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## **Peer-group mentoring for primary pre-service teachers during professional experience**

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## **Peer-group mentoring for primary pre-service teachers during professional experience**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of primary pre-service teachers engaged in a peer-group mentoring program during a professional experience placement. Pre-service teachers completed weekly questionnaires and an interview about their experiences. Questionnaire and interview responses were coded and analysed according to three domains of teacher development: professional, personal and social. Common themes about the participants' peer-group mentoring experiences include the role of the professional standards, the practical nature of the activities, increased confidence to teach and feelings of belonging and being supported. However, pre-service teachers did not make links between theory and practice in the sessions. This study provides insights into how the Finnish concept of peer-group mentoring might be implemented for pre-service teachers in an Australian context.

Keywords: peer-group mentoring; professional experience; pre-service teacher

### **Introduction**

The conceptualisation of in-school mentoring for pre-service teachers has undergone a shift in recent years. Le Cornu (2005, p. 356) described a movement “away from the mentor as expert, hierarchical one-way view to a more reciprocal relationship” to where participants challenge and support each other’s professional learning. These changes challenge the assumption that “an expert teacher can facilitate the transition for a student of teacher education to be a qualified teacher in the existing school culture and be retained as a teacher across time” (Wang & Oddell, 2007, p. 474). Mentoring is now conceived as an opportunity for mentors and mentees to share their professional experiences in a collective reflection (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013). Hence mentoring is more likely to occur in a group context where the aims and agenda are decided collectively and pre-service teachers’ participation is not subject to formal

assessment. Mentor group meetings provide “confidential time and space for discussion, problem solving, sharing of experiences, and discussing professional literature” (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014, p. 161). In this paper, we report one such initiative where primary pre-service teachers participated in a mentoring program based on the Finnish model of peer-group mentoring during one school term as part of a professional experience partnership.

Mentoring can occur within a variety of frameworks, each with its own goals and objectives. Wang and Odell (2007) identified 16 types of mentoring relationships which they categorised according to critical constructivist and social cultural perspectives on learning. The authors hypothesised three core conceptions of mentoring: humanistic, situated apprenticeship, and critical constructivist. The humanistic perspective focuses on helping the newcomer transition to the profession by overcoming challenges on a personal level. The situated apprenticeship approach supports novices in adjusting to the prevailing school culture and the norms of teaching through the development of specific techniques and skills aligned to their school contexts. Mentoring within a critical constructivist perspective is designed to transform teaching by engaging novice teachers and mentors in collaborative inquiry with equal participation.

Grimmett, Forgasz, Williams, and White (2018) outline roles for mentor teachers. The ‘supervisor and assessor’ corresponds to the traditional apprenticeship model of professional experience and is designed to help pre-service teachers to develop their classroom practice. The ‘fellow teacher educator’ emphasises professional experience partnerships and teacher educators regard mentor teachers as colleagues. The ‘supporter of pre-service teacher learning’ occurs where a community of practice model forms the basis of the professional experience program.

## **Peer-group mentoring**

Peer-Group Mentoring (PGM) is a Finnish mentoring model that is consistent with the approach outlined above. PGM is implemented in mixed groups of novice and more experienced teachers who engage in professional dialogue and knowledge sharing (Korhonen, Heikkinen, Kiviniemi, & Tynjälä, 2017). PGM meetings are held on a regular basis, typically in a location away from the school setting and membership is entirely voluntary. Members take ownership of the program by suggesting topics for discussion and by contributing to the organisation and operation of the group. Group discussions are framed around the members' narrative accounts about teaching and are facilitated by an experienced teacher-mentor who has been trained for the role and does not undertake any assessment of the participants, but rather is focused on supporting the professional learning of members.

PGM is based in part on ideas of socio-constructivism, dialogue and knowledge sharing (Geeraerts et al., 2015) through critical constructivism (Wang & Oddell, 2007). Critical constructivist mentoring relationships are built on two key ideas. The first is critical theory which assumes the fundamental goal of learning is to continually question existing knowledge and practice. The second is the notion that knowledge is actively constructed in and through a process of making sense of experiences and learning is conceptualised as a knowledge-building process. Knowledge-building “allocates new power to learners: they are the real actors; they take responsibility and show initiative; they are required to self-direct and self-assess their own processes” (Ligorio, 2010, p. 94).

Another key aspect of PGM is the construct of integrative pedagogy (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012) which frames professional expertise in an integrated and holistic combination of theoretical and practical knowledge with self-regulative and socio-cultural knowledge. In PGM, knowledge is achieved through colleagues sharing

and reflecting on their practical knowledge of personal experiences within the sociocultural knowledge of their individual contexts. The reflective practices of the group allow for deep conceptual understanding of the topics being discussed and participants' engage in self-reflection designed to develop their metacognitive and reflective skills and promote self-regulation. However, integrative sharing and reflecting is only possible to the extent that all participants are willing to contribute equally to the PGM sessions (Korhonen et al., 2017).

Teerikorpi and Heikkinen (2012) identified factors that might contribute to the success of PGM which they categorised as physical and administrative, social, and methods used during the meetings. Among the physical aspects are the availability of refreshments, a comfortable meeting space, and scheduling meetings at a convenient time for participants. Social aspects include participants' motivation, active participation, and establishing common goals for the group. The methods include agreement among the group about rules for the format and structure of the meetings. For example, a requirement for punctuality, norms for turn-taking, not interrupting others, and so on. Also covered in the methods are the topics for discussion and the inclusive way in which they are chosen.

Geeraerts et al. (2015) used an online survey to investigate perceptions of 116 teachers (ranging from early career to more experienced teachers) who had participated in PGM. They found that the teachers unanimously regarded PGM as an important tool for professional development throughout the entire teaching career. The authors acknowledge some limitations of their study including the small data-set and low response rate. The results were also based entirely on participants' self-reports. Estola, Syrjälä, and Maunu (2012) examined four PGM meetings for teachers who had graduated within the previous five years. Data for the study included researcher

observation notes from the PGM sessions and from viewing video-recordings of them afterwards and written reflections which all participants completed at the end of each session. Estola et al. (2012) found that PGM discussions focused mainly on relationship building—with colleagues, parents, and students. The teachers valued the opportunity to share the challenges they faced at school and that they had developed new perspectives on teaching. The fact that the group leader was a more experienced teacher also had a positive impact on the PGM. However, while the paper provides many examples of what the participants shared during the meetings, there is little analysis of the nature of the interactions among the group.

PGM was initially designed for the professional learning of in-service teachers, though its potential as a model for mentoring pre-service teachers has also been recognised. Aspfors, Hansén, Tynjälä, Heikkinen, and Jokinen (2012) note that “a heterogeneous group of representatives from different professional and subject areas, as well as both new and experienced teachers, can also be enriching by offering new insights and broader perspectives” (p. 136). Korhonen et al. (2017) investigated PGM in a combined group of pre-service and in-service teachers with the aim to “build bridges between teacher education and working life and to develop practices for supporting student teachers in the transition phase” (p. 154). The groups consisted of two or three pre-service teachers, an equal number of in-service teachers, and one or two mentor-facilitators. Groups met six to eight times over the year and, although themes for discussion varied among groups, some common topics were covered by nearly all groups. These included classroom management, differentiating instruction to cater for all learners’ needs, ICT, well-being and coping, engaging with colleagues and with parents, and professional development. The authors analysed reflective reports collected at the end of the PGM and classified participants’ experiences into four categories:

coffee break (a social activity of unwinding, relaxation, refreshment, amusement and chatting); peer-support (emotional support through sharing experiences and mutual encouragement); identity construction (to promote self-knowledge and individual growth supported by the group); professional community (sharing expertise, professional and communal development, constructive learning and critical reflection).

A key finding from the study by Korhonen et al. (2017) was that PGM did not attain the highest category of ‘professional community’ when there was a disconnect between theory and practice. In these PGMs, pre-service teachers wanted to hear about and learn from the practical experiences of the in-service teachers and were not so willing to share their own ideas. The authors note that a defining characteristic of ‘professional community’ PGMs was that pre-service teachers regarded themselves as equals among their more experience colleagues in terms of knowledge—not that they had the same knowledge as in-service teachers, but that they possessed different kinds of expertise that were just as valuable and therefore worth sharing.

Kemmis et al. (2014) compared mentoring practices for new teachers in Australia (New South Wales), Sweden, and PGM in Finland. The authors noted the importance of the Finnish context where “Peer-group mentoring is rooted in the high professional autonomy of Finnish teachers and schools” (p. 161). They characterised the approach taken in New South Wales as ‘supervision’ with a focus on professional standards and teacher effectiveness likely to “produce and reproduce dispositions of compliance to authority, in both mentees and mentors” (p. 163). To describe mentoring in Sweden, Kemmis and colleagues used the term ‘support’, where “a mentor, who is not usually in a supervisory relationship with the mentee, assists the mentee in the development of their professional practice” (p. 159). In the present study, we investigate



how the Finnish model of PGM might be transferred to an Australian context against the backdrop of the contrasting mentoring practices in the two countries.

### **Conceptual framework for the present study**

The conceptual framework for the present study is based on the work of Bell and Gilbert (1994) who described three main types of development for the teachers: professional, personal and social. In the professional dimension, the emphasis is on supporting the beginning teacher in gaining confidence in essential teacher competences, including pedagogical knowledge and skills. It involves “changing concepts and beliefs about ... education, and changing classroom activities” (Bell & Gilbert, 1994, p. 493-4). For their professional development, beginning teachers require access to knowledge about teaching which they develop in PGM through interactions with more experienced teachers (Geeraerts et al., 2015). The professional support provided by mentors to beginning teachers can also contribute to enhancing the mentors’ professionalism and of the school as a whole.

The personal dimension covers emotions and teacher self-efficacy including professional identity, interacting with colleagues and with students, and views about teaching and learning. Emotions, self-efficacy and self-esteem are key elements in the personal dimension to reduce stress and anxiety and to enhance the confidence and self-motivation of beginning teachers. In order to create this personal support, it is important that pre-service teachers hear the experiences of their peers to recognise that their issues are not unique and to work together in developing solutions. Hence it is important in PGM sessions that issues and feelings can be discussed in a non-judgmental way (Teerikorpi & Heikkinen, 2012).

The social dimension emphasises “working with and relating to other teachers and students in new ways” (Bell & Gilbert, 1994, p. 494) with the aim of promoting

cooperation among the members of the PGM. Novices are supported to become members of the school community, including its norms and cultures, and of the broader profession. Pre-service teachers are helped to see themselves as part of a learning community (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) within the school and the activities of the PGM focus on developing pre-service teachers' understanding and acceptance of the norms and customs of the school (Geeraerts et al., 2015).

As noted by Fresko and Alhija (2015), there is “little empirical information” (p. 37) about the specific benefits of mentoring and induction programs for the professional development of new teachers. Hence the aim of the present study was to investigate how PGM might assist primary pre-service teachers develop professionally, personally and socially.

## **Method**

### ***PGM context and participants***

The PGM was developed as part of the New South Wales Department of Education Hub Schools initiative. Hub schools showcase and share high-quality professional experience programs in conjunction with a partner university. The school-university partnership creates a context for investigating innovative practices in teacher education by providing opportunities for collaborative, school-based research on professional experience. The hub school invites other schools to join a network so that programs can be implemented across a range of settings. The authors jointly developed the PGM as part of the collaboration between the university and the hub school.

Ethics approval was obtained from the university and the PGM was offered to all final year primary pre-service teachers who were completing a practicum at one of the eight primary schools in the hub network. Pre-service teachers were invited to the

PGM via an email from the Professional Experience Office at the university and through announcements on the university's learning management system. PGM sessions each lasted for one hour and were held on Tuesdays after school for eight weeks at the hub school. The sessions began with afternoon tea supplied by the pre-service teachers as an opportunity for participants to socialise and network. Attendance was voluntary though we encouraged participants to attend as many sessions as they could.

The second author, a lead teacher at the school with responsibility for the professional experience program, facilitated the sessions. Her role in the PGM was to “act as a facilitator who sheds light on specific aspects of the practicum experience, ... raises questions, and conducts a profound discussion on them” (Biberman-Shalev, 2018, p. 261). At each session, two or three teachers from the hub school joined the PGM and shared their experiences around the topic for discussion. There were 50 pre-service teachers who attended at least one PGM session and the weekly attendance was about 15 pre-service teachers, including a core group of ten who attended all eight sessions. Participants also remained after the PGM session concluded to continue socialising.

PGM sessions were designed to be interactive so that pre-service teachers could ask questions and share their experiences, examples and ideas. Following Jones and Ryan (2014), the PGM was based on discussion topics to promote reflection among participants. Topics were selected from suggestions made in an anonymous Pre-PGM Survey in which 55 pre-service teachers who expressed an interest in the PGM nominated areas they would like to see covered in the sessions. The weekly topics were:

- The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at Graduate Level
- Building relationships
- Guiding and managing student behaviour
- How to run Literacy Groups – running records

- Early career teaching tips
- Programming and backward mapping
- The role of specialist teachers
- Student welfare and the work of school counsellors

The study adopts a critical constructivist perspective (Wang & Oddell, 2007) to investigate participants' experiences in the PGM. Critical constructivism is based on the assumption that mentoring relationships will assist novice teachers critique and question the existing culture of the school and its teaching practices. Mentors act as agents of change who pose questions and support beginning teachers to learn collaboratively as they transform their knowledge of learning and teaching. Wang and Oddell (2007) note that, in order for the mentoring relationship to be successful, mentors and novices must share a commitment to reform-oriented learning and teaching practices.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

In order to gather feedback about the effectiveness of the PGM, pre-service teachers who attended were invited to complete an anonymous Post-PGM Questionnaire after each session. We also invited pre-service teachers to an interview at the end of the final PGM session where they could discuss their experiences. The questionnaire and interview questions were similar to the prompting questions used by Korhonen et al. (2017) and were designed to find out more about their motivation for attending the group, what they had learned from taking part, whether they thought the sessions were worthwhile, and how they could be improved. Eighty-three Post-PGM Questionnaires were received and six pre-service teachers agreed to be interviewed; two were interviewed together and the remaining four were interviewed individually. The interviewers were teachers from the school who had presented some of the PGM

sessions. Interview questions were emailed to participants in advance and three pre-service teachers also submitted written responses to the questions when they attended their interview. The first author was present for each interview and took notes in order to capture the pre-service teachers' responses.

Data analysis was completed by a research assistant who was not part of the PGM. Qualitative data from the Post-PGM Questionnaires, written responses to the interview questions, and the first author's interview notes were analysed using an inductive coding approach of reflexive iteration (Srivasta, 2009) whereby the participants' responses were read repeatedly to identify emerging themes. Responses were analysed according to two phases of analysis outlined by Elo and Kyngas (2008): preparation and organising. In the preparation phase, the researcher becomes familiar with the data by reading through the responses multiple times. At this stage, the data were treated as a whole and there was no attempt to separate out ideas attributed to individual participants. This phase led to a general understanding of common or recurring participant responses and the creation of tentative codes for later categorisation.

Next, in organising the data, codes were applied to each participant response which include significant information or meaning. For example, "I learnt strategies for students with disabilities" was coded as "differentiation". A key element of organising the data at this phase is the process of collapsing codes with similar meanings ascribed to them into categories. For example, the codes "interview" and "getting a job" were categorised as "finding employment". Where there were similar categories, these were combined into a single theme. For example, "teaching ideas" and "classroom strategies" were merged into a theme called "practical activities". Illustrative quotes from the data

were identified to represent the main ideas expressed for each theme reported in this paper and each theme was matched to one of the three domains of teacher development.

## **Results**

The main themes to emerge from the data analysis are reported according to the conceptual framework of professional, personal and social domains for teacher development identified by Bell and Gilbert (1994).

### ***Professional domain***

The pre-service teachers' questionnaire and interview responses concentrated on the professional domain by referring to the pedagogical knowledge and skills they acquired by participating in the PGM. Professional knowledge for teaching was a focus of the PGM, particularly the sessions on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011), managing student behaviour, running records and programming. It was also evident in the mix of pre-service teachers and their more experienced colleagues who joined the PGM.

### ***The role of the professional standards***

Pre-service teachers reported that they gained a deeper understanding of the role of the Standards in teacher accreditation and a greater appreciation for their relevance to classroom practice. As one pre-service teacher remarked in her interview, "I have a better idea about accreditation and how to use Standards when structuring a lesson and reflecting on it later". Pre-service teachers also noted how the knowledge gained about the Standards from the PGM assisted them in their university studies. One pre-service teacher wrote in her questionnaire:

I am more attuned now to the Standards so when they're mentioned at uni I listen more carefully and I understand better how the work I'm doing at uni relates to the Standards.

### *Differentiation*

Pre-service teachers discussed many of the pedagogical skills they had learned about in the PGM sessions. In particular, they noted the importance of differentiation to cater for the learning needs of all students in the classes they were teaching. They reported that they were able to implement some of the strategies from the PGM into their lessons and that they became more confident in their ability to differentiate their teaching. The PGM discussions about the use of ICT for differentiating instruction were also valued by pre-service teachers. As one pre-service teacher wrote,

I learnt there is a wide range of online tools available to educators which can help to make the seemingly impossible task of individualising instruction possible ... I discovered the importance of a balanced approach to ICT usage to support and enhance learning.

The pre-service teachers appreciated being able to hear from practising teachers about how they differentiated their teaching programs. They commented favourably on the variety of approaches to planning and programming that were presented in the sessions. The pre-service teachers reported that they would use many of the strategies discussed in the planning and programming session to differentiate their lessons. For example:

I intend to ensure I differentiate for the students. I will also take into account the detail put into the lesson and implement this into my lessons.

### *Practical activities*

Pre-service teachers described the PGM sessions as “very relevant” and “closely related

to professional experience”. There were “lots of resources and practical ideas that you could use for future teaching”, including teaching resources, programing advice and lesson ideas. For example, participants explored a range of ways of teaching and assessing literacy including running records and staged literacy groups. Pre-service teachers valued being able to practise completing a running record and then compare it to a “real” teacher’s running record. They noted how the ideas learned in the PGM could be applied in their own classroom. For example, “When I am teaching K–2 this will be most helpful. Many ideas I’m sure I will use”.

Participants commented on the range of behaviour management strategies presented and reported the benefits of the discussion about practical ways of dealing with challenging student behaviours. Pre-service teachers identified some of the strategies covered in the sessions and reported how they planned to implement them in their teaching. These strategies included the use of the o-meter posters, techniques for settling the class down and gaining attention, the thinking chair, software to manage different levels in the classroom.

The ideas discussed helped clarify the behaviour management approaches and helped to inspire how I will implement them in my classroom.

### ***Personal domain***

The personal domain refers to emotions and teacher self-efficacy and may include professional identity, interacting with colleagues and with students, and views about teaching and learning. This domain aligns with a humanistic perspective on mentoring (Wang & Oddell, 2007) by helping pre-service teachers hear about the experiences of their peers, particularly how they have overcome personal challenges and feel more comfortable in teaching. Teachers’ emotional health was a component of the PGM session on early career teaching and the final session which explored student welfare



and the work of school counsellors.

### *Confidence to teach*

Pre-service teachers reported that the PGM sessions provided them with a “support network” and that they learnt about “looking after my emotional well-being as a teacher”. A common theme from the participants’ questionnaire and interview responses related to their growing feelings of confidence in their ability to teach as a result of participating in the PGM. Pre-service teachers reported that “the sessions are helping me to become more confident in working in a school” and they also discussed specific areas of teaching where this was the case; for example, “I am more confident in using running records and how to lead reading groups” and “I feel less stressed about teaching literacy lessons now”.

Their increased confidence appeared to have a positive impact on pre-service teachers’ self-efficacy for teaching and many of them made specific mention of how they intended to implement the ideas and strategies discussed in the PGM. One pre-service teacher commented, “I will use the information I learnt today in my classroom”, while another wrote in a Post-PGM Questionnaire that, “After attending today I am extremely motivated to get involved and learn as I complete my professional experience”.

Some of the in-service teachers who occasionally joined the PGM sessions were recent graduates and they shared their experiences in transitioning from university into a teaching career. Pre-service teachers commented that these sessions helped them better understand the demands of the first years of teaching and that this knowledge helped to allay their fears.

Hearing the experiences of recent graduates has calmed my nerves. It was comforting to hear that although the first years out may be hard, it does become easier with experience.

### ***Social domain***

The social domain of teacher development emphasises how beginning teachers can be supported to become members of the learning community of the school by learning about its norms and customs and to feel part of the broader profession. Social activities were an integral part of each PGM session through sharing food and including time for informal chat. Ideas for building relationships with colleagues, parents and students were also a focus of the second PGM session.

### ***Collaborating with colleagues***

The PGM sessions were “very relaxed, making people comfortable to clarify and ask questions” and pre-service teachers were “encouraged to come up with our own ideas and try them out in our lessons”. Many pre-service teachers also noted that there were increased levels of collaboration among the group during the practicum “because we got to know each other better through the mentor groups”. Participating in the PGM allowed pre-service teachers to meet their peers and work more closely with them. Many commented that participating in the PGM also gave them a “sense of belonging” which helped them to connect with fellow pre-service teachers outside of the group sessions. For instance, pre-service teachers reported that they talked more with their peers in the staffroom and that these conversations were generally focused on their classroom practice. The connections with peers made it easier for pre-service teachers during their placement because “everyone is in the same situation” so they were able to seek “advice and support” from each other.

A similar sense of belonging to the wider school community was also mentioned as pre-service teachers engaged in meaningful PGM discussions with teachers other than their immediate supervisor. They felt that the practicum was “an experience across the school rather than a class” because they got to hear ideas from a range of teachers in the school. One pre-service teacher compared this practicum with her previous placements:

My experience at other pracs was just about the classroom I was teaching in, whereas the mentor groups allow for more knowledge and experience across the other parts of the school and you are learning from a range of teachers rather than just your supervising teacher.

It appears that there was a stronger sense of community among the pre-service teachers who participated in the PGM because they get to know staff and other pre-service teachers better through the group activities. This was beneficial because “you could discuss how prac was going, how they were managing student behaviour, to broaden your ideas, and discuss your lesson plans”.

### *Finding employment*

On a practical level, becoming part of the school community involves developing an understanding of the process of finding employment with the Department of Education. As part of the PGM activities, participants learned about the application process, including how to develop a CV, how best to prepare for the interview, and how to write a supporting statement. They also came to understand the importance of networking with other teachers as shown by this questionnaire response:

I will go home tonight and book my interview. Closer to the interview date, I will make sure I study so I go into the interview ready and prepared. I understand the

importance of networking in the teaching community. So I will ensure I network to the best of my ability.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has reported on a PGM for primary pre-service teachers intended to help them develop professionally, personally and socially. Pre-service teachers felt that participating in the PGM had increased their practical knowledge and skills for teaching. They reported a better understanding of the role of the Standards and learning how to differentiate their lessons to cater for diverse student learning needs. PGM sessions also provided pre-service teachers with practical teaching strategies which helped them feel more confident to teach. The physical and social attributes and the methods (Teerikorpi & Heikkinen, 2012) for the PGM were also effective in creating an atmosphere of collegiality and the casual nature of the discussions added to the informality (Geeraerts et al., 2014). Pre-service teachers noted that being part of the PGM allowed them to create and sustain supportive relationships with peers and other teachers during their professional experience and they reported gaining a greater sense of belonging.

Discussion of the role of the Standards was chosen as the first topic to provide a theoretical knowledge basis for the PGM sessions and the comments from pre-service teachers showed that they had gained a greater appreciation for the role of the Standards in guiding professional practice. However, the Standards were probably not the most suitable means of theorising the PGM sessions because they are so clearly focused on the practice of teaching. The Standards may also have reinforced a focus on compliance and a 'supervision' mentoring practice that positioned pre-service teachers as passive observers rather than equal participants, thus influencing the kinds of learning that occurred within the PGM (Kemmis et al., 2014). The session on differentiation was also

intended to include aspects of integrative pedagogy (Heikkinen et al., 2012) by linking theories about differentiation to practical strategies for meeting the individual needs of students. However, concerns with practical aspects of teaching dominated the pre-service teachers' feedback about the PGM sessions and the PGM did not support pre-service teachers to view knowledge of both theory and practice as core elements of a teacher's professionalism.

As noted by Korhonen et al. (2017) in their categorisation of PGM as a 'coffee-break', the eagerness of pre-service teachers to ask for tips and practical advice during the PGM sessions and the willingness of the experienced teachers in the group to provide these inhibited a more equal sharing among the PGM participants. For instance, pre-service teachers typically commented on the value of learning *from* rather than *with* the in-service teachers in the PGM. Consequently, the roles adopted by participants in the PGM did not advance much beyond the traditional mentor-mentee relationships as described by Grimmert et al. (2018). However, as Korhonen et al. (2017) point out, the informal feeling of the 'coffee break' is a necessary precursor to the higher PGM categories because it lays a foundation for "an open, sharing atmosphere and a sense of confidentiality and equity that were prerequisites for peer-support, identity work and mutual learning" (p. 160). Elements of openness and supportive relationship building that exemplify the 'coffee break' model were present in our PGM and commented on favourably by participants.

An important goal of the PGM was for pre-service teachers to gain an understanding that knowledge about teaching is actively constructed in and through a process of making sense of their classroom experiences. We envisaged that the PGM sessions would be interactive and promote discussion among pre-service and in-service teachers. There was some pooling of knowledge and experience; however, some pre-

service teachers thought the sessions could have been more interactive with “activities for us to do as well as listen to the teachers”. In their questionnaire and interview responses, pre-service teachers reported they were able “to gain valuable information” from the presenters but there was no mention of how they had contributed to the PGM beyond a willingness to “clarify and ask questions”. These comments suggest that PGM discussions did not advance beyond a situated apprenticeship model (Daniel, Auhul, & Hastings, 2003) towards the kind of professional community described by Korhonen et al. (2017). We did not achieve the kind of roles associated with critical constructivist mentoring relationships described by Wang and Oddell (2007) where learning is conceptualised as a knowledge-building process.

As with Korhonen et al. (2017), the PGM reported here was heterogeneous with a mix of pre- and in-service teachers, a mix which can promote rich discussions (Aspfors et al., 2102). In the present PGM, only two or three in-service teachers attended each week to share their knowledge about the topic and this may have established them as the ‘experts’ in the group. This may have inhibited one of the fundamental ideas associated with the kinds of critical constructivist mentoring relationships (Wang & Oddell, 2007) we hoped to foster in the PGM. That is, we did not find evidence that pre-service teachers were willing to question existing knowledge and practice. Instead, they appeared to accept the ideas offered by their more experienced counterparts. Perhaps a more equal number of pre- and in-service teachers could have encouraged a distributed leadership among the group and challenged pre-service teachers to engage in reciprocal learning (Le Cornu, 2005).

PGM sessions were mainly taken up with practical aspects of teaching, such as managing student behaviour, running literacy groups, programming and so on. These topics reflected the pre-service teachers’ suggestions and they rated the practical aspect

of the sessions highly. However, there were few opportunities for integrative pedagogy (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012) because the PGM focused mainly on practical concerns and sharing of classroom experiences without linking these to theoretical models and concepts, as proposed by Heikkinen et al. (2012). With the benefit of hindsight, we think it may have been better to allow the PGM discussion topics to evolve as the group members became more familiar with PGM and with each other. Then, pre-service teachers could have suggested topics and led the sessions on them as a way of positioning them on a more equal footing with their more experienced colleagues and enhancing the quality of the interactions among the group.

Critical constructivism provided a useful lens through which to make sense of the participants' experiences in the PGM. While we found that mentors and mentees did adopt a similar mentoring orientation, this was not consistent with the critical constructivist view of learning to teach as an inquiry-based endeavour. Mentors were more focused on providing emotional and practical support to the pre-service teachers, which fitted well with the novices' expectations, but did not produce mentoring relationships consistent with reform-minded teaching.

The PGM facilitator was a lead teacher and an experienced professional experience mentor and this gave status to the group and allowed the facilitator to draw on her mentoring expertise in leading the sessions. However, it would have been useful to provide specific training to the facilitator and the in-service teachers who attended the PGM on integrative pedagogy and how to promote it during the sessions, especially given the prevalence of 'supervision' mentoring practices in New South Wales (Kemmis et al., 2014). This could have better prepared the in-service teachers with ideas and strategies to emphasise the connections between theory and practice in the PGM discussions. Even so, it was essential that the PGM facilitator was not a

supervising teacher for any of the pre-service teachers at the school as this allowed the PGM to sit alongside the professional experience program and yet remain apart from it. The separation meant that the PGM was voluntary and participation was not assessed.

Transferring the Finnish model of PGM to the New South Wales context proved problematic. As noted by Kemmis et al. (2014), the mentoring practices in each place are quite different; a focus on supervision and assessment against professional standards the dominant paradigm in New South Wales compared to a more autonomous culture of constructivist-oriented mentoring through PGM. The broader educational environments in each place are also dissimilar. Huttunen and Heikkinen (2004) describe a “positive circle of recognition” (p. 163) in Finland where teachers have high social status and initial teacher education programs recruit the brightest students to undertake master’s degree level study, leading to good educational outcomes. In this environment, mentoring is not viewed as a probation system designed to monitor and assess early career teachers as it is in New South Wales. Policy making is decentralised in Finland with greater autonomy given to schools, so teachers have high levels of autonomy for their work (Geeraerts et al., 2015). While in New South Wales, governments have implemented policies designed to bring education and teaching under closer surveillance and regulation (Kemmis et al., 2014). These differences in the educational and political context exert a strong influence on mentoring practice which may help to explain why pre-service teachers did not adopt a critical constructivist stance in the PGM.

To conclude, the results of this study show that a PGM model which allows pre-service and in-service teachers to meet regularly during an extended professional experience placement can have benefits for participants. Despite the issues mentioned above, the PGM did have a positive impact on the participants. Pre-service teachers



reported that they grew in confidence as teachers, gained a great deal of practical knowledge about teaching, and learned about transitioning into the profession. They also commented favourably on the social aspects of the PGM, noting the relationships that developed among the group and the advantages of being able to hear from a range of teachers at the school beyond their professional experience mentor. While the PGM was successful in terms of participants' personal and social development but did not challenge them to move beyond their traditional mentoring roles. The benefits of a PGM for pre-service teachers are maximised when they have a say in the topics for discussion, when there is an equal mix of beginning and more experienced teachers, and when theoretical and practical aspects of teaching are foregrounded. Preparing in-service teachers with strategies for helping pre-service teachers connect theory and practice in the PGM discussions is also crucial, as is taking account of the different mentoring practices in Finland and Australia.

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