Preservice Teachers' Sense of Belonging During Practicum Placements

Yvonne Dewhurst
University of Aberdeen, y.dewhurst@abdn.ac.uk

Michelle Ronksley-Pavia
Griffith University, m.ronksley-pavia@griffith.edu.au

Donna Pendergast
Griffith University, d.pendergast@griffith.edu.au

Preservice Teachers' Sense of Belonging During Practicum Placements

Yvonne Dewhurst
University of Aberdeen, Scotland
Michelle Ronksley-Pavia
Donna Pendergast
Griffith University

Abstract: Practicum placements in schools are keystone features of preservice teacher education, yet inconsistencies in their nature and quality are pervasive. This phenomenon was explored in two cultural contexts, with a focus on 'belonging', which the literature reveals may impact practicums and commitment to the profession. Interviews were conducted with six primary school preservice teachers in Australia and Scotland, about their lived experience of belonging/non-belonging during practicum. Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis revealed four themes in both cultural contexts: 1. Being welcomed; 2. Settings and procedures; 3. Interpersonal interactions; and, 4. Strategic behaviours. This study indicates belonging as crucial to preservice teachers' cognition, wellbeing and learning during practicums, with 'non-belonging' inhibiting their development. Preservice teacher and mentor preparedness for practicums is highlighted, alongside challenges for initial teacher education programs and schools in addressing the fundamental need to foster a sense of belonging for preservice teachers during this crucial aspect of their teacher preparation.

Introduction

For more than half a century, initial teacher education (ITE) has been the subject of extensive international research (Caires et al., 2012). Presently, the teaching profession is experiencing high attrition rates (Izadinia, 2015), and this extends to attracting and retaining preservice teachers (PSTs) in ITE programs (Department for Education, 2018). The first *International Summit on the Teaching Profession* advised that in order to make teaching an attractive profession, teachers' needs should be met (Schleicher, 2011). Much has been written in the literature about the need for group belonging as a fundamental human need, and the deleterious consequences when belonging is not achieved (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Engaging in practicum can be a powerful force in developing a PST's sense of belonging, not only during practicum but in harnessing a sense of belonging (or not), to the teaching profession. As such the practicum plays a key role in developing a strong sense of belonging to the profession for PSTs (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010; Wenger, 1998), ultimately affecting the decision to commit to—or to leave—their program of study. Furthermore, while practicum is well researched and consistently identified as one of the most valuable aspects of ITE (Hobson et al., 2009), and the concept of belonging has been referred to in a few studies (e.g., Evelein et al., 2008; Fox & Wilson, 2015; Maynard, 2000; Maynard et al., 2014), belonging has rarely been the focus of specific research attention. Therefore, gaps remain in understanding PSTs' experience of belonging/non-belonging, while engaged in practicum

(Pendergast et al., 2020), and how this impacts cognition, behaviour, learning and wellbeing, and ultimately influences their commitment to the profession.

Literature Review

In this section, the literature relevant to belonging is discussed, followed by an exploration of the practicum with a focus on its complex and dynamic nature and PST/mentor relationships.

Belonging

Preservice teacher identity formation is complex. The literature reveals that social interactions and individual experiences in different contexts influence the formation of teachers' identity (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). From this extensive research a unique parallel concept has begun to emerge—that of a sense of belonging, and the importance of this for PSTs' successful learning and engagement while on practicum. This belongingness concept is displacing or contesting identity formation as a crucial focus in ITE (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

A sense of belonging arguably underpins and supports the connections that PSTs have to their schools and colleagues while on placement (Johnston, 2010; Ussher, 2010). As early as 1995, Baumeister and Leary noted belonging as a fundamental human need characterised by being able to establish and maintain positive significant relationships with others. Somers (1999) describes sense of belonging as:

> [T]he need to be, and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels . . . which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance, caring and valuing to others. (p. 3)

Wenger's (1998) intrinsic components of learning "community… learning as belonging: belonging to a social community in which our activities are recognized as valuable and competent" (p. 5), usefully frames belonging alongside such concepts of meaning (learning as experience), practice (learning by doing), and identity (learning as becoming) (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). With a close and mutual connection, reliant on each other for definition, these components can be seen to intersect with having a sense of belonging for PSTs during practicum. Becoming active members of a teaching community and developing a teacher identity relating to this community are elements of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991); staying on the periphery as a preservice teacher while aiming to become a legitimate active member of the school (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010).

Belonging is also explored in terms of spatiality, which is belonging to place (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016), the school, the classroom, the physicality of space and place. This conception is also pertinent to the temporality of PSTs' sense of belonging to their school, as PSTs inhabit a space of 'in-betweenness' (Huot et al., 2014), where "space acts as a frame connecting various other dimensions, aspects and relationalities of belonging" (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p. 237). PSTs are in the process of space-making, which is said to "involve negotiation of the emotional, verbalized, and bodily felt, affective dimensions of belonging" (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p. 237), where they are seeking to belong in a new environment, as an 'outsider'.

The concept of belonging is not seen as a permanent state but is variable and changeable across contexts, time and under different conditions. There are facets of non-belonging (or exclusion), be that social, emotional, spatial or a combination of these. In their review of belonging literature, Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) discuss the concept of "non-belonging", in terms of marginalisation and "structured and determined by diverse power hierarchies and hegemonies" (p. 239), which we see in play in the practicums of PSTs and their interactions with their mentors and teacher colleagues at their host schools.

Johnston (2016) argues that acculturation and assimilation from the periphery to centre in a community of practice is "tricky to negotiate" (p. 544) for PSTs. Where some teaching colleagues fail to validate PSTs' participation and need to belong, and contexts are unwelcoming, school workplaces become increasingly difficult. Additionally, the presence of newcomers in a school inevitably alters its dynamics in a process of constant change. Individuals and contexts are reciprocally and mutually constituted, not independent of each other. While accepting the varied constraints within any school and the diversity of placements, PSTs are active agents who can influence their circumstances and vice versa. This dynamic interplay can work to PSTs' advantage when they are proactive and use creative strategies to tune in to school environments (Graham & Roberts, 2007).

In terms of PSTs undertaking practicum, there is limited research about the importance of a sense of belonging as a factor needed to establish and maintain positive significant relationships with others (e.g., Johnston, 2010), and crucially, how belonging can support PSTs' succeeding in their practicum experience. However, in psycho-social literature, belonging has been identified as significantly impacting cognition, behaviour and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), in particular the anticipation of social rejection impairs cognitive processing and learning (Baumeister et al., 2002). Furthermore, uncertainty about feelings of belonging generates emotional responses with negative effect (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). Since ITE has increasingly prioritised practicums, more needs to be known about the processes (Caires et al., 2012) that contribute towards this early sense of belonging as a teacher (Graham & Roberts, 2007). Only with fuller understandings of the nature of PSTs' lived experiences, can stakeholders find solutions to practicum inconsistencies.

The Practicum

The practicum is central to PSTs' learning and development (Moody, 2009), frequently indicated as one of the most critical (Busher et al., 2015) and influential (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Trent, 2013) features of ITE programs. In Scotland and Australia, PSTs must demonstrate achievement of professional standards at graduation. However, there is increasing awareness that standards, which currently focus on pedagogy, give insufficient attention to factors which enhance, or restrict PSTs development (Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2017); for example, belonging, which has been recognised as a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Caires and Almeida (2005) highlight the complex and dynamic nature of learning to teach, largely influenced by the interaction between individuals and contexts. One such interaction between individuals and context, essential in any practicum, is the supervision of PSTs by a mentor teacher and the success of these supportive relationships—keys to PSTs' achievement (Lawson et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014). Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) contend that, while mentor roles are complex and multifaceted, mentors and PSTs concur that support and constructive feedback are crucial to the mentoring experiences. Others (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Izadinia, 2015), also acknowledge the importance of academic and emotional

support, particularly where PSTs' feel welcomed, accepted and included (Maynard, 2000; Yan & He, 2010)), and have a sense of belonging to the school community (Ussher, 2010). Community acceptance and feeling belonged builds confidence and agency (Jones et al., 2014). Some PSTs experience rich practicums, however, varying school contexts (Caires & Almeida, 2005) can leave others discouraged, anxiety-ridden, frustrated and stressed (Mahmoudi & Ozkan, 2016). Some of the literature has reflected further negative impacts such as PSTs being fatigued and vulnerable (Caires et al., 2012); having reduced accomplishment, emotional exhaustion and negative feelings and attitudes towards teaching (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2014). Significantly, Gray et al., (2017) and Johnston (2016), acknowledge non-belonging feelings trigger distressing emotional reactions such as dejection and alienation.

The Research Study

This study focused on PSTs enrolled in the professional graduate route in Scotland with 90 days practicum placement, and a similar undergraduate route in Australia, with 80 days of practicum placement; making these programs comparable in terms of the length of workplace experiences. While differences in strength and intensity of belonging from participants completing a one year, and those completing a four year program in two different cultures might be expected, three relevant comparable criteria were evident in our study – experiences of place, events over time, and common vocabulary of these experiences. According to Cohen et al. (2000), these three interrelated criteria are crucial in exploring lived experiences. The context of the setting, placement length and language used in the setting are comparable (see Table 1), thus contributing to the robustness of findings. Moreover, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest it is difficult for cultural differences to eradicate the need to belong.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Country of ITE and Program Type	Number of Practicum Days Completed	Number of Different Practicum (and Schools)
Daniella	21 years	Female	Australia, undergraduate	80	4 (three)
Rita	38 years	Female	Australia, undergraduate	80	4 (three)
Maria	38 years	Female	Australia, undergraduate	80	4 (three)
Fiona	25 years	Female	Scotland, Postgraduate	90	2 (two)
Donald	29 years	Male	Scotland, Postgraduate	90	2 (two)
Daniel	27 years	Male	Scotland, Postgraduate	90	2 (two)

Table 1: Participant profiles

Method

This study explored lived experiences of belonging/non-belonging during practicum placements for PSTs in Scotland and Australia. We employed a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, committed to in-depth exploration of the complex, dynamic interplay between PSTs (as individuals), and their practicums (as context); to interpret their

lived experiences of belonging (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic Phenomenology was chosen as both methodology and method as it encompasses both reflection and interpretation (Barclay, 2009). Phenomenology comes to be hermeneutical when its method is fundamentally interpretive in nature and principally concerned with elucidating texts based on conversational interviews (Van Manen, 1990, 2014). As the process of reflective engagement progresses, suspending presuppositions regarding the belonging/non-belonging phenomenon assisted in encountering the experiences as they appeared (Finlay, 2014).

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by both universities and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The authors' dual roles as researchers and tutors, and differential power relationships, were clearly demarcated by ensuring students had already completed and been assessed on all course assessment requirements prior to participating in the project. This reduced potential conflict of interest ethical issues relating to whether participation (or not), might impact on PSTs' course outcomes.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive, homogeneous sampling (Smith et al., 2009) – PSTs who were enrolled in a third year practicum course (in Australia), or a similar (in terms of practicum days spent in classrooms), professional graduate route in Scotland were invited to participate. Six primary (elementary) school PST chose to participate in the study, which allowed in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of belonging. Table 1 (above) provides a summary of the participants' profiles.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured conversational interviews lasting between 35 and 65 minutes were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Resonating with phenomenology, which stresses respect for individuals, the interviewers adopted a co-participant approach becoming "naive but curious" listeners (Smith et al., 2009, p. 64). The first question remained close to everyday lived experiences of practicums and allowed PSTs to settle into the interview: "Could you start by telling me about your first day on practicum." Subsequent questions allowed PSTs to describe memorable experiences from their practicums, before progressing to belonging experiences and their perceptions of belonging/non-belonging. Experiences were discussed across all practicums and not differentiated for each individual practicum.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, which is concerned with hermeneutics, interpretation and concreteness rather than hypotheses or generalizations (Wertz, 2005). Data were analysed thematically for each interview transcript using holistic, detailed reading (Van Manen, 1990) of the field texts (transcripts and researchers' notes). Termed the *hermeneutic circle*, this is a dynamic, non-linear style of thinking, moving back and forth, to consider part and whole text interpretations.

The *field* texts were constructed into natural meaning units (Devenish, 2002) by recording appropriate phrases, capturing in singular statements the meaning of tentative interpretive themes. These were then labelled and clustered into main themes. Using the hermeneutic circle, the *field* text was constantly revisited. The themes were assigned succinct phrases to describe the meaning underpinning each. This analysis was conducted for each participant, allowing the possibility of new themes to emerge. The researchers elicited connections across individual cases to achieve the final clustering of themes.

To facilitate confidence in the reliability of the heuristic adopted, each researcher analysed three interview transcripts independently before reconvening to discuss individual analyses. The level of consensus for emergent themes was strong, while also corroborating some previous literature on belonging during practicum placements (Pendergast et al., 2020).

Findings

Data analysis of PSTs' sense of belonging/nonbelonging during practicums revealed four emergent themes: 1. Being welcomed; 2. Settings and procedures; 3. Interpersonal interactions; and, 4. Strategic behaviours. Themes are presented in turn, illustrated with interview excerpts. Using these four themes, Table 2 provides a visual representation of each participant's practicum experience of belonging and non-belonging, in terms of how these themes contributed or inhibited sense of belonging.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Themes and Sub-Themes					
	Being welcomed	Settings & procedures		Interpersonal relationships		Strategic behaviours
		School setting	Classroom setting	The pupils	Teacher colleagues	Positive/Negative impact
Daniella (Aus)						
Rita (Aus)						
Maria (Aus)						
Fiona (Scot)						
Donald(Scot)						
Daniel (Scot)						

▨ contributing　　■ inhibiting　　☐ no comment given

Table 2: Summary of PST comments on factors which contributed to or inhibited their belonging

Being Welcomed

The first theme, being welcomed, related to the initial welcome the PSTs received at their practicum schools. Findings presented under this theme reveal diverse experiences, ranging from positive experiences to negative experiences.

Positive Experiences

The initial welcome and induction all participants received from their host schools were crucial in establishing a positive start to their practicums. Typical early contextual socialisation included: a warm welcome by school leaders; helpful classroom workspace allocations; detailed timetables; an initial orientation to the school community – its layout,

policies and practices. This initial sense of welcome is evident in Daniella's comment: "[Y]ou get your bearings a little bit; you know what goes where and who can play where".

The first day introductions to staff and students were reportedly key in helping PSTs feel included, secure and relaxed. As Daniel explained: "[A]s soon as I walked through the door, he [school leader] … was out to greet me … very polite and welcoming despite preparing for an inspection". Where schools knew the expectations, were prepared for the PSTs, and staff and students accepted and validated them at the beginning, PSTs acknowledged this using positive valence terms such as: "warmth", "connection", "inclusion", "sharing", "access" and "professional friendship".

Negative Experiences

While positive socialisation featured in most welcomes, this was not always the case, as Rita explained: "[T]here was no sense of belonging, no niceness, not even a 'good morning' when I arrived." Maria revealed that "I really would have liked to have heard more about what I'll be going into as a teacher". Daniella shared her experience, revealing she was barely acknowledged as a PST and was told: "[H]ere's a chair, live on that chair!' … it was like a kid's chair just plonked next to her [mentor teacher's] table!"

Others described times when they felt like outsiders, where expectations were unclear or inconsistent and the school provided the sense of obligation to take PSTs; Maria felt *"lower"* than the pupils. Fiona conversed with "an unknown" on her first day, "… then I clocked her badge … 'Headteacher', and I thought, 'Oh no!' But she never introduced herself to me. She never made an effort with me, and so I was like, 'Well I'm not going to make an effort with you then!'"

Settings and Procedures

The second theme – settings and procedures, had two sub-themes: school climate and classroom climate.

School Climate

The practicums were mediated by complex institutional and sociocultural contexts impacting on PSTs' professional learning and belonging. A school's modus operandi, its supportive systems and procedures, alongside effective and timely feedback on teaching, assisted PSTs to feel more relaxed and confident which fostered connections and feelings of teaching team membership. Furthermore, being included in school cultural, professional and social mix boosted PSTs' personal, social and professional development, as Daniella explained: "[T]hey knew I was coming; they're prepared for me; they want me here".

Conversely, problematic school climate conditions hindered connections and development, as Fiona revealed:

> She [mentor] was typing up an email whilst having a conversation with me. So absolutely no eye contact. But the impact it had on me from day one was incredible, and I was really standoffish with that person and I didn't feel like I belonged for weeks.

Participants were quick to make judgments about whether the social dynamic of a school was hospitable to their learning. Typical positive responses described schools as having really supportive environments, embracing good communication, resulting in PSTs

feeling valued, respected, "one of the team" (Daniella), "a kind of togetherness … able to ask teachers anything" (Donald). Moreover, being perceived and introduced as *teachers,* endorsed their status and worth significantly. First day introductions to staff and students were important in helping PSTs become known figures, facilitating quicker integration and collaborative working. Participants also commented on their need for contact with teaching colleagues in being new to a school and feeling insecure and lacking confidence. The staffroom: "[W]here you get that real sense of belonging" (Maria), is often a favoured yardstick to determine school culture. PSTs commented on friendly staffrooms that facilitated networking, which supported them to feel acknowledged and part of the social mix. When they felt valued, accepted and included in the social and professional aspects of school life, PSTs felt they belonged.

Conversely, some school communities were less conducive to enabling belonging, instead being portrayed by participants as having "cliquey" (Maria) staffroom cultures, with teachers unsupportive of each other, thus, limiting interaction and connections. Participants described such environments as toxic, with adversarial staff relationships; teachers "gas-bagging" (Maria) openly; no access to resources or services; feeling invisible; viewed as "free help" (Maria), or used as a supply teacher for absent staff; trying to "break my will" (Rita); and, feeling "gutted" (Rita) when a pupil would not recognise the PST as having teacher competencies. Such undermining as a PST and a person, made it difficult for some to establish themselves in a teaching role and forge any sense of belonging.

Stories of rejection and exclusion added to the challenges of achieving professional belonging. PSTs struggled to build a sense of attachment and belonging to school when they did not feel 'part and parcel' of the context, and when staff contact was denied or reduced. Rita exemplified this: "[W]hen they [mentor] would go to the staffroom for lunch they'd go get their stuff out of the fridge... I wouldn't be invited… I'd just sit in the classroom on my own. Horrendous, I hated every moment". Similarly, Daniella shared an experience of being segregated at a staff meeting with a teacher directing: "[D]on't sit there! You can go down and sit at that table, down the back." Daniella continued, "No one talked to me; I was just up the back by myself. I looked so disconnected."

Classroom Climate

This sub-theme of classroom climate, related to the teaching team, mentor expectations, independence, teaching allocations and feedback procedures; providing further insights, both positive and negative, relating to developing a sense of belonging. Viewed as a team member, Donald was invited to be involved in planning, sharing and teaching his own ideas. He relished the opportunities to expand horizons, team teach and observe colleagues, resulting in successful learning outcomes. The differing mentor expectations and ways of working played a major role in limiting, or enhancing PSTs' classroom practice; some generated feelings of fear, alienation and rejection. Fiona was prohibited from making decisions about her teaching. Likewise, Rita, without prior knowledge of the students, felt uneasy when instructed by her mentor to: "[D]o what you want, do it how you want", and distressed about her teaching allocation, "I was on my own teaching 55 kids maths… every day". Daniella compared her work expectations with her mentor's: "There was just so much stuff that she expected me to do, that I didn't see HER do"

The key role of mentors in providing constructive feedback varied in quality and consistency across the PSTs' experiences. Positive experiences of regular, helpful and empathetic feedback assisted in clarifying expectations and development needs. This also

promoted PST reflective practice and learning, as Fiona acknowledged: "I could see that I was improving".

All PSTs stressed the value of mentors' supportive written and verbal feedback, extending beyond "a bit of a chat" (Rita). One mentor announced proudly: "I have stolen that lesson!", because she felt the PST's lesson was so good. Such instances enhanced PSTs' confidence to experiment and take risks. Furthermore, positive feedback from school leaders confirmed PSTs' status as legitimate staff members. Public affirmations of competency made PSTs feel they belonged. Commenting on effective planning, Daniella proudly explained how her mentor: "[T]old all the other teachers how good [my work] was… "I'll send it out to all of you!".

Interview data also revealed negative effects from excessive, limited, or no feedback. For example, when mentors left the PST alone in class, they felt abandoned. Experiencing this, PSTs undertook unguided self-reflection making some feel there was "no care factor" (Maria). This produced feelings of inadequacy, reduced agency, motivation and ultimately created anxiety; "No one's going to watch me, no one's going to care if it goes badly, …it's just on my head" (Fiona). Such outcomes negatively impacted PSTs' belonging to the profession; as Daniella explained: "It was too stressful… there's no way I could work like that for the rest of my life".

Interpersonal Interactions

The theme of interpersonal interactions had two sub themes: the pupils, and teacher colleagues. PSTs highlighted the criticality of relationships in achieving a sense of belonging, which extended across the school involving multiple interpersonal interactions. Also noteworthy are the reported extremities of feelings of the PSTs, ranging from being happy to being extremely unhappy.

The Pupils

PSTs highlighted the significance of pupils' validation for their sense of belonging. Many anecdotes with evidence of positive emotions were shared around these connections. For instance: pupils recognising PSTs outside of school; forming positive relational bonds, "Really special every time" (Maria); humorous banter, "We'll pay you, we'll pay you to stay on!" (Daniel); warm and caring responses; "They walk past and give you a hi-five" (Donald); and, affirmation of teacher status, "My children treated me exactly like they treated their teacher …made me feel like I was a teacher too and therefore, I belonged" (Fiona).

Pupils' affirmation impacted PSTs' agency and motivation to, "Have good lessons" (Daniella). With positive feedback from pupils, they concentrated on learning to teach by attempting new pedagogies. Data revealed evidence of growing self-efficacy and emerging teacher identities, "That belonging, not just to that school but in the profession… a sense of I belong" (Daniel).

Teacher Colleagues

Being able to form and sustain positive relationships with staff dominated responses. PSTs referred to relationships featuring support, collegiality, care, trust, acceptance, inclusion, respect, empathy, interest, acknowledgement and frequent, open communication free from criticism and confrontation.

There were instances where mentors went the 'extra mile' by assisting with planning beyond the school day, affording them time and "[A]lways [being] there when I needed her" (Fiona). The facets of common humanity – care, friendship, compassion and nurturing, were particularly significant for PST's wellbeing, motivation, self-esteem and confidence. Providing classroom workspace and keeping in contact after the practicum affirmed PSTs' value as teaching colleagues and importantly, as human beings. Supportive and interested school leaders with an open-door policy, further endorsed feelings of belonging, value and acceptance of PSTs as competent staff members. For example, when PSTs were given increased independence and "Dealt with as a teacher" (Donald); valued you as "a professional" (Fiona), signalled trust in PSTs' capabilities, allowing them to feel belonging, which enhanced their learning. Broader staff relationships increased PSTs' support mechanisms, social interaction and inclusion. Sharing professionally and socially featured strongly in the data where mentors willingly shared ideas and classroom materials, community spaces, IT log-ins, and involved PSTs in professional development days and social events. Nurturing mentors also listened to PSTs' ideas and shared responsibility: "[I]t's very much, that didn't work, how do we make it better?" Mentor validation was instrumental in enhancing motivation, wellbeing and professional development: "[I]f you're valued, then you feel like you belong" (Maria).

Strategic Behaviours

Within the theme of strategic behaviours there are two sub-themes: positive impact, and negative impact. Proactivity as a strategic behaviour surfaced in problematic as well as positive contexts.

Positive Impact

Far from being powerless, the participants frequently used agentic strategies to connect with others to gain acceptance. Daniel introduced himself, by visiting his school before commencing practicum and midway through practicum, took time off, "Reflecting how I felt when I belonged, seeing how good that was and how much it benefitted me". Participants described other proactive behaviours, such as arriving early on their first day; volunteering for school events; seeking school-wide help with unfamiliar curricula; and positive proactive interactions with other teachers; working intensely to establish bonds with mentors and seeking early feedback on planning. Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging, Donald, "got stuck in", becoming fully integrated into the school community. He shared his sports expertise, sought team teaching and attempted productive pedagogies, which enabled him to achieve personally and professionally.

Negative Impact

Countering non-belonging, some PSTs employed highly strategic proactive behaviours. These included determination, compliance, affiliation, conformity, alignment and coping strategies, which impacted positively and negatively on their progress and belonging. Some PSTs revealed emotionally distressing descriptions restricting both learning and belonging. Fiona declined a staff social, explaining: "I'd rather spend my Friday night chilling by myself than having to make small talk with you!". Maria lamented, "I wasn't supposed to be left on my own ...you don't want to argue …because they're marking your

reports. So, you just don't say anything." Rita felt "invisible", without a physical space to work, and described her mentor as indifferent towards her, frequently disregarding her responsibilities. These behaviours carried consequences; increasing some PSTs' feelings of destabilisation, marginalisation and disconnection. Opportunities to fully function, to learn from experienced mentors, or access support, were reduced and impacted on PSTs' learning and developing sense of belonging to the school. Sensing one school's forced obligation to host a PST and feeling "unwanted" and socially and professionally marginalised, Maria avoided confrontation to earn trust, stating: "I'll show you [mentor] that I can do an amazing job!". Her learning became self-directed and positive in its intent, yet her sense of non-belonging remained.

Inevitably, feelings of dejection, insecurity and vulnerability reduced PSTs' sense of belonging; two of the participants questioned their chosen career path and as a consequence, ventured tentatively towards thoughts of exiting the profession before their career had really started.

Discussion

Our study affirms the variability in the lived experiences of practicums, and confirms previous findings, which suggest that different cultural settings do not necessarily influence belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In terms of contributing to establishing a sense of belonging, for five of the PSTs, their experiences ranged considerably from positive to negative; comprising both competing and complementary forces towards having a sense of belonging and ultimately, becoming a teacher.

For all participants, and from wider research evidence (Dewhurst, 2013; Johnston, 2010; Ussher, 2010), the initial welcome and induction that PSTs received from their schools were significant factors towards settling in and feeling belonging; this finding is consistent with prior research (e.g., Caires et al., 2012). Conversely, the absence of an initial welcome impacted negatively on PSTs' direction, motivation and ultimately their learning, with emergent feelings of isolation and vulnerability; findings that are consistent with research by Yan and He (2010).

Navigating practicums is demanding and challenging; teacher status is temporary, hence the need to quickly become validated as a member of the school's teacher community. When PSTs established initial connections they felt more comfortable and emotionally stable, thus better positioned in their induction to becoming a member of school community. This is consistent with Maynard (2000), who argued that this validation extends beyond their role as a PST, towards the need to be accepted as a person, and ultimately as a teacher.

As we have shown in this study, a positive school culture placed PSTs in a strong position to get on with the business of learning to become a teacher, without having the distraction of feeling displaced, not welcome and not belonging. Positive school culture helped emotionally ground PSTs to develop a sense of agency and confidence; this concurs with findings in relation to PST empowerment (Jones et al., 2014). Caires and Almeida (2005) also note the complexity of learning to teach, its dynamic, interactive and idiosyncratic nature, where individuals and contexts are reciprocally and mutually constituted – this is echoed in our findings. The atmosphere and culture in a school context is widely perceived to be one contributing factor for positive practicums (Moody, 2009), and the fulfilment of a belonging occurs through personal involvement with this environment (Ussher, 2010) in terms of relatedness.

Relatedness depends on supportive environmental conditions (Evelein et al., 2008; Beck & Kosnik, 2002), where the development of personal networks afforded by the latter,

enables affective and cognitive support (Fox & Wilson, 2015). Furthermore, many researchers (e.g., Johnston, 2016; Lawson et al., 2015), highlight the important and complex role of the professional, cultural and social norms, which are at the heart of school contexts. These directly influence early professional learning, acculturation and dual membership to school and to the profession. The findings from our study suggests that where PSTs encountered difficult settings and relational struggles, these made it hard for them to develop a strong sense of belonging and affirm their roles as a teacher during practicum, ultimately negatively impacting their sense of belonging to the profession.

This study supports the requirement that PSTs need commitment from the whole school, along with the professional and pastoral support of all teachers on their practicums; this finding concurs with Johnston (2010). In terms of spatiality, PSTs need to have a sense of belonging to the place, not only the physical space of the school, but feeling that they have a place in the classroom; a desk and a workspace. As Huot et al. (2014) contend, PSTs inhabit the spaces of 'in-betweenness', but it is this in-betweenness which our study shows has the capacity to create a scaffold to feelings of belongingness. As Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) explain, space-making is part of the affective elements of belonging. Through these avenues PSTs can be supported in establishing a sense of belonging during their practicum, thus positioning themselves confidently to learn, network, use the wisdom of the workplace and form effective, reciprocal relationships for mutual benefit (Ussher, 2010).

The current study, and others internationally (e.g., Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Hobson et al., 2009; Lawson et al., 2015), emphasise the importance of supportive PST and mentor relationships as being essential to learning to teach. As a major component of practicums, the classroom setting is also important in developing belonging, where personal, social and professional acceptance is fundamental to learning, also recognised by Maynard et al. (2014). In the present study and echoing other findings, PSTs expressed the need for a range of support from mentors (Busher et al., 2015), such as being good role models, having consistent expectations, working collaboratively, providing emotional scaffolding, holding realistic teaching expectations, enabling increasing independence, and joint decision making. Evidence from our study, and elsewhere (e.g., Maynard et al., 2014), highlight that an essential aspect of strong mentoring is receiving effective, supportive and timely feedback on lessons taught. Our study also recognised that supportive mentoring relationships contributed to participants feeling a sense of belonging, similarly to Caires et al. (2012) and increased self-efficacy and retention; consistent with the work of Hobson et al. (2009). Findings of inadequate and less positive experiences of support negatively affected PSTs' sense of belonging; concurring with the work of Johnson et al. (2010).

Echoing other researchers (Beck & Kosnick, 2002), our study confirms that pedagogical and professional needs are underpinned by a social dimension, situated in supportive and respectful relationships with mentors. Indeed, the nature of relationships is a pervasive theme in our study. Relationship quality directly connects to the quality of the learning (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010); where quality relationships provide positive outcomes for PSTs' development (Caires et al, 2012; Izadinia, 2015; Ussher, 2010), and a sense of belonging (Laker et al., 2008; Maynard et al., 2014; Wenger, 1998). Conversely, negative relationships deleteriously affect belongingness.

Lave and Wenger (1991) support the view that through initial peripheral participation, PSTs learn from and work together with experienced mentors, towards shared goals through mutual engagement in developing practices towards increasing expertise, more central participating and belongingness. In this study, relationships were not always harmonious, some of the PSTs felt positioned on the fringe by their mentors' seeming failure to accept them as legitimate. The PSTs then became preoccupied in affective rather than cognitive concerns. In order to create a sense of belonging, PSTs sought connectedness and acceptance

for example, through collaboration with the mentors, which is a finding consistent with Ferrier-Kerr (2009) and Somers (1999) definition of belongingness. While this highlights the importance of relational bonds for creating a sense of belonging, it also underscores how non-belonging may impact on learning to teach.

Failure towards legitimisation of PSTs impacted feelings of belonging. This finding echoes Johnston's (2016) work, which acknowledges that while legitimate peripheral participation is temporary and can be empowering, it may also involve disagreements and competition. Johnston challenges the trajectory of legitimate participation from peripheral to full participation because of the temporary status of PSTs, but *also* the failure of mentors to validate PST participation. For most participants in our study, the drive to form and maintain significant interpersonal relationships with mentors generated feelings of deep frustration, anxiety, powerlessness, uncertainty and rejection.

Where participants in some cases felt that they were denied group belonging, it negatively impacted cognition, behaviour and wellbeing, also acknowledged in the findings of Baumeister and Leary (1995). Our findings are consistent with other research (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2002), where social exclusion was found to impair complex cognitive processing and learning. This vulnerability and stress was debilitating, impacting on PSTs' ability to effectively engage and grow professionally (Gray et al., 2017; Mahmoudi & Ozkan, 2016). Our findings suggest that PSTs' engagement in their practicum is dependent on their need to be included, recognised and appreciated as having potential to make positive contributions to the school community. For those participants, feeling rejected and their sense of belonging under threat, this initiated increased proactive behaviours in an attempt to regain acceptance and belonging. Indeed, one participant, Maria, feeling unwanted and non-belonging, rose to the challenge and became determined to show that she could adapt to the pressures and requirements of the practicum. This speaks to the PSTs' resilience and capacity to cope with adverse learning environments. This is consistent with Graham and Roberts (2007), who suggest that PSTs need to be in-tune with the school environment. However, other participants who felt rejected, withdrew from relationship-building opportunities (e.g., Fiona consciously deciding not to attend a staff social function), which caused further rejection and increased difficulty in learning. Changes in participants' belonging status linked to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, predicated emotional reactions with negative effect (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009) and vulnerability (Gray et al., 2017). Conversely, PSTs who felt that they belonged became more proactive in getting the most learning out of the practicum.

Study Limitations

The intentional choice of a purposive sample of PSTs to participate in this study excluded groups that would merit exploration (e.g., secondary PSTs, and newly qualified teachers). Furthermore, there are various accredited routes into teaching and practicum models not featured here. There would be value in future work that considers these and extending further research to include other countries and a larger-scale study. Further insight may also be provided by using other methodologies for considering belonging.

Implications and Conclusions

Our findings are not particular to individual PSTs, or indeed to Scotland or Australia, and echo OECD (Schleicher, 2011) findings of problematic working environments for

teachers, limiting effective education and teacher wellbeing; important in the context of high attrition rates and increased challenges associated with attracting and retaining PSTs in ITE.

In their literature review of the mentoring relationship, Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010), highlight that mentoring is a mutual, interdependent relationship where the mentoring process impacts on both mentors and mentees. For positive impact, both mentors and mentees need to understand their respective roles and how to interact. Because PSTs' belongingness centres around three support dimensions: personal, professional and social, there is a need for much fuller collaboration and shared responsibilities between mentor and mentee. In order for these support dimensions to be effectively realised, the mentoring relationship needs to be based on principles of mutual respect, alongside unity of purpose. First, we suggest that ITE programs include explicit guidance to empower PSTs to enhance their capacity for proactively developing relationships during practicum. Cultivating positive PST dispositions can enhance their potential for success (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2014).

Second, practicums where mentors model classroom teaching and give feedback, require attention and new thinking. Schools should be alerted to the ways in which PSTs should be informed, welcomed and initiated into contextual values and practices. In order to operate in a more practice sensitive way, practicums could be developed and implemented collaboratively between universities and schools. In this way, being endorsed as an expert mentor may add to individual teacher expertise, and to the development of a group of teachers whom universities can draw on as expert mentors for supporting the development of aspiring teachers; thus making the mentoring role desirable and sought-after in the teaching profession. This is important in terms of ongoing professional learning for mentors in sharing their experience while nurturing future teachers. A key focus would be to develop strong relationships between mentor and PST to foster and develop a strong sense of belonging.

Third, PSTs must be more agentic and self-regulated towards the nuances and complexities of school settings; their personal agency can influence their own placement experiences. ITE programs should emphasise the need for PSTs to be proactive in developing support mechanisms and relationships, in carving out a degree of control and building their own sense of belonging. This is particularly important when PSTs are placed in schools that may become problematic work environments, and for practicums where mentor and PST relationships do not become well established. It is important that PSTs understand that they are an 'outsider', entering an already established community. Even though they are a legitimate peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991), PSTs need to be forearmed with prosocial skills and knowledge to proactively support themselves in developing a sense of belonging.

References

Ambrosetti, A., & Dekkers, J. (2010). The interconnectedness of the roles of mentors and mentees in preservice teacher education mentoring relationships. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *35*(6), 42-55. http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n6.3

Barclay, A. (2009). *On becoming educators of the cross: A faithful Christian response to pupil disaffection.* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Aberdeen.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497-529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

Baumeister, R. F., Twenge, J., & Nuss, C. (2002). Effects of social exclusion on cognitive processes: Anticipated aloneness reduces intelligent thought. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*(4), 817-827. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.4.817

Beck, C., & Kosnik, C. (2002). Components of a good practicum placement: Student teacher perceptions. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *29*(2), 81–98. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23478294

Busher, H., Gündüz, M., Cakmak, M., & Lawson, T. (2015). Student teachers' views of practicums (teacher training placements) in Turkish and English contexts: A comparative study. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 45*(3), 445–466. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2014.930659

Caires, S., Almeida, L., & Vieira, D. (2012). Becoming a teacher: Student teachers' experiences and perceptions about teaching practice. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 35*(2), 163-178. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2011.643395

Caires, S., & Almeida, L. S. (2005). Teaching practice in initial teacher education: Its impact on student teachers' professional skills and development. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy, 31*(2), 110-120. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470500127236

Cohen, M. Z., Kahn, D. L., & Steeves, R. H. (2000). *Hermeneutic phenomenological research: A practical guide for nurse researchers*. Sage Publications. https://.doi.org/10.4135/9781452232768

Department for Education. (2018). *Initial teacher training (ITT) census for the academic year 2018 to 2019, England*. Department for Education. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/initial-teacher-training-trainee-number-census-2018-to-2019

Devenish, S. (2002). An applied method for undertaking phenomenological explication of interview transcripts. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, 2*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2002.11433873

Dewhurst, Y. (2013). *Student teachers' articulation of belonging during school placement experiences: An hermeneutic phenomenological study*. (Unpublished Masters thesis). University of Aberdeen.

Evelein, F., Korthagen, F., & Brekelmans, M. (2008). Fulfilment of the basic psychological needs of student teachers during their first teaching experiences. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 24*(5), 1137–1148. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.09.001

Ferrier-Kerr, J. (2009). Establishing professional relationships in practicum settings. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*(6), 790-797. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.01.001

Finlay, L. (2014). Engaging phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11*(2), 121-141. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.807899

Fox, A. R. C., & Wilson, E. G. (2015). Networking and the development of professionals: Beginning teachers building social capital. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 47*, 93-107. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.12.004

Graham, S., & J. Roberts. (2007). Student-teachers' perspectives on positive and negative social processes in school. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 13*(4), 399-410. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600701391952

Gray, C., Wright, P., & Pascoe, R. (2017). There's a lot to learn about being a drama teacher: Pre-service drama teachers' experience of stress and vulnerability during an extended practicum. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *67*, 270–277. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.015

Hobson, A. J., Malderez, A., Tracey, L., Giannakaki, M. S., Pell, R. G., Kerr, K., Chambers, G. N., Tomlinson, P. D. & Roper, T. (2009). *Becoming a teacher: Student teachers' experiences of initial teacher training in England*. University of Nottingham. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8366/1/RR744.pdf

Huot, S., Dodson, B., & Rudman, D. L. (2014). Negotiating belonging following migration: Exploring the relationship between place and identity in Francophone minority communities. *The Canadian Geographer, 58*(3), 329–340. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12067

Izadinia, M. (2015). A closer look at the role of mentor teachers in shaping preservice teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 52*,1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.08.003

Johnson, B., Down, B., Le Cornu, R., Peters, J., Sullivan, A. M., Pearce, J., & Hunter, J. (2010). *A framework for supporting early career teacher resilience*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education International Education Research Conference, Melbourne.

Johnston, D. H. (2010). 'Losing the joy': Student teachers' experiences of problematic relations with host teachers on school placement. *Teacher Development, 14*(3), 307-320. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2010.504012

Johnston, D. H. (2016). 'Sitting alone in the staffroom contemplating my future': Communities of practice, legitimate peripheral participation and student teachers' experiences of problematic school placements as guests. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 46*(4), 533-551. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1069793

Jones, C. K., Kelsey, K. D., & Brown, N. R. (2014). Climbing the steps toward a successful cooperating teacher/student teacher mentoring relationship. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 55*(2), 33-47. https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.02033

Kokkinos, C. M., & Stavropoulos, G. (2014). Burning out during the practicum: The case of teacher trainees. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, *36*(3), 548-568. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2014.955461

Lähdesmäki, T., Saresma, T., Hiltunen, K., Jäntti, S., Sääskilahti, N., Vallius, A., & Ahvenjärvi, K. (2016). Fluidity and flexibility of "belonging": Uses of the concept in contemporary research. *Acta Sociologica, 59*(3), 233-247. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699316633099

Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method*. Pearson Education Limited.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Lawson, T., Çakmak, M., Gündüz, M., & Busher. H. (2015). Research on teaching practicum - a systematic review. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(3), 392-407. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2014.994060

Mahmoudi, F. & Ozkan, Y. (2016). Practicum stress and coping strategies of pre-service English language teachers. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *232*, 494 – 501.   https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.067

Maynard, C., La Paro, K. M., & Johnson, A.V. (2014). Before student teaching: How undergraduate students in early childhood teacher preparation programs describe their early classroom-based experience. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 35*(3), 244-261. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2014.936070

Maynard, T. (2000). Learning to teach or learning to manage mentors? Experiences of school-based teacher education. *Mentoring and Tutoring, 8*(1), 17-30. https://doi.org/10.1080/713685510

Moody, J. (2009). Key elements in a positive practicum: Insights from Australian post-primary pre-service teachers. *Irish Educational Studies, 28*(2), 155-175. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323310902884219

Pendergast, D., Ronksley-Pavia, M., & Dewhurst, Y. (2020). A systematic quantitative literature review of pre-service teachers' sense of belonging during school-based experience. *International Journal of Home Economics, 13*(2), 59-79.

Riley, T., & White, V. (2016). Developing a sense of belonging through engagement with like-minded peers: A matter of equity. *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies, 51*(2), 211-225. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-016-0065-9

Schleicher, A. (2011). *Building a high-quality teaching profession: Lessons from around the world.* OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264113046-en

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretive phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880903340091

Somers, M. (1999). *Development and preliminary validation of a measure of belongingness*. Temple University.

Stillman, T. F., & Baumeister R. F. (2009). Uncertainty, belongingness and four needs for meaning. *Psychological Inquiry, 20*(4), 249-251. https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400903333544

Sugrue, C., & Solbrekke, T. D. (2017). Policy rhetorics and resource neutral reforms in higher education: Their impact and implications? *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(1), 130–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1036848

Trent, J. (2013). From learner to teacher: Practice, language, and identity in a teaching practicum. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, *41*(4), 426–440. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2013.838621

Timoštšuk, I., & Ugaste, A. (2010). Student teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(8), 1563-1570. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.06.008

Ussher, B. (2010). Involving a village: Student teachers' sense of belonging in their school-based placement. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(2), 103-116. https://doi.org/10.1080/13598661003677614

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Althouse Press.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice. Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932

Wertz, F. (2005). Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 167-177. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.167

Yan, C., & He, C. (2010). Transforming the existing model of teaching practicum: A study of Chinese EFL student teachers' perceptions. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 36*(1), 57-73. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470903462065