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On the Cultivation of Their Community of Practice: A Case Study of EFL Malaysian Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

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Keywords

Pre-Service Teachers, Community of Practice, Simulated Teaching, Practicum, Social Context, Case Study

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On the Cultivation of Their Community of Practice: A Case Study of EFL Malaysian Pre-Service Teachers

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This study examined the experiences of five EFL student teachers/pre-service teachers (PSTs) who participated in a Community of Practice (CoP) during their simulated teaching course and the practicum stage or teaching practice (TP), at The University of Malaya, a public Malaysian university. The experiences and tensions they encountered through this stage were discussed in the light of cultivating their CoP over five stages. Joining the CoP, increasing participation and negotiation of one's tacit knowledge and assumptions were found to be productive at their learning to teach stage. However, some tensions, such as English proficiency level, self-confidence and agency, power relationships and worries of assessment persisted until the end of their practice. The results highlighted the significance of collaboration, reflection and social interactions with other CoP members as key to PSTs' learning. Keywords: Pre-Service Teachers, Community of Practice, Simulated Teaching, Practicum, Social Context, Case Study

Introduction

Teacher education program is a university undergraduate degree that students enroll in to learn to become teachers. It mainly focuses on the theoretical basis of a specialization, teaching English for example, and finally, ends with a practical component where students practice teaching. This practice takes place at university first and further, extends to one of the public schools in the nearby areas of the university. Meanwhile, these university students who are preparing to become teachers are either called student teachers or pre-service teachers (PSTs). Around the end of their university study, these PSTs tend to approach schools in an attempt to teach under the supervision and guidance of experienced teachers (Fengqin, 2012). Henceforth, a set of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, content pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge are presented for student teachers as theories (i.e., abstract/theoretical knowledge) to apply later in real teaching contexts (Dowling, 2009). The practice stage, though represents a genuine knowledge application opportunity, is not tension-free (Gerardo & Contreras, 2000). The dilemma, here, is how PSTs can transform their abstract theoretical knowledge (i.e., facts) into an experiential/practical one. Additionally, observing their school teachers, their lecturers, their mentors and their peers, PSTs informally gain tacit knowledge. That tacit knowledge (i.e., the ideas, the skills and the experiences that the individual knows but does not know how to explain) (Sternberg, 1999) needs also to become explicit. Thereby, realizing the gravity of explicitness among PSTs may help in understanding the earned educational practices, assumptions, and beliefs.

Scholars, further, comment on traditional teacher education programs that consider learning as an individual process in acquiring knowledge and then accumulating it within one's cognitive layers (Floding & Swier, 2012; Gerardo & Contreras, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Exposing one's knowledge to discussion and negotiation among diverse interest groups could reveal their assumptions and generate profound understanding of perspectives (Dowling, 2009; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). This consequently, could reflect in an overall improved potential performance. Hence, creating an impression and opportunity, designed by

a constraint and tension free class work could reflect in potential PSTs professional growth. Teachers do not have to isolate themselves in their classes. More interaction with their sociocultural context could be more productive.

Supplementary empirical research is needed to explore the complex nature of learning to teach (LT) within a Community of Practice (CoP) of PSTs. To gain a better understanding of the professional growth of PSTs, it is crucial to follow the developmental line of their thinking and practices and to examine their experiences (Jiang, 2013). Nevertheless, very little research has been conducted on how EFL PSTs' engagement in a CoP has an impact on their thinking and practice. The stories of those PSTs help illustrate the process of LT and also, capture the intricacies, conflicts and challenges thereof.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory proposes a more engaging model for interns on their practicum sites. Learners do not work individually to receive knowledge and accumulate it in their cognitive structures. Rather, individuals are actively engaged in their social context. Learners acquire "the legitimacy of participation" as part of their belonging to a learning community. Their positions alter according to their knowledge and experience, moving inward from the peripheral position to the center of their CoP. The presence of a facilitator such as a university supervisor or a cooperating teacher could help foster learning opportunities in the CoP. However, an informal situation is also likely to result in improved learning. For example, when PSTs observe fellow colleagues, reflect on their practices and imitate them, they can maneuver their learning too (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

According to Lave and Wenger's (1991) social perspectives, learning is not an accumulation of knowledge; rather it is a construction of knowledge. This knowledge has new characteristics that require student teachers to collaborate with the others to learn. Their participation in the CoP can change the traditional way of how they used to learn. This kind of learning, resulting from getting involved in the surrounding social context, could transform who they are (namely, from university students to school teachers). They come to their practice with a sort of a professional identity that they built through the long years of experience as students. Over years, they have built numerous assumptions, beliefs and values both in teaching as well as about students, under the effect of "apprenticeship of observation" (Chong, Ling, & Chuan, 2011, pp. 30-31; Friesen & Besley, 2013, p. 23). Negotiating what they bring to their CoP can enable learning (Smith, 2006) and transformation. To be able to teach they need to tailor all knowledge types to reconstruct a student-friendly practical knowledge. Because of the above perspectives, the current study aims to explore the opportunities and the challenges that 5 EFL Malaysian PSTs faced to develop professionally through the various stages of the CoP cultivation. To guide the interview and observation data collection and the data analysis thereafter, we revert to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) model of cultivating communities of practice. The following discussion represents the five stages of cultivating a community of practice and the challenges of each stage.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the stages of cultivating a CoP as its theoretical framework. A CoP consists of a group of people who have the same passion, interest, or problems. Those people meet regularly for discussions and sharing of information and insights (Wenger et al., 2002). The values they gain through participating in their CoP range from exploring ideas to creating resources, tools and stories that can develop their skills and abilities. While they are interacting to solve their problems and develop their tacit knowledge, they also gain broad mutual understanding of each other's perspectives. This could enhance their sense of belongingness and identity. Under such circumstances, they feel that they own their learning; they are empowered through their relationships and interactions to construct their knowledge (Wenger

et al., 2002). The knowledge generated through CoPs is neither a “thing” nor a “static unit” that is transmitted from experts to novice (Dowling, 2009). According to Wenger et al. (2002), “knowledge lives in the Human act of knowing”; it “is tacit as well as explicit”; it “is social as well as individual”; and it “is dynamic” (pp. 8-11).

Cultivating a CoP goes through five stages: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation. Similar to an individual development, a Cop faces challenges and opportunities while moving on towards its maturation and transformation. Tensions could result from having two opposing tendencies that require the individuals to make their choices to find their ways constructing knowledge. Variations apply even with the existence of a developmental model. The model has three constituent elements, namely: domain, community, and practice. Domain refers to the common ground issues that the members are interested in. A Well-defined domain could induce collaboration and participation from members. The community refers to “the social fabric of learning” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28) that is based on trust and mutual understanding. Interactions and relationships within this community can encourage sharing ideas, solving problems and constructing new relevant knowledge. Practice refers to what the community produces as a result to interactions and sharedness of knowledge. Practice is “a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language and documents that community members share” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 29). When these three fundamental elements function well together, they can result in an appropriate environment for constructing meaningful knowledge. Through the life of a CoP, those elements will experience some shifts and changes to suit each stage of a CoP development.

The following figure shows the five stages that represent the evolution of a CoP. It shows the developmental tensions connected with each stage. In the following part, we will discuss the different stages, their main features, the opportunities they represent to the learners and, more specifically, the tensions they provoke.

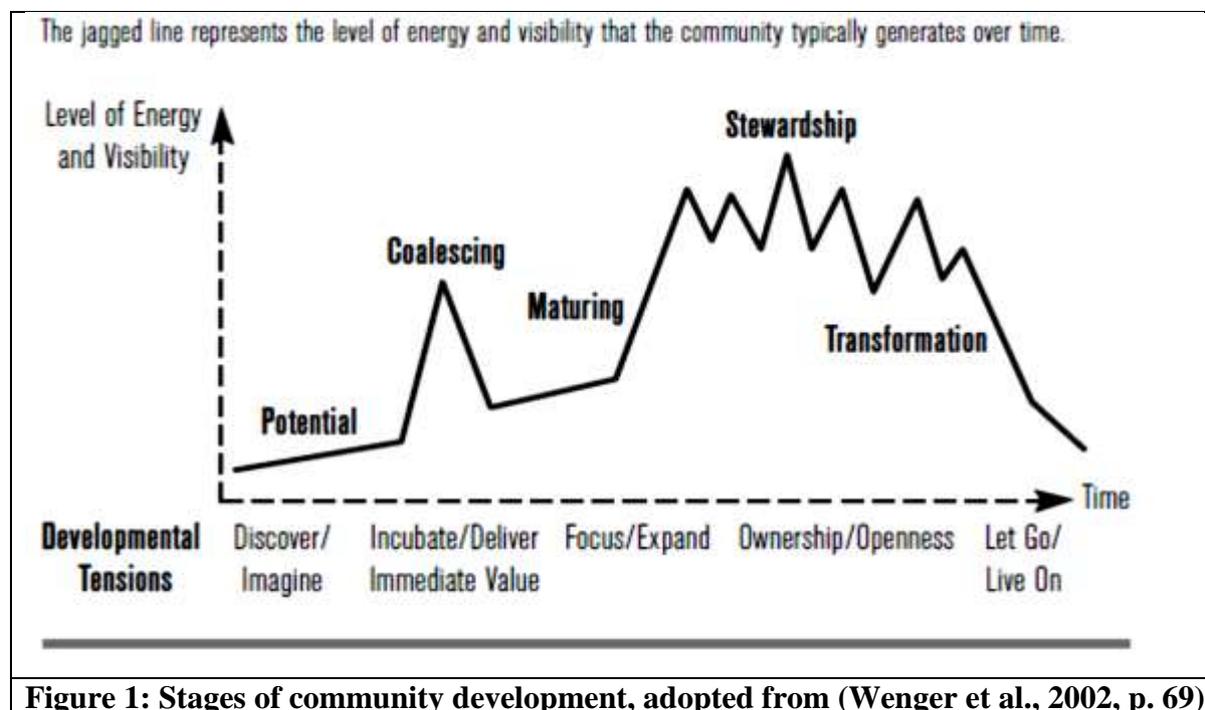


Figure 1: Stages of community development, adopted from (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 69)

A. The Starting Stages of Cultivating a CoP

Stage One: Potential

The shared domain or interest pulls people into a network forming their potential community. The practice dimension enables members to identify their knowledge needs. For PSTs, their domain is LT. Their common needs within their CoP are learning how to teach, what to teach, how to manage their classes and their time effectively and how to interact with the others. Likewise, knowing how to tailor their lessons to cater to their students' needs is among their knowledge needs. Thereafter, the community could rectify the discovery and imagination of the procedure of problem solving and knowledge sharing. The challenge at this initial stage is that PSTs discover how their CoP has the ability to support them and to imagine how this could enable them to evolve as teachers. Such an understanding could provoke formal and informal interactions between them.

Stage Two: Coalescing

At this stage, the challenge is that the participants develop a sense of trust among themselves. This trust emerges from understanding the dilemmas and ways of thinking and problem-solving skills each member has. It helps them see the gaps in their own approaches; hence, seek consultancy from other members. They start to discover what knowledge (e.g., teaching techniques or class management) is important to share. Such trust and reciprocity will help members appreciate the value of sharing knowledge within their CoP.

B. The Mature Stages of Development

Stage Three: Maturing

The CoP experiences a shift from identifying its value to clarifying its role and boundaries. The challenge, which arises while their CoP is expanding, is to keep its main goals and practice focused on its initial intent. At this stage, its membership expands to include more people. The practice surpasses the issue of sharing ideas and insights. Rather, it focuses on organizing the CoP's knowledge. Now, the CoP has its own identity and its members can identify themselves in relation with it. The members appreciate each other's contributions and perspectives resulting in stronger relationships. Their intimacy, in turn, enhances interactions among them. The CoP needs to be supported at this stage to survive. It becomes more dynamic with continuous gathering and consultation. Materials, information, and stories need to be accessible to practitioners.

Stage Four: Stewardship

A number of challenges tend to persist at this stage. The CoP needs support to stay alive. The members need to find a voice and have impact on their context. The theme of efficacy (Jamil, Downer, & Pianta, 2012) is key at this stage. Members need to stay engaged and focused on their learning. Their practice enhances their knowledge and makes it explicit to them and to the others. Experiential or practical knowledge is more appreciated (Dowling, 2009). What they learn via their socializing with the others in their CoP can help them overcome the tensions at this stage.

Two concepts could conflict at this stage: ownership and openness. The members develop their own practices and approaches to solve any occurring problems. They have their

own identity with a strong sense of ownership of their knowledge/learning. They have more confidence and pride in what they achieved within their CoP. They believe in their voice to make changes where they work. However, tensions could arise if they are faced with new ideas or different approaches and insights from other new members. The role of the CoP coordinators or facilitators is important at this point to help members' exposure to new ideas and to seek new perspectives from the others. Negotiating their assumptions with the new perspectives can lead them develop their own understanding.

PSTs, through their CoP, could be empowered and given the voice in what they learn and how to learn it. Provoking more discussions, exchanges, and negotiations of knowledge among the members can inject life in the CoP. Supervisors and cooperating teachers, as CoP facilitators, could create activities and sessions for PSTs to tell their stories and reflect on their training in real classes.

Stage Five: Transformation

A CoP ends naturally due to changes in the circumstances of its cultivation. One of the reasons is the departure of its members from the work site. Otherwise, the issues that attracted the members get resolved and they no longer participate in the CoP's practices. Closing their community, the members may regret missing opportunities they should have taken. They may feel they could have contributed more to their CoP or that they should have developed their relationships with the others more deeply. The challenge is whether to let the CoP die or to try to rejuvenate it. Coming up with changes and developments can foster members' participation and sustain the "practice-based value" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 110) of the CoP. However, the point here is that being aware that the CoP will eventually come to its end should urge its members to get the maximum benefits from it. What is more important is to contemplate over the lessons and the stories that they shared with one another for their future development. Thus, the CoP cultivation model framework can lay the basis to explore the challenges and the opportunities that our participants as PSTs tackled in their journey to learn to teach. We used this model to refine our research questions, guide our data collection (interview and observation) and analysis, thereafter.

Study Context

The study was conducted in the Malaysian context. The educational reforms that Malaysia has led since independence have focused a lot on the professional growth of teachers as the key subject and object of change. The Ministry of Education adopted a philosophy that aims at preparing highly qualified teachers through teacher preparation programs. Those teachers have to be able to tackle the tensions and challenges that may result from the educational reforms within a multicultural context (Jamil, Abd, Razak, Raju, & Mohamed, 2011). Being a part of a continuum in the educational system (Olsen, 2008), the Ministry of Education has the challenge to make sure that all its graduates are quality teachers with high standards of education, skills and values regarding teaching profession. Hence, it set a number of standards for its universities and training colleges to hire excellent students to be trained as teachers.

The challenging sociocultural environment of Malaysia calls for preparing PSTs to be able to get engaged in their sociocultural context and benefit from negotiating their knowledge with the others. CoPs may secure those PSTs the learning conducive conditions that they need. Despite its ambitious policies, PSTs preparation challenges and tensions are not well-identified or addressed in the Ministry strategic plan (Ministry of Education of Malaysia, 2012); thereby threatening producing effective teachers/changers. This argument is supported by a study conducted by Khalid (2014) to examine the contextual factors that affected PSTs' identity

formation within three schools. She concluded that automatic affiliation to a CoP is not enough to become an effective teacher. She recommended that training new teachers to be a shared project among universities and schools is crucial to realize its intended goals. Goh and Matthews (2011), also, focused in their study on the teaching practice period to investigate the concerns of 14 PSTs. Those concerns included student and classroom management, personal and institutional adjustment, teaching and student learning. They invited stakeholders to incorporate these findings in their policies to upgrade PSTs teaching skills. More exploration of teacher preparation issues, such as the tensions and challenges encountered within a CoP, could enlighten policy makers and PSTs in the Malaysian context.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study is an exploratory one and aims to understand the developmental stages of a group of PSTs while cultivating their CoP. It attempts to describe the different tensions that PSTs face while learning to teach within their simulated teaching practice and field practice. It focuses on the role of socialization within a CoP to help PSTs overcome the challenges of the practice stage. Giving the PSTs the voice to tell their stories can help educators and other stakeholders understand how those PSTs learn and what struggles they encounter in the absence of appropriate professional support (Gerardo & Contreras, 2000). The current study adds up to the current literature on teacher education by demonstrating how EFL PSTs juggle with tensions and challenges faced while cultivating their CoP. Despite the plethora of literature concerning the professional growth and identity construction of PSTs in developed countries such as the USA, the UK and Australia, such studies are rare in EFL contexts (Izadinia, 2013). The purpose of the current research is to produce local knowledge in one of the EFL developing contexts to understand the challenges that EFL PSTs encounter during their journey. The knowledge gained through this study could constitute foundation for future EFL PSTs research, and for changes in procedures and educational opportunities.

This study is a part of a larger whole PhD thesis that attempts to understand how PSTs construct their professional identity within their simulated teaching class and field practice. The study generally relies on the social and psychological notions to grasp the role of context and individual in guiding the PSTs' LT.

Researcher Position

I (henceforth, refers to the first author: Tagreed El-Masry) have been engaged in English language teaching (ELT) for over 18 years. In 2007, I conducted a master study that aimed to explore the EFL PST, university supervisor and cooperating teacher relationship. I moved on to work as a teacher educator for PSTs. I observed them struggling to survive the training period, though many of them had high academic achievements and tried to build up their confidence and teaching abilities. Their academic achievement was not to facilitate their becoming journey. Being in that position inspired me to learn more about how PSTs learn how to teach. I needed to understand the role of social context in supporting or hindering their learning process. Reflecting on my personal experience as a PST and reading in literature about many other PSTs around the world who juggle with many difficulties to survive their becoming journey encouraged me to start this study as part of my PhD thesis. My experience, as a PST, EFL teacher and teacher educator, and my interest in the study are two aspects of my position that will affect my decisions and choices throughout this study. Being aware of my presumptions will keep me open-minded and sensitive towards my participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009). The findings of this study can help improve my teaching strategies as an educator. They can also contribute in making systematic educational changes to create more

opportunities and space for those PSTs in EFL contexts to get engaged within their CoPs and reflect on their understandings and practice.

The co-author, being my PhD supervisor and my participants' university supervisor was excluded from the data collection and initial data analysis process for ethical purposes. Henceforth, "I" and "my" refers to first author while "we" refers to both of the authors. After our participants' graduation, the co-author had the chance to revise the data transcription and analysis.

Research Questions

Two key research questions are said to guide the demonstration of PSTs' CoP experience in this study, namely:

1. How do PSTs understand their experience within their CoP?
2. What challenges and opportunities are encountered by PSTs while learning to teach?

Research Strategy

Capturing the complexities of cultivating a CoP from the PSTs' point of view needs to give them the voice to vent out their ideas and perceptions. A case study is a proper methodological strategy to capture such complexities. A case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2008, p. 18). Driven by the principle that "researchers do not find knowledge, they construct it" (Merriam, 2009), we need to fully engage ourselves in the phenomenon context. One can better comprehend the variant tensions sustained by PSTs within their CoP. The meanings they socially construct and interpretations of self-encountered experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) will be the basis for our constructions and understanding. My participation within their CoP could help them feel comfortable to disclose their concerns and achievements within this period.

Settings of the Study

The study was conducted on two settings. The first setting was the simulated teaching class at the University of Malaya. In addition to having an easy access within our university, it is considered one of the reputable educational institutions. These reasons contribute to the eminence of the research setting choice. Its EFL teacher preparation program is organized to prepare effective future EFL teachers. According to the Education Faculty website, the program aims to prepare the students academically and professionally to teach English at secondary schools. The program includes 8 semesters with 133 credit hours that encompass English language skills, English literature and the professional components of education and classroom practices.

Following the subject content classes and the methodology classes, during the third semester (end of June, July, and August) PSTs attend one week at a school they choose as a part of their School Orientation Program. They observe the classes and give feedback. Later, they go through their simulated teaching class during the second semester of the third year. The Simulated teaching course is devoted to practicing teaching English in a room equipped with technology at university. This is followed by the actual practice (practicum) period. They start their training within the safe environment of their university and with their classmates.

Meanwhile, PSTs are encouraged to employ the different teaching methods and techniques they learnt in the theory classes. Each PST is given the chance to teach, at least twice, and go through a reflection session with their classmates after that. The feedback received from their supervisor and classmates help them amend their teaching strategies in a more student-centered approach.

Following the simulated teaching class, the actual practice period (practicum or field practice) at real schools start on the third semester. Hence, the second setting of this study is at secondary public school level, lying within urban areas surrounding the university. At this site, the PSTs practice in actual classes with real students away from their university. Each class is made of 32 students of the three main Malaysian ethnic groups (i.e., Malay, Chinese, and Indian), in addition to other minorities. Each PST is required to teach at least 12 periods a week. Through this period, they keep a practice record that includes their teaching documents, reflections, and comments on their practice. The Guidelines for Teaching Practice booklet at university states that PSTs get support from their supervisors, school mentors, principals, and peers. The relationships within such a sociocultural context could determine the PSTs' professional development perplexity and acceleration. The booklet presumes that joining a CoP will secure the PSTs a supportive environment academically and socially. The practice stage represents a good opportunity for them to link theory to practice and build up their teaching skills.

Participants

Given the research goal of in-depth understanding of the opportunities and the difficulties that participants experienced through the cultivation of their CoP, a case study design was one of the most appropriate methods (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Being part of a case study, 5 participants or less are considered a suitable number to go deeper in the phenomenon and identify common themes across their themes (Creswell, 2009). The sampling process started by inviting a group of 8 EFL female PSTs who were in my PhD supervisor simulated teaching class to participate in my study. Five of those PSTs volunteered to participate in this study. Each belonged to a different part of Malaysia (urban, suburban, and rural). The participants were at the age of 21-22 years. After finishing their simulated teaching class, those PSTs were sent to two secondary public urban schools within the university nearby areas. Though not representative of whole population of PSTs, these participants had their own experience on the issue of training inexperienced teachers. They are EFL PSTs who learn to teach within an EFL context, consequently; their understanding of their tensions during the practice period can enrich literature on such neglected contexts (Izadinia, 2013).

The following table is a representation of the research participants' demographic information.

Table 1: Research participants' demographic background

No.	Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Comes from
1	Ameera	21	Female	Penang / suburban
2	Faten	22	Female	Taiping, Perak / suburban
3	Ola	22	Female	Kadah / rural
4	Noor	22	Female	Kuala lampur / Urban
5	Zainah	22	Female	Kuala Selangor/ rural

Method

Data Collection

To conduct my study, I first got its plan approved by my PhD thesis committee, the Faculty of Education and the Higher Education Department. Then, I got access letters (equivalent to the Institutional Review Board [IRB]) to conduct my study. After introducing the participants to the study, its goals and length, they were invited to sign a consent letter to participate in data collection by being interviewed, recorded, and observed. The consent letter also stated their consent for the publication of the study results. Their identities were protected by using pseudonyms and their university and the schools where they trained were not named here. They were also assured that they had the right to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted. In addition, they were given the right to participate in data collection and analysis. I assured them that their lecturer or mentors would not share the study results and findings so that their assessment and grades would not be affected. They could revise any information or interpretations of their stories before I included them in my final report (Patton, 2002). I kept my promise for them and I am releasing the findings of this study after they have already graduated from university. Also, I got access letters (Creswell, 2009) from university to attend the simulated teaching class and the practicum at school.

To get engaged in the context of the phenomenon and with the participants (Merriam, 2009), I joined the participants' CoP that started with them attending the simulated teaching class. I attended all their weekly classes (12 classes, 3 hours each). For the first half of the course (6 weeks) I only took field note and had informal talks with my participants and other students in the class. I delayed my interviews to the mid of the semester to give them the opportunity (1) to build up their understanding regarding their training and (2) to build up mutual trust and understanding between them and me. Informal talks built a rapport between them and me; bridged the gap and fostered the confidence level between us. Later, I followed them to their schools, but due to time limit and schools' context, I did not attend on full-time bases. However, I visited the schools 10 times to attend lessons, observe, interview, and have group discussions. Participating in their practices and dialogues enabled the gathering of more insights into the constructed meanings throughout their progress.

To minimize power relationships between the PSTs and the researcher, engagement in their evaluation process was avoided. While abstaining judging their personal stories or experiences, I shared my own stories from my experience as a teacher educator. A number of day-to-day activities helped me reduce their discomfort feeling of my awkward status as an outsider observing them and participating in their classes. Informal talks about our families, our life burdens and past funny stories were of great effect. I, also encouraged them to address me by my first name and they did considering me as their elder sister, as one of my participants expressed. I also avoided talking to my supervisor (their lecturer) in front of them before or after the class so that they would not connect me with him as figures of power. I was aware of the reflexivity of my researcher role, consequently; I worked towards building rapport with the research participants and hence, encouraged them to be open in sharing their experiences, assumptions, and beliefs (Merriam, 2009).

Data Collection Methods

Two data collection methods were used: (1) interviews; and (2) participant observations. Having multiple participants and different data collection techniques can contribute to the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2009). I interviewed each participant 4 times (i.e., twice during the simulated teaching class and twice during the

field practice stage). Those interviews were held around the mid and end of each phase (i.e., simulated teaching class and practicum) to uncover the professional developmental line of the PSTs and the difficulties they encountered. Being part of their CoP, I supported my interview data with observational data. Wenger (1998) and Izadinia (2013) note that observing teachers in their practice can reveal how they construct their professional knowledge and skills. Observation can both support the PSTs' perceptions cultivated through the interview data or open up the horizon for new probes for interviews. Following is a sample of the interview guiding questions.

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself? Why did you choose to study TESL?
2. How can you describe your experience as a student at school/at university? Who is/was your role model as an English teacher?
3. What type of a teacher do you hope to become/do not want to become?
4. Are you prepared with the subject content, pedagogical knowledge and related technological knowledge of teaching?
5. How do you perceive your participation in the CoP (first at simulated teaching class, and later, asked with reference to practicum)?
6. How supportive is your community of practice to learning? What hinders your learning?
7. What challenges do you face at this stage (simulated teaching/practicum)? How do you tackle them?
8. Can you describe your relationships with people involved in your CoP? I mean your classmates, your supervisor (later, the question referred also to mentors, school students and staff)?
9. What are your perceptions regarding concepts of cooperation, collaboration, reflection, and confidence within your CoP?
10. How efficient as a teacher do you feel? How satisfied are you with this journey? What values have you gained through the CoP?

Note: More evolving and follow up questions were used on spot based on the participant's input.

The fieldwork took place from March 2015 to September 2015. The interviews were semi-structured; however, I remained open to the evolving nature of the conversation and allowed the emergence of topics that participants considered relevant to their professional development, social relationships, and engagement within their CoP. The interviews were preceded by a group discussion after each micro teaching session for one of the participants. Later, I interviewed each participant individually for 30-50 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription and further, analysis. I started my interviews with a general discussion of the lesson the participant conducted and asked her to reflect on her professional growth. After that, I moved to focus on her interaction within the CoP and the barriers she faced to be engaged fully with others. Through my questions, I tried to elicit information related to the stages of cultivating a CoP.

The observation notes aimed at understanding PSTs' learning, participation and interaction with each other and the other people involved in their training. I audiotaped the classes and videotaped the micro teaching lessons to reflect on during the analysis stage. While my participant observation mode helped me interact with the group and take field notes during the simulated teaching class, I found it difficult to conduct during their practicum stage. I observed their individual classes and interviewed them after each observed class at their

practice site (i.e., school). Having specific dates to attend to their schools limited my ability to observe them regularly while interacting within their CoP, so I based my understanding on their words. I wrote reflective memos instead, as supplementary data that helped in thickening the descriptions in my study. In addition to using different techniques to collect data from different participants, member checking was done by sharing the interviews' transcriptions and summary of codes with the participants to ensure that their perceptions and understandings were truly reflected in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Inductive and comparative data analysis was conducted to identify themes across sub-cases. Saldana (2009) offers a simplified scheme of the complex process of codifying data and moving to categories and themes. However, Merriam (2009) and Saldana (2009) contend that it is not necessary to build a theory from a qualitative inquiry. The researcher transcends from the reality of data to the abstract and general concepts. The following figure represents Saldana's scheme.

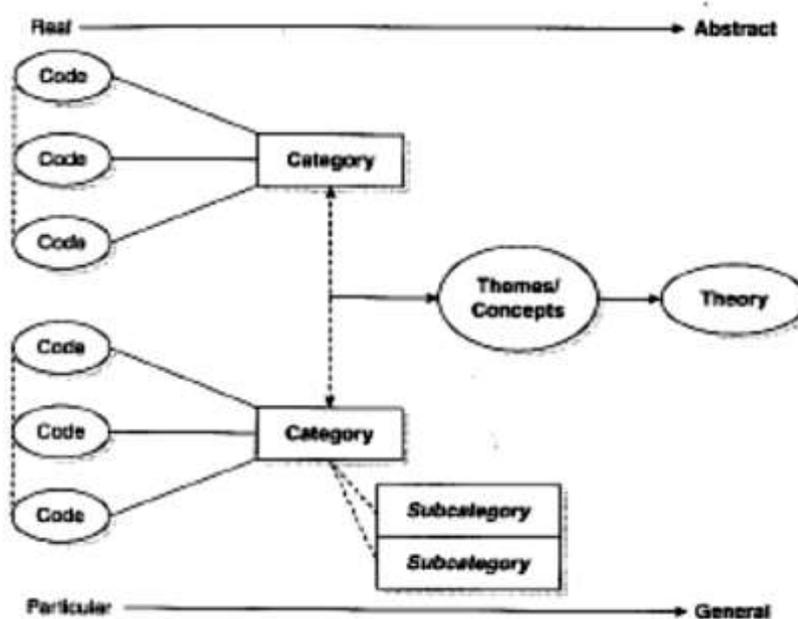


Figure 2: A streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry, adopted from Saldana (2009).

The preliminary data analysis started at the data collection stage. “Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). This enabled reflection over the procedures and the data collected and following decisions in collecting data. Three versions of the recorded data were kept to prevent data loss: one on my laptop, one on my Google one drive and the third copy on an external hard disk. Within the first two days after recording each interview, I went through the transcription process. I listened to each recording while looking at my observation notes to make sense of both types of data. I prepared a file of my field notes and observation data. Later, I compared between emerging themes of interview and observation data on the same events.

I read all data together to get a sense of them. With my research questions and theoretical framework in mind, I started the open coding process. I went vertically and horizontally through data analysis. First, I read interview data and observation data for each participant separately to grasp the themes. Memos of my reflections connecting between the

field notes and the interview were recorded. For example, my participant Ola thought her mentor was trying to help her get better, however while talking about their cooperative relationship, Ola silently gave me a sign to turn off the recording. She said, “I want to tell you something about the tensions between us. You can use this in your research as long as my name is not there but I, myself, don't want to hear it again.” That immediately triggered the idea of imbalance power relationship in my field notes. My memo explained my understanding of what Ola said explicitly on the recording and the contradiction she added off the recording. To add to the accountability and depth of findings, I used in vivo coding (i.e., using the participant's words) and value coding that explores intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of the participants. While the first one celebrates the voice of the participant, the second reflects the understandings of the participant and the researcher who interviews and observes. Participants express their thoughts and feelings but their actions may not harmonize to what they claim (Saldana, 2009). Hence, observing their actions could help assess their claims.

After ending the first cycle (i.e., vertical analysis) of coding data, I started the second cycle to compare emerging themes horizontally among the participants' data. The second cycle of the analysis process followed the pattern coding method to pull the codes together and develop my major themes. The axial coding was the last phase to compare different categories to each other. Recognizing the categories and their properties (i.e., conditions, causes and consequences of a process) helped me recognize how and why something happens.

Table 2: First and Second Cycle: Categories and Properties

First cycle	In vivo coding	Participant's words/interview data
	Value coding	Interview and observation data
Second cycle	Pattern coding	Developing categories/themes
	Axial coding	Identify categories and their properties

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Before proceeding with the results' presentation, I would like to discuss the validation strategies utilized to ensure the study is credible and rigorous (Merriam, 2009). Credibility of study was realized using the validation strategies of prolonged engagement explained earlier in this paper under the Participants and the Data Collection sections. Further, triangulation of data, rich description, member check and peer debriefing were sequentially adopted. First, the data were triangulated using two different data collection techniques (interview and observation) with 5 participants. Secondly, to gain thick description, the participants' voices were presented under each theme to add up to the description of each development stage. Thirdly, after transcribing the interview, each interviewee was handed a copy to review it and add, delete, or amend any of their respective statements. For instance, Ameera claimed that she did not think that her mentor was very strict, but rather, that happened occasionally. She thought the mentor was supportive when they met for a short time during assembly. Her amendments were accepted.

Fourthly, peer debriefing was preferred over working with my supervisor as intended prior to this study. The participants were promised that he (the supervisor) would not look at their data under any circumstance until they graduate and henceforth, the promise was fulfilled. Instead, a TESL PhD student who was at the last stage of her PhD study at a different university was to conduct a coding consistency check. In total, two people, including the researcher, were involved in the analysis process at the initial stage; however, the co-author was involved later in a discussion of the analysis process. The coder was provided with information regarding the study, its goals, the guiding questions, and the theoretical framework. We worked separately on the first sets of the interview and field notes data. After a discussion meeting, we agreed on

the emerging themes and type of data that supported those themes. Consider the following example as drafted in the field notes:

“The students avoided participating in the presence of their professor.”

This data was labelled as “Power relationships” while the coder labelled the same data as “peripheral position.” She insisted that it was the beginning of the semester and they might not have got engaged in their CoP yet. Then we agreed that I needed to revisit similar data and compare them with interview data to check how this theme would change over time. Later, I continued with the rest of the data and requested the second coder's review until the end of data analysis process. Later, the co-author went independently through data analysis passing his comments on the process. Finally, this is a small-scale qualitative study which aimed to gain in-depth understanding of the case of 5 EFL Malaysian PSTs challenges and opportunities while going through their LT process. Hence, we admit the subjectivity of the findings and accept that those findings may not be generally true and accurate.

After displaying the data collection methods and analysis strategies, we proceed with the data presentation. The results of the current study provide valuable information that will help educators understand the complex nature of the journey involved in learning to become a teacher within a CoP. We aim to extend the applicability of results to other similar, but not identical, contexts. Though restricted by limited space in this paper, the description offered is aspired to sufficiently enable readers to contextualize results.

Results

The findings show that the PSTs approached their training with a number of concerns and hopes related to (1) subject content, (2) ability to deliver a lesson, (3) school students' proficiency level, and (4) acceptance at practicum site. Getting engaged with real practice, new themes emerged with reference to (1) value of communication, collaboration, and peer support, and (2) power relationships. The following discussion will place those themes within the stages of cultivating a CoP that have been discussed earlier in this article. Though the model has offered separate stages, still yet practically those stages overlap. For the sake of the flow of analysis, this section is divided into two parts early stages of development (i.e., potential and coalescing) and the mature stages of development (i.e., maturing, stewardship, and transformation). The principle of letting the text talk guides (Merriam, 2009) instead of attributing meanings that may not have been reflected in the data.

Opportunities and Challenges of the CoP

A. Early Stages of Development

Phase one: Simulated teaching safe environment

They started their journey on the margins of the CoP. Both content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge earned through their university courses together with the images of their previous K12 teachers and university lecturers underlined PSTs perceptions about teaching, students, and teacher's role. Some of the participants decided to become teachers because their families encouraged them and wanted them to be so. For other PSTs who were not participants in the study but at the same class, it was having one of their family members as an EFL teacher that inspired them to become teachers too. Others expressed that because

their secondary school grades matched the requirement of TESL, they decided to opt for it. Farah reported that:

At first, it was not my intention to take TESL. I applied for a number of courses with TESL as one of them. I went through an entrance exam and a personality interview. I was chosen to study TESL. It was quite surprising actually because I was not sure whether my English proficiency was qualified enough to enroll to the course but maybe I was fated to be here.

Ola reported similar reasons for studying TESL:

Originally, I was hoping to further my studies in dentistry or at least something related to Biology. During my foundation in matriculation, I did not manage to achieve the average pointer to apply for dentistry. Anything related to English was my second choice.

Noor, on the other hand, had a different story:

After I finished my secondary school, I really had no idea what I wanted to pursue for my tertiary education. My dad saw that I was quite good in English at that time since my interest in music, movies and books were always in an English medium. He suggested that I took TESL but I was against it at first. I really like English, yes, but teaching was not my passion. I didn't really like school and I only went to school for friends. The idea that later I would have to work in a school environment was horror. But, with my SPM result, I didn't really have that many options and since I myself didn't know what I wanted to do, my father talked to me and finally I gave in. I took TESL for my diploma course. To my surprise, I like it so far.

Nonetheless, only one of the participants thought her English proficiency encouraged her to specialize in teaching English. Ameera said, "The main reason why I chose TESL was because I love English and I wanted to focus on learning the subject" their desire to improve their English language acted as a mutual driving force in becoming EFL teachers.

These reasons trigger the teacher educators' minds that those PSTs are not necessarily self-motivated to become teachers. Lacking such a genuine motivation requires creating more opportunities to engage them in their CoPs.

Participants reported a number of concerns regarding their training when they had a group discussion at the beginning of their simulated teaching class prior to their micro teaching lessons. Those concerns are mainly related to their content knowledge and school students' proficiency level.

...I'm worried about the students' proficiency level at school... Because if they are smarter than me... (class laughs quietly)... In terms of grammar... You know... I find grammar difficult for me. I'm afraid if Students ask me anything in grammar... you know like: what is that why we use that. I cannot answer them. That's my major concern, said Noor.

Hence, English proficiency stood out as their major concern. It was a key reason for them to lack self-confidence and fear standing out in a real class. "I know I still need to strengthen

myself in grammar,” said Farah, “I’m afraid their English proficiency level is higher than mine,” added Farah.

Likewise, Ola shared similar concerns:

Truthfully, I think I am not 100% prepared to teach. For instance, regarding subject content knowledge, yes, we have learnt a lot throughout the past semesters. We’ve learnt on grammar, on the 4 skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), literature and the list goes. However, I don’t think I have all that on the tip of my hands and to teach others. I still need some brushing up in some areas until I can be more prepared and without having to refer too much to various sources when teaching soon.

They doubted their ability to deliver a lesson in an interesting way that could capture their students' attention, “I’m worried if the students will be kind or naughty. Not sure (laughing) if I’ll be able to deliver information well, if the activities I prepared are interesting enough for students,” contended Ameera.

However, they perceived their pedagogical and technological knowledge as sufficient. Becoming aware that they all faced the same concerns, they thought their CoP could help overcome such challenges. “I didn't know they all feared similar things of becoming teachers. I felt that we can support each other, benefit from our experiences and even learn from our stories,” said Farah.

Noor said while laughing:

I was embarrassed to talk about my concerns. I didn't know how I would face my fears in teaching. At least, being with the group might lessen my worries. Truly, I can't judge right now, but it still a good start, I guess.

Networking with their peers was noticeable from the beginning of the semester. The presence of their peers performing their lessons in front of them was of powerful effect. They learned many strategies of teaching among themselves. Reflecting on their practices further contributed to understanding the underpinnings of each activity. They managed to calibrate their practices to be accepted by their supervisor, their peers and their individual standards.

Moving on from stage 1 (potential) to stage 2 (coalescing), the PSTs started to appreciate a number of the advantages and rewarding opportunities of belonging to their CoP. “I was nervous at the beginning... I was scared...but watching them teaching and all the group discussions we had... I think it encouraged me to do my lessons. I felt proud of their positive comments also,” indicated Ameera.

Away from their supervisor, they developed a coherent and collaborative group where they developed their own strategies, language, and stories. I noticed more interaction between them when the supervisor is out of the class or asked them to discuss their activities within their group. Their confidence level started to rise after performing their first micro teaching lessons and observing the others in action. Their second trial was more promising and revealed the progress they had made in their teaching skills. They appeared confident, relaxed, and capable of handling their stage fright and their classes.

“What I like the best about our group are those stories about the challenges each one faces while preparing the lessons” said Noor. Moreover, Farah agreed with her saying, “We improved a lot and I feel proud of myself because I made sufficient progress as a teacher. I mean at least compared to my classmates... I see myself as a promising teacher.” “We,” “our,” and “my” are all personal pronouns reflecting their sense and insight of ownership and freehold over their learning and progress.

At the end of the first phase (i.e., simulated teaching class) of their training and getting involved in their CoP, they were full of optimistic feelings of their ability to teach and to influence the context they were going to train in. A sense of security occurred in their interviews as their concerns diminished and faded away.

However, they were still aware that the idealistic environment of their simulated teaching class might not be comparable to what they would face in the real classes. “In terms of confidence, you teach here but then because they're so few students, it doesn't teach me how to manage big classes. It's not a problem for me to manage this class but then in real classes. I'm not sure,” expressed Ola.

In this part, we introduced the results we came to by examining the data regarding the first two stages in cultivating the CoP. The discussion showed how the CoP paved the way for the participants' progress. Having similar concerns, hopes and fears encouraged them to discover and imagine how their CoP could help them. They shared their knowledge in how to teach the micro teaching lessons. They taught each other where to find their resources and how to prepare their audiovisual materials. The next part of analysis explores the expansion of their CoP and the new challenges and opportunities they encountered. This expansion entails getting into contact with new members of the CoP and experiencing new forms of interaction, cooperation, and feedback. The maturing stages do not necessarily represent a harmonious environment similar to the previous stages. PSTs need to continue negotiating their professional identities, their beliefs, and understandings.

B. The Mature Stages of Development

Phase two: Practicum

The third stage of cultivating their CoP was marked by moving to actual teaching context that offered PSTs new challenges and opportunities to develop their beliefs and practices. Their CoP expanded to join more people (i.e., monitors, schoolteachers, school students and staff). Schoolteachers were another mirror they could use to relate themselves to. Zainah, for example, stated that:

Her (the mentor) lesson was really simple but the students were responsive and very interactive. The teacher prepared working sheets for two periods, but she didn't use them. She is very experienced, and she could just talk to the students and motivate them to pay attention during the class.

They started to define and form an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in teaching real students. “New insights and more practical skills can help us develop our teacher identity more,” added Noor.

They needed to address a new tension. That tension was accepting feedback from their mentors and revising their practices, beliefs and attitudes. Ameera for example complained:

I know my strategies suit my students' needs. I engaged them in group work, but she insisted that I use individual work to assess their abilities. Of course, I did what she asked me to do, but I wasn't really satisfied.

Furthermore, Zainah added:

My class wasn't noisy. I admit I still need to learn how to handle them more. But the students enjoyed the class. They were very noisy at the time of the group

quiz. I told them who ever raised their hands first, they would the chance to answer first... but then I couldn't really decide which group was the first. When I asked a group to answer the others started complaining and saying it wasn't fair. I don't understand why she focused on that and took it negatively. I thought it was a healthy practice of democracy.

Soon, the participant PSTs were left alone in their classes and they had to rely on their students' reactions in deciding on the appropriateness of their activities and teaching. When asked how they could assess their classes while they were teaching under no supervision, they referred to their students' reaction as a reflection of their success or failure. First, Ameera, revealed:

I get my feedback from the students. I ask them how the lesson was and whether they understood what I taught them. Yes, I can trust them but sometimes I'm afraid they might want to be nice to me and that's why they give me good comments. But sometimes I think they are sincere in giving the comments. By looking at their responses during the lesson or after the lesson.

Next, Ola added:

I look at the students. If they show they understood and they were interested in my lesson, then I think... I'd say it was a good lesson. But if they were bored and didn't want to participate, then I would take it as a sign that the lesson wasn't well-done. For example, the lesson you observed today, I felt it was so-so because they participated but there were some students at the back who didn't want to take part in it.

Changing context of practice from a safe environment such as that of the university to the complex school context contributed to rising tensions between what they hoped to do or to be and what they were actually allowed to do. They experienced competing beliefs, values, practices, attitudes and constraints at the new context (Tsui, 2011). For example, Noor was told to follow the scheme of work of the prescribed curriculum. Zainah wanted to utilize technology in her lesson but the computer lab was under renovation and she could not book it for her class. The participants also claimed the school culture was not supportive of trying new methods. Their presence at school was to support and cover classes rather than to try new teaching strategies. They were supposed to attend classes for their peers, to discuss later and gain more understanding of their practices. However, being burdened with their tasks, they could not attend such classes and if that happened, they would not have enough time for reflections and discussions. Hence, they believed that they were deprived from a powerful tool to LT.

They were positioned in a context which had its own discourses and “ongoing social conversations” (Wang & Lin, 2014, p. 7). Their agency could empower them and gave them the ability to construct their professional identity. While Kayi-Aydar's (2015, p. 98) participant assigned “herself powerful, agentic positions” and considered herself as a resource for her mentor, my participants reported a sense of being marginalized as the presence of experienced teachers affected PSTs' self-images. It made them feel less competent. They saw themselves as second class in a disadvantaged position in the school context. Farah stated:

I was quite scared when she came to my class because she looked very serious during the lesson. She walked around and saw the students' progress. I felt quite nervous when she went around. I think my students noticed how I felt and I wasn't happy with that.

At this stage it was difficult for me as a researcher to separate the maturing stage from the stewardship stage in cultivating the CoP. Actually there were two parallel lines going along each other. The first one reflected the challenges that staggered through the practicum; the second was the opportunities that PSTs kept exploiting to LT and to survive their practicum. Another issue that persisted through the two phases (simulated teaching and practicum) was the imbalanced power relationships.

The students have an objection but sat silent without showing any sign of that for their teacher. Later, they wondered if they talked to their teacher, would he positively accept their suggestion. They looked reluctant and decided not to do that. They thought they might just accept his strategy to elicit theory before he took them to the practice part. (Observation notes, 24/3/2015).

Power relationships made them develop anxiety of being negatively judged by schoolteachers and supervisors. They thought their supervisors and monitors are experienced and know better than they did. They feared being devalued as English teachers and that resulted in a drop in their self-confidence either regarding their language competence or pedagogical skills. They expressed their relief that their mentors and supervisors rarely visited them in their classroom. "It's enough for me to worry about planning and teaching. Their presence will just confuse me. Maybe later when I master the teaching skills, they can then attend my classes," contended Ameera.

They drew boundaries between them as apprentices and their supervisor as the master. The same boundaries were observed between them and the schoolteachers and staff. One of the monitors was eager to engage with her PSTs; however, under the pressure of being assessed, I noticed that their relationship with her was formal and lack the intimacy that would allow them to let their voice be heard:

She is really nice and helped us a lot. She tried to support us and made things go easier for us. But I know she was responsible about my assessment... you know... that made me always sit silent, listen to her, and apply her instructions," said Noor.

For Ola, the monitor and the principals are the ones she needed to worry about their attitudes towards her. Ameera stated:

As for my relationships with the other teachers, I think my biggest concern would be only with the principal and the cooperating teacher. It's not that I don't care about the others, but I have to worry about them most at the end of the practice as their words will affect my grades.

Ola's words, also, supported this attitude.

I think my supervisor will come second after the cooperating teacher because I'll spend more time with my mentor than with my supervisor. They may not come to our classes a lot, but they will be at school around us. As I said, they'll affect my grades a lot and I want to pass my practice at school. The supervisor will come once or twice, this doesn't show how I am as a teacher, so the supervisor will ask either the principal or the mentor there.

The school administration intentionally seated the PSTs in the same room to give them the chance to exchange experience and collaborate in their work. However, this procedure was only relatively beneficial for PSTs as they could not have real chances to negotiate their experiences. In addition, that arrangement resulted in isolating the PSTs from the schoolteachers. Consequently, interaction through different levels in their CoP was stalled. Instead of maximizing their opportunities to learn from the sociocultural context around them, they had to rely mainly on occasional meetings with their peers, supervisor, or mentors. According to Farah:

They sat in the staff room while we sat in a separate room for PSTs. I found it kind of strange because as teachers we need to interact with each other. They're experienced teachers and we could ask them about different tensions we face. Our mentor is helpful and cooperative and I benefited a lot from her but she's also overburdened by her duties. We need to talk with the others, communicate with them and learn more.

Despite that wave of frustration, depression, and sense of getting lost, PSTs started gradually to calm down due to getting used to the routines of the school culture. They did what they were informed to do because they got convinced that their presence and their opinions meant a little for the others. Their solo shelter was in building good relationships with their students. Such relationships gave meaning and value to their presence at the school context.

The fifth (and last) stage of cultivating their CoP began while they were preparing to finish their actual practice stage, PSTs felt regret for all the opportunities they could have had to reconstruct their professional identity and reshape their understandings, beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding the whole teaching/learning process. They thought that deeper relationships with their mentors and the school staff could have stimulated more fruitful talks about their practice. They eventually admitted “communicating with other teachers and peers could have helped us face the problems and learn from each other's experiences” (Farah regretted).

Their CoP simply ended because of coming to the end of their practice and moving to new burdens in their studies. Some of their developmental challenges remained unresolved. Such inappropriately handled stage may have resulted in creating a new batch of English teachers who lack agency and self-confidence. They left their practice environment with no clear directions towards how to develop deeper knowledge of their domain, how to correct their understandings and how to shape their professional identities. They survived the practice stage but gained no solid skills (e.g., negotiation, reflection, building reciprocal relationships...) to live on to continue their professional growth. More challenges should be anticipated for them to encounter once they set on their career as teachers. They started their CoP but could not sustain it.

Discussion of Findings

Through the process of cultivating the CoP, PSTs faced a number of challenges that hindered their professional development. Those challenges resulted from their false sense of preparedness, lack of confidence and agency, and underestimating the value of the social context.

1. False sense of preparedness

The primary intent of the PSTs' CoP, in the simulated teaching class, was to develop a set of proper practices as teachers and to simply apply them during their field practice later at

school. During their journey to realize their intention, PSTs did not believe in their abilities to teach. They thought they needed to be exposed to plenty of practice before they decided they were ready to teach. They could not reveal such a passion towards teaching due to their inability to assess their teaching skills. However, facilitating their legitimate participation within their CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991), PSTs could be better inducted into their profession as teachers (Carter, 2012). Given the opportunity and facilities to apply the pedagogical theories at their university with their peers and supervisor, participants expressed competence and readiness in teaching real students. The reflective discussion after each microteaching lesson with the supervisor encouraged them to increase their participation moving to the center of the class events. With the praise and feedback they got from their peers and supervisor, they improved their self-image as teachers. This improvement in their professional identity goes a long way with the approach that identity is shared (Carter, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). They reported their pride and sense of preparedness even though the simulated context was an “idealistic context” compared to the real school context. What was left to practice, as they thought, was managing activities and time with real students.

They were eager to go to school to test the knowledge they gained at the university. Noticeably the administrative duties and the extracurricular activities added up to the culture shock that PSTs experience when they move from the university safe environment to the school context (Findlay, 2006). They started to juggle with their duties hoping to reach a balance between what they hoped to practice and try out and what they were required to accomplish by their mentors and principal. The apprenticeship concept assumes that novices learn from masters (i.e., experienced others). Consequently, the absence of PSTs' supervisors from the practicum environment and their mentors from their classes will lessen their real preparedness. Similar to their Vietnamese counterparts in a study conducted recently by Nguyen, Tran, and Luu (2016), our participants found time management and dealing with their students' misbehavior a major problem in their practicum context. My participants were alone in their classes facing such challenges. By the same token, Castañeda (2014) reported that his participant felt frustrated, uncertain and angry because she was alone in her class. She revealed that her lack of sound classroom management skills was due to the absence of her mentor. Observing their peers going through similar difficulties was not enough to soothe their worries. The data from both studies (i.e., Castañeda's study and mine) suggest that PSTs needed support from the experienced ones (their mentors in this case) in their CoP.

They felt isolated and abandoned by the others who were supposed to scaffold their learning. They started to report the futility of their simulated teaching class and its inability to prepare them for the real context of schools. Reflection is another significant activity that could lead PSTs learning. Reading some of what they called reflective notes in their preparation notebooks, I noticed that their reflections were only notes on what activities they have accomplished within their class and what was left for the next class. Since neither their supervisor nor their mentors had a look at such notes, it was difficult for the PSTs to acknowledge their misunderstanding of the reflective practice and its power as a mediating tool to revise their learning and amend their ways of approaching knowledge. Even with the end of their field practice they expressed their genuine need for more training.

2. Lack of confidence and agency

Based on their false sense of preparedness, my participants reported improvement in their confidence level through the simulated teaching class. However, moving to the harsh context of the school for their actual practice made such level drop to the extent they doubted their desire to become teachers, in the future. Sooner, they restricted their field practice to their ability to get good scores on their assessments. They welcomed the absence of their supervisor

and mentors as a means for them to avoid getting negative comments on their teaching. They could not trust their ability to manage their classes or deliver correct content. It was their way to escape being assessed by the others. They expressed the same concerns they had regarding their teaching skills and their ability to manage their classes. Eventually, they ended up their practice with a humble level of confidence.

At the agency level, the PSTs thought they were able to make real changes within the school context. However, lacking the logistics such as technology and having the obligation to follow the prescribed curriculum shocked them. They also found themselves paralyzed due to the pre-established protocols within the school cultures. They are followers not changers and their main role is to alleviate the schoolteachers' administrative and teaching burdens. Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, and Fry (2004) have reported similar results of their PST who could not achieve her goals to grow as a teacher. The two participants of Smagorinsky et al. (2004) and Larson and Phillips (2005) developed a sense of resistance and agency due to the tensions they encountered on their practicum site. On the contrary, for my 5 participants, similar to Cooper and He's (2012) participants, such resistance and agency were not observable or reported. The result adds up to the assumption of the role of the broader sociocultural attitude that the apprentices follow their master. When PSTs are prepared within a social context that entrench hierarchical power relationships, they will avoid challenging their seniors or even approach them seeking their help and support. Yuan (2016) criticized how his Chinese PST-participants' agency was confined because they grew up in a society that required them to respect authority and encouraged them to avoid conflict with their seniors.

3. Understanding value of social relationships

Similar to Beltman et al.'s (2015) participants, this study participants were mainly concerned with content knowledge, student centered lesson deliverability and classroom management. They underestimated the value of communication and mingling with the broader social context within the school. As Beltman et al. (2015) suggested, teacher education programs focus more on the responsibilities of the individual teacher within a classroom isolated from the others. My PSTs lacked initiation and positive interaction with their social context. At the end of the practicum, the PSTs admitted their sincere need to communicate with other teachers to improve their skills. They reported the same challenges they started their training with to be the same at the end. That means they could not make any genuine shift in their professional identities.

The essence of learning within a community of practice is that it “happens in collaboration with others and through activities situated in the learning community” (Izadinia, 2013, p. 700). The members build up a social capital of reciprocal relationships where every member benefits from the group (Munarriz-Diaz & Castañeda, 2013). To engage actively within their CoP, they need to communicate and jointly analyze their activities with other members of CoP (i.e., peer, supervisor, cooperating teachers, and school students, and administrative). While such collaboration was observed during the simulated teaching class, it was almost missing except of few times when they could exchange ideas on problems they faced on practicum site. The PST-mentor relationship was a kind of instruction giver-instruction applier one. In spite of lacking genuine time and opportunity to communicate with each other, most their discussion and communication was with their peer and later with school students. However, power relationships negatively persisted to prevent them from getting into real communication with their supervisors and cooperating teachers. Sooner they were more interested in their assessment results. They believed that avoiding confrontation with their supervisors or cooperating teachers would guarantee them good scores at the end of the course.

Implications and Recommendations

A community does not grow by a command, so the assumption that designing a learning community will guarantee it to rise is misleading. The goal should be “to develop the community in ways that can foster the emergence of a community of practice” (Coto Chotto & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2008, p. 56). A number of advantages of belonging to a CoP were reported in this study. For example, peer support, collaboration and reflection stood as significant tools that gradually took them from the peripheral position of the CoP to a more central one. Those tools helped PSTs gain confidence and sense of agency during the first stage of their training. However, PSTs' beliefs and positive attitudes towards teaching started to fall apart when they moved to their real practice context.

PSTs doubted their English proficiency and that decreased their self-confidence and sense of professionalism. Their teacher education program designers could further intensify training to enhance their language competence to enable them build their self-confidence (Wang & Lin, 2014). The complexities they encountered could also be a result of neglecting their need to be scaffolded by their seniors and peers. With the assistance of the experienced others, they can accomplish more than what they could alone (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Learning occur formally and informally within a CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Hence, more time needs to be given for them to mingle more at the school context. Overburdening them with administrative and teaching tasks will not result in real learning. According to the studies that Izadinia (2013) reviewed, it was not only joining a learning community that resulted in positive shifts in PSTs' beliefs and professional identity, but rather “creating an atmosphere of collaboration and reflection” (p. 701).

In addition, PSTs in this study approached the training culture with a number of anxieties, stereotypes and some negative feelings regarding their teaching abilities. Within their CoP, it is important that PSTs make their implicit beliefs explicit to question them and reflect on them. This enables them develop language of talk about practice and contradictory beliefs. They will be empowered to control their professional growth and own their progress (Zheng, 2009). Guiding PSTs to write or tell their stories and reflect on them using theory is vital for their learning (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Teacher educators should encourage PSTs to analyze and reflect on the cultural and sociological context and their activities within it to activate their situated learning. For example, when they articulate the oppressive relationships they encounter and collectively navigate solutions for problems, they start to see and experience shifts in their participation. They will challenge their own passive responses and gain more agency against “the way things are” (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008, p. 158) and the stereotypes that were passed to them by previous PSTs.

Hoffman-Kipp (2008, p. 157) advocates that PSTs “benefit most from concrete activities in which they (1) create texts about their beliefs and practices; (2) share those texts with others; (3) investigate theory as a tool of understanding those texts; and (4) do all of this with the support of a facilitator...” (For further details on those socially and culturally engaging activities, see Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Those activities entail social interaction, collaboration and reflection and socially and culturally engage PSTs in their learning. Creating a self-dependent and agentic learner or teacher does not exclude the role of context and people from this process. Universities and schools cannot send PSTs to walk the way a lone. They need to collaborate to provide those PSTs with the resources, strategies and time to belong to their CoP and grow through it as teachers (Carter, 2012).

The EFL context where we conducted the current study could have similarities with many other EFL contexts. However, some limitations need to be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, our research methodology is that of the case study whose results may not be generalized to another population. A small number of PSTs who volunteered to participate

in this study were recruited. We aimed to understand in depth what challenges and opportunities this particular group of Malaysian PSTs encountered while learning how to teach. Our focus was on the beginning of their professional training part (simulated teaching class and practicum). That narrow focus may have resulted in gaining narrow data. Hence, we would recommend conducting a longitudinal study starting from the beginning to the end of their university study. Even the first years of profession could be involved in such a study to gain more comprehensive understanding of PSTs journey of LT.

Another limitation that lies within this study is the researchers' identity as an outsider and supervisor, respectively. As one of the authors is a foreigner undertaking a case in the Malaysian context, that may establish more reliability in our study, given the objectivity. On the other hand, a distant and formal relationship might have developed as I was an unfamiliar face. Consequently, I adopted the concept of "prolonged engagement" by participating in their simulated teaching class and their informal meetings outside the class. I started my interviews after mid of their semester, almost 6 weeks. At that time, the PSTs were pleased to disclose their ideas. Finally, the distribution of gender was not applicable to this study since all the TESL PSTs at the time of collecting my data were female. Male PSTs may have different or similar perceptions about their LT journey. Hence, we would recommend male students be involved in similar studies within the Malaysian context.

Conclusion

This study aimed to trace the developmental line of 5 PSTs during their simulated teaching class with a focus on the opportunities and tensions they encountered. The PSTs approached their practice stages with a number of expectations to be equipped as successful EFL prospective teachers. In addition, through the cultivation of their CoP, they had a number of tensions (e.g., false sense of preparedness, lack of confidence and agency and value of social relationships) had to juggle with especially at the school context. In spite of the opportunities they got to put their theory to practice and enhance their teaching abilities, the participants left their practice stage with unresolved tensions regarding their professional growth. Results suggest that PSTs feedback can support renewal of practices at universities and schools.

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