionally (Beck and Kosnik, 2002; Glenn, 2006). Similarly, the findings of this study suggested the preservice teachers enjoyed the close personal relationship with their mentors and felt included and welcomed as a result.

Moreover, it was found that the support and advice the participants received from their mentors instilled a sense of confidence and engendered their enthusiasm for the job. For instance, feeling unmotivated to teach, Alex regained his confidence in teaching after having a discussion with his mentor about the challenges of the teaching job, which reminded him to remain strong and motivated. Similarly, a study by Rajuan *et al.* (2007) found that student teachers needed a collaborative and supportive relationship with their mentor teachers to develop the confidence to take risks and experiment in the classroom. However, as Collet (2012) describes in her Gradual Increase of Responsibility Model, the support mentor teachers provide gradually decreases in quantity and quality as preservice teachers increase in competence and confidence. This is verified by the findings of this study where the feedback Eden received from his mentor shrank in size. Yet, this decrease in the level of support suggested his progression and helped him build more confidence.

Interactions are crucial to identity development, as "we invest ourselves in what we do and at the same time we invest ourselves in our relations with others" (Wenger, 1998, p. 192). The overall findings of this study suggested that mentoring relationships played a significant role in shaping preservice teachers' teacher identity. The detailed feedback mentor teachers provided, as well as their positive interactions characterized by ongoing support and encouragement, helped preservice teachers build higher levels of confidence, develop a stronger teacher voice, and demonstrate a deeper understanding of their role as a teacher.

Conclusions

This study examined the identity development of eight secondary preservice teachers in a four-week block practicum and the extent to which mentor teachers played a role in creating such changes. The findings indicated that mentor teachers positively influenced preservice teachers' perceptions and understanding of themselves as teachers and created positive changes in their teacher identity.

Practicum is the most stressful part of the preparation for teaching and preservice teachers are in need of practical and emotional support (Murray-Harvey *et al.*, 2000).

This study also showed that the preservice teachers had fears and doubts before they started their first placement. However, they gained confidence, overcame their initial fears and felt more like a teacher as they forged supportive mentoring relationships.

Although changes in preservice teachers' perceptions of themselves as a teacher might be small and short term, they potentially impact their decision to stay or leave the profession. The Australian Council for Educational Research analysis shows that 25 percent of preservice teachers leave the university in the first year of their degree and 25 percent of those who completed their degree in 2014 did not want to become a teacher (Weldon, 2015). As the findings of this study also revealed, three participants experienced changes in their vision of the kind of teacher they wanted to be. It is not surprising that demands of the job and developing a more realistic view of the role might influence preservice teachers' decision to be a teacher. Thus, the more positive experiences preservice teachers have in the practicum, the more likely they are to stay in the profession. This again highlights the significance of mentor teachers' role; mentor teachers can create positive experiences for preservice teachers and give them a positive outlook on their job by empowering them with personal and professional skills, knowledge and resilience to work with students (Grima-Farrell, 2015).

This study has a number of implications. First, given the powerful impact mentor teachers can leave on preservice teachers' teacher identity, they should be encouraged to resolve to deliberately provide academic and emotional support and encouragement during the practicum. Martinez (2004) discussed teacher attrition in Australia and analyzed 1999 data from Queensland. She noted that many teachers cited lack of support as their main reason to leave, although the types of support were not identified. As preservice teachers begin their teaching experience they are filled with fears and self-doubts. A supportive network, which promotes open lines of communication, encourages preservice teachers to discuss their concerns, thoughts and needs with their mentors and address their challenges with their mentors' help. Moreover, the role of effective feedback cannot be overemphasized. Mentor teachers should offer ongoing and constructive feedback in their supportive and non-judgmental network, to help preservice teachers evaluate and modify their teaching performance.

Second, preservice teacher education needs to provide thorough mentor training programs to equip mentors for their crucial roles. Despite research on mentoring, researchers believe little attention has been paid to developing and implementing mentor preparation programs and mentors often do not receive formal training (Beutel and Spooner-Lane, 2009; Gershenfeld, 2014; Giebelhaus and Bowman, 2002; Russell and Russell, 2011). As a result, the mentoring that preservice teachers encounter is often considered "hit or miss" (Russell and Russell, 2011), which might be a factor contributing to teacher attrition. Teacher education programs in every context are recommended to design comprehensive mentoring programs and discuss key issues such as who should be a mentor, significance of mentoring, keys to effective mentoring, establishing responsibilities and expectations in the mentoring relationship, importance of individuals' learning differences, and helping in their transition of learning to workplace (Beutel and Spooner-Lane, 2009; Garvey and Alred, 2000).

Third, preservice teacher education programs need to exercise more caution about recruiting mentor teachers. As mentors are highly likely to be regarded as an ultimate example of a teacher by preservice teachers, their professional conduct and enthusiasm for their job are of utmost importance. Preservice teacher education programs should work with mentor teachers who are passionate about their teaching job and mentoring roles, and are not suffering from teacher burn out.

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Appendix

Preservice Teachers Interview Framework (First round):

(1) What made you choose teaching as a career? What is your purpose of teaching?

(2) What do you perceive as your main responsibilities as a teacher toward yourself and your students?

(3) Do you have a vision of the kind of teacher you would like to be?

(4) What metaphor would you use to represent yourself as a future teacher at this time? Could you explain?

(5) What changes might you anticipate in your image of yourself as a future teacher? What might influence these changes?

(6) What might make you stay in teaching? What might lead you to leave it?

(7) How do you think your mentor's/university lecturer's role should be? (Parent figure/ support system, etc.) Why do you think so?

(8) How do you imagine your relationship with your mentor teachers during this year? Can you use another metaphor to describe this perceived relationship? (You could start like this: my relationship with my mentor will be like…).

(9) How do you think your relationship with your mentor should be? What should it involve?

(10) To what extent do you think the relationship you have with your mentors will affect you and your vision of the teacher you want to be?

Preservice Teachers Interview Framework (Second round):

(1) How do you perceive your identity as a teacher now? Can you name any specific changes in your teacher identity since you began teaching?

(2) Is there a metaphor you would use to represent your teacher identity at this stage?

(3) Do you think you have been able to find your teacher voice? If yes what do you contribute it to?

(4) Could you describe the relationship you shared with your mentor teacher?

(5) What metaphor would you use to describe your mentoring relationship?

(6) What did you want to be different in your relationship with your mentor?

(7) To what extent do you think your mentor has changed your vision of the teacher you want to be?

(8) Was there any critical experiences, including tensions you have lived through during prac? If yes, how have they affected you? How did you deal with them?

(9) Do you think your mentor could give you the courage and confidence you needed in your role?

(10) How has your mentor met your expectations about how a mentor teacher would (or should) be?

(11) How has your mentor contradicted your expectations about how a mentor teacher would (or should) be?

Mentor Teachers Interview Framework:

(1) How would you describe the mentoring relationship between you and your mentee?

(2) What metaphor would you use to describe this relationship?

(3) Was there any conflicts or tensions between you?

(4) To what extent do you think your mentee has developed his/her teacher identity such as his/her teacher voice/confidence/vision?

TE's pattern of educational behavior	Examples	Frequency	Notes
Way of giving feedback			
Emotional and academic support			
Role modeling			
Collaboration			
Forging a bond			
Mutual learning			
Open communication (dialogue) vs silence			
Encouraging gestures			
Respect			
Encouraging STs to have a vision			
Encouraging reflection			
Giving confidence			

Table AI.
Preservice teacher-mentor teacher relationship rubric

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