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The Role of Support System: A Phenomenological Study of Pre-Service Teachers' International Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

Professional and personal gains related to international teaching practicum (ITP) of pre-service teachers' (PST) are evidenced in literature. However, challenges faced during ITP have the potential to function as stressors, which may inhibit PSTs' learning and harm their emotional and psychological wellbeing, which in turn may influence their identity as future teachers and intention to continue as teachers. In the current study, we used interpretive phenomenological approach to examine 12 PSTs' experiences of the provision of support system during international teaching practicum (ITP). We collected data for this study using in-depth phenomenological interviews and reflective journals. The positive experiences and functions include emotional and physiological well-being, source of motivation and morale, provider of professional knowledge and skills, and purveyor of instrumental support.

Keywords

international teaching practicum, mentoring, teacher support, pre-service teachers, phenomenology

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The Role of Support System: A Phenomenological Study of Pre-Service Teachers' International Teaching Practicum

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Professional and personal gains related to international teaching practicum (ITP) of pre-service teachers' (PST) are evidenced in literature. However, challenges faced during ITP have the potential to function as stressors, which may inhibit PSTs' learning and harm their emotional and psychological wellbeing, which in turn may influence their identity as future teachers and intention to continue as teachers. In the current study, we used interpretive phenomenological approach to examine 12 PSTs' experiences of the provision of support system during international teaching practicum (ITP). We collected data for this study using in-depth phenomenological interviews and reflective journals. The positive experiences and functions include emotional and physiological well-being, source of motivation and morale, provider of professional knowledge and skills, and purveyor of instrumental support.

Keywords: international teaching practicum, mentoring, teacher support, pre-service teachers, phenomenology

Introduction

International teaching practicum (ITP) has been a crucial part of teacher education programs in many countries around the world (see Kabilan et al., 2017; Willard-Holt, 2001; Zhao et al., 2009) because it is primarily driven and shaped by the integral concepts in the 21st century: borderless education (Middlehurst, 2006), globalisation, migration, and internationalization (Gay, 2010), as well as “an accelerating increase in the demand for international education” (Lehman & Welch, 2020, p. 2). Hence, ITP provides opportunities for pre-service teachers (PSTs) to travel aboard and teach in international settings (Parr & Chan, 2015) that are rich with opportunities for the PSTs to learn, work, and interact in a multicultural environment and context (Kabilan, 2013; Kabilan et al., 2020).

Studies report such immersion programs have resulted in: (i) increased cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity of PSTs (Williams, 2005), (ii) widened participants' worldview, and enhanced their intercultural competence (Kabilan et al., 2017; Kabilan et al., 2020), (iii) improved language competency and skills (Lee, 2009; Trent, 2011), and (iv) enriched instructional and pedagogical knowledge and skills (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Willard-Holt, 2001). In addition, ITPs encourage institutional collaboration, strategic alliances, and facilitate networking opportunity for teachers and other members involved. This in turn enriches teachers' knowledge, as well as contributes positively towards school effectiveness with ideas, knowledge, and practices shared by international partners (Kabilan, 2013; Kabilan et al., 2017; Tomas et al., 2008).

However, ITPs bring along challenges that can be detrimental for PST's psychological, emotional, and sometimes physical well-being. PSTs are relatively new to the world of teaching and, hence, are unaware and not fully prepared to confront the complexities involved in this profession (Long et al., 2012). During their induction years, they are still undergoing the process of identity formation, developing beliefs and frame of references for the teaching profession (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Together with the objective of enhancing global and intercultural competencies of PSTs through international teaching programs, the major challenges of candidates involved in international exchange persist around socio-cultural differences that put them through cultural dissonance and disequilibrium (Taylor, 2017). Those experiences may function as a catalyst for professional development of PSTs (Brindley et al., 2009) but may also result in threat, stress, confusion, and feeling of alienation (Roberts, 2006). Allport et al. (2015) deem these challenges as culture shock, which, for PSTs specifically, may result from misunderstanding of local culture, work practices at schools, nature of student-teacher relationships, unfamiliar curriculum, classroom practices, and uncertain and unaccustomed environment (Lee, 2009; Willard-Holt, 2001).

Literature associates the feelings of culture shock with homesickness, stress, anxiety, depression, nervousness, isolation, and helplessness (Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Sherry et al., 2010). Furthermore, in the process of developing intercultural competence, the visiting teachers undergo psychological, emotional, and identity related struggle. For example, Hamel et al. (2010), on investigation of cultural disequilibrium experienced by teachers during short term teaching exchange program reported visiting teachers struggled with home setting and the environment they encountered as it did not meet their expectations. A few teachers also reported a lack of rapport with the host teacher in terms of social interaction, friendship, and some were dismayed by the behaviours of the students. Similarly, in a comprehensive study, Trilokekar and Kukar (2009) examined the disorienting or discomfoting experiences of PSTs of study-abroad programs. Aside from identity and race related challenges, the findings reported that one of the teachers had difficulty receiving support and guidance from the host teachers, which caused confusion and anxiety to her practice as a novice teacher.

These experiences of struggle influenced the visiting teachers' sense of self and identity. Similarly, Brindley, Quinn, and Morton (2009) explored PST's reflective observations (written in either consonant or dissonant view) of the customs and practices of the host schools. Of particular interest was the finding on the role of teachers whereby the visiting teachers struggled to explain their perceptions about their hosting teachers. The PSTs found discrepancies between the professional expectations from teachers and time allotted to work on them hence opted individualised ways to plan their lessons. Such ambiguity specially related to the cultural norm of teaching and classroom management can lead pre-service teachers to experience uneasiness and nervousness about practicing teaching (Hamel et al., 2010).

Altogether, the PSTs' struggle with the learning of a new career practice during ITP coupled with the challenge of moving out of comfort zone to practice teaching in an unfamiliar culture and work setting, even for a short period, can be confusing, disorienting, and uncomfortable (Merryfield, 2000). Stressful or experiences of dissonance or disorientation during international field practicum, if not managed thoughtfully, can exacerbate PSTs' transformational and adjustment challenges of becoming a teacher and abate the beneficial outcomes of international experiences. Despite these challenges associated with ITPs, the literature in teaching education have largely focussed on ITP's role in educational learning benefits of teachers. There is scant research on the provision of mechanism to alleviate the challenges associated with it.

The role of social support has emerged as a key factor in subjugating these challenges and facilitating psychological and emotional adjustment of the candidates involved in international program (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2017; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Social support offered

in form of social networks, intimate relationship, or mentoring can function as a protective factor against the challenges faced by the PSTs during their international visits, as it could provide personal assistance and emotional comfort to cope with the challenges (Horwitz et al., 2015; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Acknowledging the challenges confronted in the past international teaching practicums (ITP; Tsui, 2017), and with the intention to improve the design and effectiveness of future ITPs, in the current study the researchers provided a systematic support system to the PSTs through accompanying academic (chaperon), supervisor's initial visit, and peer support through social media throughout the teaching practicums abroad to understand the role of support system for ITP in enhancing PSTs' overall experiences during ITP against the challenges associated with it.

The central question that guided the study was – What are PST's experiences of the provision of support system during ITP?

Theoretical Underpinnings for Social Support System

Higher education research on student sojourning has comprehensively documented the challenges these students face in unfamiliar and novel social and institutional cultures and how the challenges contribute toward students' psychological, physical, and emotional ill-being (Prince, 2015). A comparable pattern is observed during ITP, whereby studies have reported teachers' discomfort, confusion, nervousness, anxiety, and sometime feeling of isolation while they encounter different and unfamiliar social and work cultures in terms of curriculum, students' behavior, classroom norms, and teaching practices (Lee, 2009; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2009; Willard-Holt, 2001). Hence, like sojourners, these negative experiences may lead PSTs to doubt their efficacy in teaching, create identify related issue, or even affect intentions to continue as teachers (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Lazarus's (1984) cognitive theory of stress and coping regards stress as a relational concept, which denotes transaction between an individual and the environment and in the event of an individual's demand from the environment exceeding his or her resources causes stress. Nevertheless, the theory suggests that to be able to function effectively during stressful situations, individuals develop a coping mechanism (tactics and strategies) using individual or situational sources. Folkman and Lazarus (1984) define coping as, "the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them" (p. 223). The two coping strategies defined are problem-focused (actions to alleviate stress) and emotion-focused coping strategies (regulate emotions to feel better). However, both the strategies highlight the significance of seeking of social support as a key resource for coping with stress. Social support is one form of situational support that performs as protective factors against negative outcomes. It is established in the literature that social support is an asset in mitigating the stress which is caused by unfamiliar cultural environment which in turn facilitates physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of individuals (Chu et al., 2010).

Social support is particularly seen important for PSTs professional development, job satisfaction, and intention to stay in the job (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Types of social support can be categorised generally in four different categories that are (a) emotional support, (b) informational support, (c) instrumental support, and (d) companionship support. Emotional support can be provided in the form of listening, acknowledging, trusting, appreciating, expressing love and care, showing concern, providing comfort and security, and enhancing self-esteem. On the other hand, informational support refers to providing knowledge, advice, suggestions, and information. This term also refers to tangible assistance provided in form of financial, material, labour, or time. Companionship support refers to

positive social interaction, informal feedback, and social and relationship satisfaction (Wills, 1985). The literature on social support, especially for sojourners, enumerates several indirect (e.g., reduction in stress), and direct (enhanced performance) beneficial outcomes of social support especially for individual who struggle to cope during the stressful events. For example, provision of social support is associated with lower rates of depression, stress, anxiety, and enhanced social, psychological and academic adjustment, as well as wellbeing, improved performance, motivation, and self-esteem (Konishi et al., 2018; Rueger et al., 2010). Similarly, the role of social support for PSTs, especially during induction is considered as a significant contributor for teacher retention, job satisfaction, and professional development (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Edwards, 2011; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Several studies in teacher education literature have provided evidence on the positive outcomes of the provision of social support in a variety of mediums. For example, mentoring by senior teachers and supervisors is one of the ways social support can be made available for PST for beneficial outcomes (Barrera et al., 2010; Clark & Byrnes, 2012). Hobson et al. (2009) on mentoring as teacher support stated that appropriate mentoring can produce enhanced confidence, morale and job satisfaction among PSTs as well as function as an emotional and psychological support.

Another effective way documented in the literature is using information technology mediated communication to extend social support to PSTs for positive outcomes. For instance, DeWert, Babinski, and Jones (2003) reported that provision of peer-to-peer online support to beginning teachers eased PSTs feelings of isolation and loneliness, and, thus, provided social emotional and professional support to the teachers. Similarly, Paulus and Scherff (2008) also found that online support provided to the PSTs during their practical experience functioned as a strong emotional and motivational support. Such use of social media can engage PSTs in a fresh and new “journey of learning and teaching” with “shared and co-constructed knowledge inside and outside the classroom” (Szeto et al., 2016, p. 43) that also allow PSTs to share their emotions and feelings (Hur & Brush, 2009). This scenario is possible as learners can mix their social life and their learning in the same environment (see Deng & Tavares, 2013; Jones et al., 2010), especially in social media such as Facebook.

Self-of-the-Researchers

One of our colleague’s publication (i.e., Kabilan, 2013) sparked our interests to further explore ITP and how our PST experiences during ITP could help them grow and develop into a more dynamic and enterprising teacher. We also believe that PST pursuing further studies in a different context would enhance their employability chances (Ng, 2019). Hence, the School of Educational Studies (SES), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) initiated the ITP research collaboration project that involved Malaysian, Indonesian, and Bangladeshi universities. The corresponding author, Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan, who planned and carried out USM’s first ITP in 2011-2012, led this project since he has managed an ITP previously. At that time of the current study, Hairul Nizam Ismail (3rd author) was the dean of SES, and a scholar in educational psychology. His administrative position and deep interest of the psychological elements of the project facilitated easier planning and implementation of ITP. Hairul suggested a system should be in place to support our USM students so that their learning experiences during ITP would not be greatly affected or jeopardized by any unwanted issues, obstacles, and challenges, which we obviously anticipated. We became aware that literature indicated a research gap of support system for ITP and therefore, planned and carried out this research. We then invited Amrita Kaur (1st author), a scholar in another Malaysian university who, like Hairul, was very much interested in understanding the PSTs’ experiences during their ITP, as her area was also Educational Psychology. Amrita has since moved to another university in

China, but that did not stop us from further collaborating and writing this paper and sharing its findings. We were supposed to further extend the ITP project and explore other areas of research that has not been investigated but the COVID-19 pandemic shelved our plans.

Methods

In this study, we adopted interpretive phenomenological approach (Heidegger, 2019) with in-depth phenomenological interviews and reflective journals to investigate the main research question - what are PST's experiences of support system during ITP? This methodological approach was considered appropriate because "it is concerned with lived experiences and seeks reality in individuals' narratives of their experiences of and feelings about specific phenomena, producing their in-depth descriptions" (Cilesiz, 2009 p. 240). Another reason for choosing interpretive approach over descriptive phenomenological approach was the aim of the study was to look for the meaning that participants made of their experiences of social support during ITP in their day-to-day life and not simply describe the phenomenon (Heidegger, 2019). In the current study, our epistemological position was that the data, as qualitative evidence, is contained within the experiences of the PSTs, who were involved in ITP and experienced support system. Furthermore, the underlying assumption of the interpretive phenomenological approach suggest that "presuppositions or expert knowledge on the part of the researcher are valuable guides to inquiry and, in fact, make the inquiry a meaningful undertaking" (Lopez & Wills, 2009, p. 729). Therefore, the researchers, with their positionality as teacher educator, employed multiple methods in gathering the data that are contained in teachers' experiences of support system provided during ITP.

Participants

The study involved 12 PSTs from the School of Educational Studies (SES), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), a research university. All 12 participants are final year students majoring in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), who were doing their compulsory 20 weeks of practicum. In SES USM, all students are given the opportunity to do their internship or practicum in other countries. If the PSTs embarks on the ITP, they are required to complete at least 12 weeks of their practicum in Malaysian schools, while completing the remaining 8 weeks in another country.

ITP and Related Contexts

The ITP project was made possible by the collaboration between SES USM, Universitas Siliwangi, and Universitas Kanjuruhan Malang of Indonesia and Dhaka University of Bangladesh. These three universities provided ample support and assistance, especially in terms of identifying schools for the PSTs' placement, arranging local accommodation and travel for the PSTs, providing local supervisors and supervising PSTs during ITP, and coordinating with the local education authorities.

The local mentor teachers from the respective schools, in which the PSTs are placed during ITP, would provide advice, assistance and guide in terms of teaching and learning. They would also be involved in assessing and grading them and so would the academic supervisors from the universities. Each PST is assigned one mentor teacher and one academic advisor-cum-supervisor from the collaborating universities. The mentors observed the PSTs at least three times a week, the school coordinator once a week, while the supervisor from the universities observed the PSTs at least thrice during the eight weeks of ITP. For all these observations, the

local schools and universities used their own existing instruments to assess the PSTs during their ITP.

The Support System

SES USM in collaboration with the partner institutions, designed a systematic support system for PSTs to be provided before, during and after the ITP. Acknowledging the challenges associated with ITP programs, the researchers mindfully created this support system with departmental support. Traditionally, such ITPs are conducted with a mentor for administrative support (Kabilan et al., 2020). The objectives and implementation plan for this purpose was formally articulated and later communicated to the members involved. Chaperon and peer group on WhatsApp were provided guidelines on how to facilitate successful implementation of ITP.

The three major supports provided were:

- a. Chaperon (accompanying lecturer) - One lecturer was appointed for each ITP venue to accompany the PST throughout the six weeks. The lecturer established connection with schools to be visited, disseminated information related to the students, syllabus, and the teaching plan of the host school with PSTs. They coordinated with the mentor teacher in the host school and PSTs to convey expectation from both the sides. The Chaperons accompanied the PSTs when they flew to their respective cities of ITP and remained with them for at least three to four days. The chaperons were the head of the respective delegates and represented Faculty A to the meetings and discussions with the administrative team of the universities and schools. The chaperons also maintained communication with the PSTs via social media (WhatsApp and Facebook) and were asked to support the students even after they returned.
- b. Supervisors' Visit – A supervisor was appointed for each city, and he/she visited the PSTs in the final two weeks of ITP. The supervisors constantly remained in touch via emails and other instant messaging tool with the PSTs since the beginning of ITP. While on site with PSTs, the supervisors observed their teaching for at least three times and carried out formal and informal discussions with them on professional and personal experiences. In addition, the PST were encouraged to consult their supervisors if the need help and advice in terms of matters related to teaching and learning, as well as ITP.
- c. WhatsApp Group – For each city, a WhatsApp group comprising the supervisor (SES USM), chaperon and the PSTs were created. The central purpose of the group was to serve as a support group to all the practicum students. Participation was voluntary.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

We used three primary sources of data collection, which were in-depth phenomenological interviews, reflective journals and the analysis of support, guidance and discussions that occurred in the WhatsApp group. The interview protocol is attached in Appendix A, which was created to capture PSTs' experiences of support system in easing out

the ITP. We conducted the interviews, which took place upon the return of the participants to their local university, and audio taped and transcribed the interviews into verbatims. Each participant was interviewed once for 40-60 minutes. Reflective journal was used to facilitate inquiry into the PSTs' experiences to find meaning. The PSTs were asked to write a reflective journal (at least twice a week) on their experiences of the provision of support system through the ITP. They were given questions (Appendix B) to guide their reflections. They also recorded critical incidents that occurred related to their experiences of social support. Institutional permission for the study was obtained the participants as well were informed that their feedback will be used for the study purposes. Their participation in interview and WhatsApp discussion was completely voluntary.

At this juncture, we would like to note that the USM's ethics committee did not make it compulsory, at that time, for individual research (i.e., without any form of funding) to get its approval. Nevertheless, as researchers, we felt that it was necessary to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality. Hence, we provided a letter of informed consent to the participants to acknowledge and sign. The content of the letter specifically described the aim of the study, the participants' rights, especially in terms of the purpose of data collected and their anonymity (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

We merged the interview transcripts and reflective journals of each participant into one document, including relevant data from the WhatsApp group. Therefore, the 12 data set constituted the raw data for the study. One of the underlying features of interpretive phenomenological approach is the researchers do not bracket their prior knowledge hence, the current study adopted hermeneutics inquiry to interpret the data (Spielgelberg, 1976). The analysis process described next was recursive in nature whereby the researchers went back and forth with the data to interpret the meaning. To be consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of interpretive phenomenological approach, we adopted Van Manen (1997)'s approach to isolate the themes in three different ways. For the purpose of this study, we employed all the three approaches. We began with the "The detailed reading approach" whereby the analysis began with reading and re-reading of the raw data of individual participant. We reflected on important keywords and sentences to ask what this information reveals about the phenomenon. A frequency table on the occurrence of those keywords in participants' narrative was maintained alongside the analysis to understand the degree of emotion experienced. We moved on to the next approach, "The selective or highlighting approach," whereby meaningful words, phrases, and statement were highlighted, and those selected words and phrases were pasted and tabulated in Word document to search for implicit meaning and assigned them into concepts and later categories. This was also the beginning whereby the sub themes that gave meaning to the phenomenon appeared. The same process was applied to all the participants' data. Finally, under "The holistic reading approach" the data was examined as a whole and the subthemes that were common across all the participants were used to create the final themes.

Finally, we used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria – credibility, transferability dependability, and confirmability to establish the trustworthiness and rigour of the study. In the current study the data was collected from two primary sources and their findings were contrasted to ensure if produced similar findings. Transferability concerns with the applicability of the findings to other contexts that are like those of a particular study's context. Thick description of the study methodology, as in this study, can facilitate transferability of the study in another similar context (Guba, 1981). Dependability concerns with the consistency and reliability of the findings if the inquiry is conducted with the similar participants and

context. In the current study, code-recode strategy was adopted to comprehend the lived experiences in a holistic way. Finally, confirmability, which concerns that the “data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392), was established using rigorous method for analysing the data using audit trail, how codes were assigned, and themes were generated.

Table 1 demonstrates how we extracted the keywords from the data and constructed a concept that describes the data. From these concepts, for example, “Physical safety,” “Emotional,” and “Chaperon,” we construed the sub theme, “emotional and physiological well-being” and thus, the main theme – “Supporter of emotional and physiological well-being.”

Table 1
Development of Themes

Supporter of Emotional and Physiological Well-Being			
	Keywords	Concept	Sub theme
I felt a sense of security for being with a familiar responsible figure when arriving in an unfamiliar place.	Sense of security Uncertainty Unfamiliar place	Physical safety	emotional and physiological well-being
Our accompanying lecturer serves as our connection to where we came from, we felt really nervous and a bit scared when it was time for her to go back to Malaysia. Her presence made us feel calm and well taken care off.	Connection Nervous Calm scared Well taken care off	Emotional Chaperon	emotional and physiological well-being
Motivation and Morale			
	Keywords	Concept	Sub theme
...his presence helped in a way that it encouraged us to do better and gave us a sense of purpose not to mention mental strength.	Encouragement Sense direction/purpose Value	Motivation of Encouragement	motivation and morale
Professional Knowledge and Skills			
	Keywords	Concept	Sub theme
teaching face to face and seeing his reaction provided me the right feedback and made me feel like I’m on the right track because during my stay there sometimes I felt lost like am I doing this right or did I do what we were supposed to do here. When he came and we discussed with him I would say it makes me felt comfortable.	Face to face Feedback Right track Discussion	Knowledge Feedback skills	Professional knowledge and skills
Technical Support			
	Keywords	Concept	Sub theme
Our chaperon taught us a lot like how to communicate better with the man on rickshaw so there wouldn't be any more misunderstanding and getting lost in the future, how not to be deceived by expensive fare and basically how to live safely. Also, the presence of our chaperone helped us solved our accommodation problems that rose due to miscommunication with the host.	Communication/ miscommunication Transport Accommodation	Logistics	Technical support

Findings

The phenomenon investigated in this study was PSTs experiences of support system during ITP. The fact that most of the data were embedded with emotional experiences, it was an arduous task difficult to assign a few experiences under a particular category. For example, a statement, “I was already exhausted from the first day, but his presence (the supervisor) lifted my mood like a caffeine kick early in the morning,” has a connotation for positive emotional well-being as well as motivational appeal to continue with practicum requirement with zeal and enthusiasm. However, such dilemmas were resolved by analyzing the context and outcomes of the experiences. Data analysis resulted in four major themes, which comprises several sub themes. Along with the researchers’ interpretative description, PSTs descriptions of their experiences of support are presented using verbatim and quotes in each theme. Wherever possible, we also present percentages (%) to denote the frequency of idea or phrase within data sets.

Supporter of Emotional and Physiological Well-Being

International visits for teachers as sojourners along with fun and excitement can also be emotionally laden experiences (e.g., Nguyen, 2014). It was evident in PSTs’ experiences that the fear of unknown, uncertainty, and ambiguity can contribute to stress, nervousness and anxiety during the ITP but the presence of support, virtual or physical, served as an emotional support in several practical ways. Throughout their interviews and reflection PSTs used negative terms such as homesickness (70%), nervousness (62%) anxiety (44%), scared (40%), unfamiliarity (30%), and unease (27%) to express their negative experiences that they either experienced or could have experienced in the absence of support. They highlighted that the presence of accompanying lecturer alleviated these experiences. For example, S7 expressed in the interview:

To me, being in a totally new environment was pretty intimidating. I was genuinely scared as the environment was different and somehow, the presence of the accompanying lecturers helped in providing some sort of comfort and reassurance to adjust ourselves with the new environment.

Additionally, the visit from the supervisor not only reduced negative emotions but contributed towards positive emotional experiences. For example, S1 said:

YES! We were so glad that he came as he brought to us what we are familiar with although we are in a foreign and unfamiliar place. It does not only help us curb a bit of our homesickness but lifted our moods brought smiles on our faces.

Another PST reiterated the similar emotion:

Definitely yes, Dr k went there when we were there for one month and some of us started to feel homesick and when he came, we felt as if a relative from back home came to visit to make us feel happy. (S10)

The communication on WhatsApp group provided the similar positive emotional experiences to PSTs. For example, in the reflective writing, a participant narrated an incident on the role of WhatsApp support:

I remembered when I was sick, all the kind words sent to me through WhatsApp did help me feel better. It lifted up my spirit and the WhatsApp group also serve as a connection to home when I was feeling a bit homesick. Moreover, sometimes I can vent my frustration with the other members in the WhatsApp group and in turn they gave me words of support that made me feel that I can go through all challenges.

However, the finding suggests that these supports did not only contribute towards PSTs emotional well-being, but also provided them with physical safety. Most (85%) of the data set comprises the word physical “safety” and “security.” As S1 wrote, “I felt a sense of security for being with a familiar responsible figure when arriving in an unfamiliar place.” In fact, the company of a chaperon made the travel abroad safe as S6 wrote, “...in a way, it made us feel safer to travel abroad with the company of a lecturer.” Another one said “I also had a feeling of being protected that was quite akin to the feeling you get around a family member” (S3). Another PST S11 wrote descriptively about how the provision of support system contributed towards their physical well-being:

Visits to unknown countries and work environments have taken its toll on our mental as well physical strength. Sometimes, due to the differences in the countries, we tend to get sick, depressed, and feel unsafe. I’m not saying that it’s dangerous or what not and yes we’re not little kids, but I felt secured protected with accompanying lecturer around us” (S5)

Hence, according to PSTs experiences, the provision of support system for ITP functioned as supporter of emotional as well physical well-being for the PSTs.

Source of Motivation and Morale

Closely aligned with the above discussed theme is the issue of motivation and morale for the PSTs. It is evident that exposure to foreign culture and workplace can be challenging for PSTs to function effectively in new environment and learn as well. S4 expressed, “to overcome the challenges such as homesickness, new work system, new culture, and role ambiguity can stress us as well as make us feel demotivated.” However, PSTs’ experiences reveal that presence of support system became a source of motivation and raised their morale to thrive in new surroundings. S2, on the presence of accompanying lecturer remarked, “I think he made us more comfortable and confident and boosted our morale to face the new school and new people that we will be working with.” Another PST described the visit of her supervisor in detail and how it motivated her.

That’s what I truly felt. His visit helped us to renew our motivation. As for us, or at least me, I think I really got out of my comfort zone by choosing Bangladesh as the place for my ITP. Besides feeling all excited to stay at new place with new environment and people, I did find it challenging. Thus, I really need to be motivated every day in order to have good experience there. However, after so many days I have to admit it is quite a battle at times to stay motivated so visit by Dr. K was necessary to be honest. I think that we somehow feel connected to him despite all his fatherly nag (or lecture) to us, he ended up inspiring us all in those conditions. (S6)

The reason presence of this support system contributed to PSTs motivation was that they felt valued and worthy which in turn invigorated their purpose of ITP. For example, S1 said, “The knowledge that I am taken seriously by the department that practicum is meaningful, and our supervisor is coming for us all the way inspired me to do my best.”

The similar thoughts were echoed in S2’s remarks:

We felt appreciated and cared throughout this program, we didn’t feel like we were abandoned in a foreign country instead we felt like we are in good hands, and this give us a spirit boost to do a great job in ITP and give our best shot...

Similarly, S10 mentioned the accompanying lecturer’s “presence helped in a way that it encouraged us to do better and gave us a sense of purpose not to mention mental strength to do well.” Another source of motivation was found when PSTs experienced their support becoming part of them during this journey. Their presence and active involvement provided them encouragement and assurance on their performance. S6, while narrating her experience of organising a Leadership and English Language Camp (LELAC), said:

He also visited us while we were doing the international English camp (LELAC), so it felt good that he was with us, and he got to see all the hard work that we put to make the camp worked. We were excited.

Furthermore, the motivation emanated by the provision of social support led PSTs to perform their best in the classes. S12 wrote that “I believe that the visit helped me to fuel back my motivation after a month of staying there. A motivated teacher will get to be more positive in class and I believe that is a good thing”. Furthermore, S2 reiterated the similar experiences that:

We were always motivated to do our best in teaching there. However, when our lecturers came to visit, we felt more excited as we could share our experience and at the same time complain about any discomfort to them. In a way, most of us felt as if our family came to visit and they are with us in it.

Even though the support from WhatsApp group was virtual, several PST’s (40%) felt that WhatsApp group also served as a source of motivation and morale. For example, S8 wrote:

WhatsApp group can be considered as a medium for us to receive a moral support from our lecturers and peers. We were able to share our experiences and if there were some bad days, we had a medium to rant at which eventually became like a therapy for us.

To continue with the similar experience, S1 said:

A virtual support system of our educators & peers to console and remind us through advice and motivations could really boost our spirit again. WhatsApp is indeed a very good platform of support system as it is easy to use and reach the other parties.

Based on the PSTs’ experiences and description, we can conclude that the provision of support system for ITP became of source of motivation and morale for having PSTs perform well at ITP.

Provider of Professional Knowledge and Skills

In order to gain professional knowledge and other relevant skills, ITP are inherently valuable programs whereby contextual and individual factors contribute towards skill acquisition of PSTs. Its beneficial outcomes are explicitly discussed in the introduction section. However, the analysis of PSTs experiences explained that beneficial outcomes can be further enhanced with the provision of support during sojourn. PSTs did highlight the role of mentor teachers in helping them acquire professional knowledge; however, with the inclusion of three supports provided, PST' professional gains advanced much more. The feedback provided by one of the PSTs, is that the mentor teachers' support was more meaningful for them. As S4 said in the interview, "while he also was there to observe us, and he gave us a few pointers on to improve our teaching skills. This system has provided us enough guidance, making the experience more meaningful." S8 wrote:

The local mentor at school observed us but his (visiting supervisor) presence was important in order to determine whether we are doing the right thing in terms of teaching there. Since the program is initiated by him, I felt he knew about our learning outcomes and how one must achieve them.

The PSTs felt that the supervisors' visits were planned as a routine or a regular event that has a specific agenda (i.e., to align with PSTs' learning objective). Therefore, supervisors' physical presence contributed to PSTs' learning and validated their teaching skills. S5 said in the interview:

During class observation, seeing him face to face and seeing his reaction made me feel like I'm on the right track because during my stay there sometimes I felt lost. I was asking myself if I am doing this right or did, I do what we were supposed to do here? When he came, observed and discussed with us, I felt I gained a lot of knowledge.

S5, reiterated the similar experiences in reflection. The background of the statement below was related to the differences in national education policies of the PSTs and the host nation that might affect the quality of feedback for teaching and learning:

Supervision from lecturers from our own university was essential because we need to know whether we have done our tasks on par with the (university's name) expectation and our lacking if there is any. The comments regarding our teaching seem more valid and reliable if they come from the ones who actually understand the goals that we are trying to achieve (i.e., conducting 21st century education style, etc.). However, from my experience in Bangladesh, that isn't the goal that they are going for. All they wanted for their students is to excel even if it means using the traditional method that is memorizing. Thus, their supervisions may not focus on how and what we were trying to teach.

Similar experiences were associated with the presence of accompanying lecturer. S1 reflected:

I wasn't sure whether I was doing alright in terms of my teaching and adapting to the syllabus of host school, and I think it would be very difficult because if we don't have anyone to refer to if we encounter any problems in professional

work. We are sometimes hesitant to ask teaching related questions with the host and with her presence there, she did help us to ease out the confusion guide us towards doing our teaching well.

In terms of professional knowledge and skills gain, support from WhatsApp may not equally significant as compared to the other two supports. Nevertheless, 30% PSTs saw a learning gains advantages through virtual support. As S11 wrote, “The WhatsApp group is very important for me because I can directly ask the lecturers and friends without hesitation whenever I need, for example in terms of the syllabus or teaching techniques.” S9 reflected on critical incident and wrote, “My WhatsApp group was more like a community of practitioner; it was full of teaching ideas and strategies from people who were like us teaching abroad. We could ask questions and learn from each other.”

Hence, according to PSTs experiences and description of the provision of support system it is evident that it functioned as a provider of professional knowledge and skills.

Purveyor of Technical Support

Appropriate practical and procedural support is central for successful implementation of ITP (Yeom & Bae, 2010). To function in new surroundings, culture and workplace, the PSTs required guidelines on issues ranging from food, accommodation, transportation to establishing communication with the host school members, seeking advice and help for several other reasons. The experiences of PSTs in the current study highlighted that support system provided during the ITP facilitated in seeking technical support. For example, a teacher, S7 while narrating the incident said:

This incident was related to accommodation. We had a miscommunication with our host about the accommodation. It was very overwhelming for us to handle on the first day of our arrival but thanks to our chaperone, we managed to overcome the problem.

The data suggests that the major concern of the PSTs was to obtain permission and gain procedural information to function effectively during the ITP. For example, S3 wrote, “A support system is also needed in a way that it would be easier to reach for professional and an authority to ask permissions or inform about important decisions throughout the practical days. Similarly, S9 reflects on her experience:

Everything was so vague the moment we arrived. For instance, we did not know exactly the proper procedure to introduce ourselves to the host country and barely knew anyone. Therefore, with the accompanied of the lecturer or a wiser person, I must say, we managed to settle all the important procedures before getting into the schools.

The participants during IPT also conducted a variety of activities that they had planned. The successful implementation of that plan was contingent on the assistance of host school. The PSTs largely (70%) felt those activities could be successfully accomplished due to the support system. For example, S7 wrote:

We were given tasks to accomplish in the school that we went. Therefore, we need to have on-going discussion with the supervisors and everyone to ensure that we would be able to carry out the plans as required. We were able to discuss

the issues with our lecturers and friends where they helped us to convey the message properly to our Bangladesh supervisors of what we wanted to do, without being rude and damaging the ties between two institutions.

Furthermore, PSTs also highlighted the support from WhatsApp group. For example, S11 said, "WhatsApp group helped a lot as it is direct, free, and all sorts of media can be shared via WhatsApp like pictures, documents, videos, hence, making documentation easier." In summary, the provision of support system also served as purveyor of technical support, whereby PSTs could avail procedural and methodological support with ease.

Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that provision of support system for PSTs during ITP has a substantial role to play in enhancing their overall experiences during ITP against the challenges associated with it. PSTs initial experiences of unease, confusion, anxiety, and fear during ITP which otherwise might have contributed to stress and negative outcomes, were subsided by the presence of the support system. Protective effects of emotional support against stressors and for healthy psychological and physiological function are important (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2017; Yeh & Inose, 2003). However, of particular importance for us in these findings is the impact of PSTs positive emotional state and feeling of safety on their learning experiences. Positive emotional experiences are substantial for academic settings as they directly influence individual's cognitive processes and impact learning (Pekrun, 1992). Negative or poor quality of emotions experienced during practicum can impede successful completion of practicum (Farrell, 2007), can delay the learning process (Pillen et al., 2013), and can be detrimental to their identity development as a teacher (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). PSTs' personal and surrounding safety are also significant, as they contribute to one's well-being (Tay & Diener, 2011). Specifically, in the context like the present study whereby the practicum venues were situated in developing countries, which may not have well developed physical infrastructure, amenities, and other appropriate physical support for PSTs to be safe. However, PSTs' experiences informed that the presence of accompanying lecturer and other support system alleviated these concerns by guiding them to right places to eat, take safe transport, and be there if they experience any sickness.

The sense of emotions permeates another theme of this study and links them together. PSTs' experiences of positive emotions and fulfillment of safety needs indirectly lead them to experience motivation as positive emotions have also been linked to heightened experiences of motivation (Pekrun, 1992). However, the findings extend evidence that provision of social support also directly contributed towards PSTs' motivation and morale (Hobson et al., 2009). The most significant findings under this theme suggested that provision of social support such as visit by the supervisor made PSTs feel valued, the steady company from chaperon provided them with warmth and care, and WhatsApp group support made them experience connectedness. Overall, the three support systems had PSTs experience belongingness with the task (ITP) they were undertaking, thus, motivated them to perform optimally.

These findings substantiate the claims made by self-determination theory, a contemporary theory of human motivation which postulates need for relatedness as one of the basic psychological needs to be fulfilled to nurture self-determination and motivation among teachers for optimal outcomes (Roth et al., 2007). The role of teacher motivation in learning to become a teacher, in intending to continue as a teacher and to teach innovatively and effectively is evident in the literature (Alexander, 2008; Roth et al., 2007), and the findings suggest that it is equally significant while PSTs pursue their practicum abroad. The findings also suggest that in terms of professional gains, PSTs perceived the role of support system abroad was highly

significant. These findings are directly relatable to a variety mentoring support teachers seek to learn from different people in different in ways (Clarke & Byrnes, 2012; Kelly & Antonio, 2016). Those supports contribute significantly towards acquisition of professional skills for teaching (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Edwards, 2011). The distinguished information we can drive from the current context is PSTs value mentoring support that is aligned with their own goals and congruent with their beliefs. For example, even though the PSTs in the current study were satisfied with the local mentoring support, they perceived supervision and discussion with their own supervisor (during the visit) and discussion on teaching strategies with their peers (on WhatsApp) and accompanying lecturer more relevant and meaningful. Furthermore, this interpretation reiterates Hobson et al. (2009) recommendation that benefits of such mentoring can only be procured when it is “fit for purpose and addresses, and is responsive to, the needs of the mentee/learner” (p. 212). Finally, PSTs experiences informed that this support system was crucial in providing technical support for successfully accomplishing the ITP. Technical support in terms of assistance for communication, logistic arrangements such as accommodation, transportation is crucial for successful sojourning experiences (Lee, 2009; Willard-Holt, 2001). However, in the current findings PSTs reported that the provision of support facilitated not only towards logistic arrangements but provided clarity and assurance in carrying out activities with the host school. Hence, the support systems contributed towards positive experiences and smooth functioning of ITP activities, which in turn resulted in enhanced learning.

PSTs experiences with the complex realities of teaching in a real classroom during practicum coupled with the challenges of unfamiliar culture, curriculum, and work settings can leave them perplexed (Premier & Miller, 2010). The role of support during teaching induction programs and later during the professional teaching practice are established as critical for teacher development (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The finding suggests that this support is equally relevant and critical for PSTs during practicum abroad. Hence, these practicums can be designed with the provision of systematic support system that would facilitate positive experiences for personal and learning gains of PSTs during those challenges. Mahan and Stachowski (1989) do not mention explicitly about the provision of support system for ITP but greatly emphasis on extensive preparatory activities which included early correspondences between the PSTs and host schoolteachers to understand the practices, and policies of the host schools and supervisors must work closely with the PSTs and give them constructive feedback to prepare them to teach in foreign settings. Accordingly, ITP can adopt these recommendations and design a more sophisticated program to extend required support to PSTs. These programs through its support system can create conditions that would support PSTs’ emotional well-being, ensure physical safety, promote relatedness, and hence promote their motivation to pursue ITP effectively (Parkhouse et al., 2016).

The current study was set against the background that PSTs as sojourners drive numerous personal and professional benefits from their trips abroad; however, challenges related cultures, language barriers, logistic arrangements, and other potential differences (Lee, 2009; Willard-Holt, 2001) can cause dissonance (Brindley et al., 2009) thereby undermine positive experiences. The role of social support is widely acknowledged among sojourning students for functioning as a buffer against several stressors. However, its impact on PSTs remains scantily explored. Future studies should explore this aspect of ITP where new forms of support system could be experimented, such as the use of social networking sites (SNS). In addition, fresh social support systems and devices developed from the social self-determination theory should be experimented with in an ITP environment. Nevertheless, PSTs of different gender, with different personalities and uphold contrasting values may react differently to the kind of support system received and needed (Khairani et al., 2018). What would be the PSTs’ reactions towards the support received and how these affect their ITP experiences? These

questions could be interesting areas of future research in terms of support system provided during ITP.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

-
1. Was the presence of the accompanying lecturer needed when you first went to the host country for the ITP?
 2. What effects did his/her presence have on you in easing out the ITP experience?
 3. Was the supervisors' visit during the ITP necessary / needed?
 4. In what ways were you affected (or not) by your supervisors' presence?
 6. Was the provision of WhatsApp group necessary/needed?
 7. How effective was the support provided through WhatsApp group from your peers and lecturers?
 8. Overall, how would you describe your experiences of these support system during your ITP?
 9. Would you like to narrate any significant incident which is relevant to the provision of this support system?
-

Appendix B

Reflection Prompts

-
1. How did you feel about the presence of chaperon and/or, supervisor, and/or WhatsGroup this week?
 2. How difficult you think your experiences of ITP would have been, if you didn't have any of the support (chaperon, supervisor visit, and WhatsGroup)?
 3. Do you remember one or more incidents where you felt the support (chaperon, supervisor visit, and WhatsGroup) played a significant role or eased your ITP experiences?
-

Appendix C

Letter of Informed Consent (LIC)

I willingly agree to participate in the research, “**The Role of Support System: A Phenomenological Study of Pre-service Teachers’ International Teaching Practicum**” that is conducted by Professor Dr. Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan and Prof. Dr. Hairul Nizam Ismail of School of Educational Studies, Unviersiti Sains Malaysia and Dr Amrita Kaur of School of Education, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

I understand that data collected from me is anonymous and confidential. A pseudonym will be used at all phases of the research, including the write-up. No one will have access to the code name, except the researcher and me. Again, pseudonym will be used if the results of the present study are published or reported at professional meetings and conferences, unless permitted otherwise by myself in a form of written consent.

I understand that I can withdraw from the present study at any point of time. In no way will my decision on whether to participate or continue with the research affect me as a student or the outcome of ITP.

Research Participant	
Name:	(Please write in CAPITAL LETTER, which also means that you are signing this letter)
Date:	

Please email this LIC to: kabilan@usm.my

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The data used in this study cannot be made available for public as the respondents of the study feel revealing the data in its entirety may expose their identities.

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