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“They made me feel like a teacher rather than a praccie”: sinking or swimming in pre-service drama education

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}
Support, professional guidance and modelling of teaching practice offered by quality mentor teachers are important components in preparing teachers for the profession. Yet research confirms the impact of poor mentoring on pre-service teachers’ developing pedagogy. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study with pre-service drama teachers and their mentors as a way of better understanding how mentoring impacts their developing pedagogy, in a learning area that is highly interactive and relational. Data comprised of observations of planning and teaching, participant interviews, journals and field notes representing five pre-service drama teachers’ experience of mentors during an extended teaching practicum. These data revealed the considerable variance and disparities in mentoring styles and quality and the repercussions for the pre-service drama teachers. The discussion addresses the implications of these findings in light of those mentor attributes identified as most conducive to creating competent and confident beginning drama teachers.

\textbf{Introduction}

“They made me feel like a teacher rather than a praccie” (Kyle, pre-service drama teacher)

The practicum is an integral component of teacher education, providing pre-service teachers with authentic classroom experiences with in-service teachers so that they may learn their pedagogical craft (De Leon-Carillo, 2007; Grudnoff, 2011; Segall, 2002; Wyckoff, Grossman, Boyd, Lankford, & Loeb, 2009). The features of a quality practicum have received considerable attention by researchers (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Moody, 2009; Murray-Harvey, 2001). For example, Beck and Kosnik (2002), revealed five components of a quality practicum included: (a) peer relationship and collaboration with the mentor teacher; (b) emotional support and feedback from the mentor teacher; (c) mentor with sound approach to teaching and learning; (d) flexibility in teaching content and method; and, (e) a heavy, but not excessive workload, during the practicum.
Research further recognises that a key feature of high-quality practicum is an effective mentor teacher (Appl & Spenciner, 2008; Lai, 2005; Murray-Harvey, 2001; Wyckoff et al., 2009) who not only offers professional and emotional support (Hayes, 2004; Moody, 2009; Ralf, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008), but also provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience success and self-efficacy (K. Anderson, Walker & Ralph, 2009; Edwards, 1993; Hrncir, 2007). In addition, an effective mentor can provide valuable insight into the realities and broad responsibilities of teaching and is therefore imperative in assisting pre-service teachers become classroom-ready. However, little is known about the mentoring of pre-service drama teachers and the attributes most conducive to supporting pre-service drama teachers learn their pedagogical craft. This deficit has salience because not only does the Australian Bureau of Statistics report that 53% of those with a teaching degree do not work in the profession, but teacher attrition continues to grow with close to 50% of early career teachers (both primary and secondary) leaving in the first five years (Gallant & Riley, 2014).

This research adds to a richer understanding of this issue through specifically considering pre-service drama teachers and their experiences of mentoring during an extended practicum. This focus is important because there is consensus amongst researchers that an effective practicum component of teacher education, with highly effective mentoring, leads to more confident and competent beginning teachers who are more likely to remain in the profession (De Leon-Carillo, 2007; Grudnoff, 2011; Townsend & Bates, 2007; Twomey, 2007; Wyckoff et al., 2009). Furthermore, this article contributes to an under-researched component of teacher education by focusing on pre-service drama teachers and their experiences of mentoring.

**Key concepts and the conceptual terrain**

Inconsistencies in the quality of practicum experiences, in particularly mentoring, has been the subject of several reviews. For example, the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, established by the Australian government in 2014, conducted a review of pre-service education and provided recommendations on improving the quality of teacher graduates. The report *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (Teacher Education
Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014) identified a need for improved and structured practical experience (practicum) for pre-service teachers. Furthermore, the report identified an inconsistency in the quality of practicum experiences emphasising the importance of quality mentor teachers who were prepared for the role of mentoring pre-service teachers. The report stated:

To ensure new teachers are entering classrooms with sufficient practical skills, the Advisory Group recommends ensuring [practicum] experiences of appropriate timing, length and frequency are available to all teacher education students. Placements must be supported by highly skilled supervising teachers who are able to demonstrate and assess what is needed to be an effective teacher. (p. 7)

To clarify what “sufficient practical skills” look like, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011), provides a summary of the responsibilities of a classroom teacher, which consists of seven overarching standards with 37 sub-standards. The standards cover aspects of a teacher’s work from creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments to knowing the content and how to teach it. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011) are organised into four career stages which reflect the continuum of a teacher’s professional development from a graduate teacher, to proficient-, to highly accomplished-, and then to lead-teacher. Teacher graduates, having completed their pre-service education, must be able to perform at a graduate standard. This means that teacher education programs are accountable for equipping pre-service teachers with necessary pedagogical skills, content and subject knowledge so that they are ready and able to thrive in the classroom (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014).

Learning drama pedagogy

In order to be classroom-ready and able to succeed, pre-service drama teachers need to develop some highly complex pedagogical skills and understandings (Dunn & Stinson, 2011; Kempe, 2012; Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000; Wales, 2009; D. Wright, 2015). While the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011) identify the need for graduate teachers to know the content and how to teach it, drama teachers also need to know the art form of drama and the scope and practice of teaching drama. According to Wales (2009), this includes learning the subtleties of teaching an effective drama lesson which involves intuition and an ability to read the class, understanding the different personalities and dynamics of the class so that group work is productive, as well as confidence, and vocal and non-verbal communication skills to work effectively in an open space, and as Taylor (1995) proposes, at all times blending the pedagogical with the aesthetic.

Furthermore, drama teachers working in the wider school setting, perform unique and diverse roles requiring highly developed communication skills, and inter and intra-personal skills (Norris et al., 2000; Wales, 1999). For example, drama teachers’ coordinate large-scale events, direct performances, perform production tasks such as costume, set, lighting and sound design, model performance skills, write scripts and manage budgets. They may lead Arts tours, organise theatre excursions and enter their students into
performing arts festivals. All of these activities often occur in addition to the drama teacher’s regular teaching load and without financial remuneration (Gray, Wright, & Pascoe, 2017; Kempe, 2012). Given that learning how to facilitate these tasks occurs “on the job”, it is imperative that pre-service drama teachers have opportunity to observe quality mentor teachers in real school settings where these practices are exercised.

Wright and Gerber (2004) investigated the complex nature and “multi-faceted dimensions” (p. 55) of teaching drama as perceived by 33 Australian drama teachers. The findings identified six experientially-based conceptions of competence they suggest could be used to inform the content and methodology of pre-service drama education courses. These competencies are: (a) competence in drama teaching as being “tuned in and turned on”; (b) competence in drama teaching as risk-taking or experimenting in a creative environment; (c) competence in drama teaching as empowering learners and adding value; (d) competence in drama teaching as sharing skills and networking; (e) competence in drama teaching as being a considerate reflective practitioner; and (f) competence in drama teaching through being an ambassador for drama and the Arts (Wright & Gerber, 2004, p. 58).

While Wright and Gerber (2004) proposed that these competencies developed over time, it is reasonable to suggest that graduating drama teachers should have at least “graduate” competence in these areas. This is particularly challenging given that these competencies highlight the complex social dynamic of teaching drama (Wright and Gerber (2004)), and the insufficient time in pre-service education programs for pre-service teachers to develop the pedagogical skills and theoretical knowledge needed to teach drama (Pascoe & Sallis, 2012).

The participants in the research reported here, trained to be drama specialists in secondary schools and completed units designed to develop drama content knowledge (e.g. theatre history, contemporary theatre practice), and drama teaching knowledge (pedagogical content knowledge). The challenge for pre-service teacher educators is to provide courses for these individuals that cover the broad range of curriculum in suitable depth, whilst attending to the specialised skills required to facilitate effective lessons (Wales, 2009). In other words, content knowledge needs to be complemented by pedagogical knowledge including an ability to be sensitive to context recognising the social, political, cultural, and economic imperatives of education (Tozer & Gallegos, 2011).

Pedagogical content knowledge, developed through planning, preparing and teaching lessons, is “that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding” (Shulman, 1987, p. 8). Research has identified that pedagogical content knowledge is an important yet difficult part of learning to teach, and therefore should be central to effective teacher development (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005).

Shulman (1987) described the teacher’s ultimate goal as, “the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organised, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction” (p. 8). For example, given the highly interactive and relational nature of drama, facilitating a successful lesson depends greatly on students being able to cooperate and work together and the teacher’s ability to foster this positive interaction. Thus, a drama teacher is both a mid-wife to student’s experience, and also a facilitator of it.
Mandell and Wolf (2003) recognised the interactive and cooperative nature of drama and stated, "Students don’t walk in the door willing to work with strangers or with people they resent, avoid or fear. To help classes work, teachers have to coach students on ways to be productive members of an ensemble" (p. 33). Correspondingly, drama teachers may need to engage students who do not want to do drama or have chosen the subject thinking it is an easy option (Norris et al., 2000). The drama teacher’s ability to develop relationships of trust with his or her students (Kempe, 2012), and maintain a positive class dynamic and sense of “togetherness” (Neelands, 2009) is integral to an effective drama lesson. Indeed, preparing pre-service drama teachers to manage complex issues such as these is essential pedagogy.

Furthermore, the embodied nature of drama, a distinguishing feature from other ways of learning (Nicholson, 2005), provides yet another challenge for pre-service drama teachers. Indeed embodied teaching and learning is experiential, holistic, and involves being and doing. However, as Meskin and Van Der Walt (2018) state, “… so much of the embodied knowledge implicit in this pedagogy is lost, because it exists only in the direct transfer from teacher to student in a virtually non-verbal process.” (p. 37). Therefore, the opportunity for pre-service drama teachers to learn through experience with highly skilled mentor teachers is essential (Pascoe & Sallis, 2012).

**Inconsistent mentoring**

The problem that not every teacher is an effective mentor affirms the adverse effects on practicum outcomes when the quality of mentoring and/or relationship between the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher is unsuccessful (Hastings, 2004; Moody, 2009; Ralph, 2000). Moody (2009), for example, identified that when pre-service teachers lacked the emotional and professional support of their mentor teacher, the pre-service teacher’s self-confidence and attitude to the practicum was affected negatively. Similarly, Clarke and Jarvis-Selinger (2005) asserted that if a mentor/pre-service teacher relationship did not foster openness, pre-service teachers felt defensive and learning was brought to a standstill.

The issue of a mentor teacher expecting their pre-service teacher to mirror them in the classroom is a concerning reality in some placements (Moody, 2009; Ralph, 2000). This is particularly problematic when pre-service teachers are placed in practicum settings that are inconsistent with their beliefs about how a classroom or mentor teacher should function. Ultimately, this may influence how pre-service teachers perceive the practicum and level of satisfaction with the practicum as a learning opportunity (Appl & Spenciner, 2008). There is also some contention over the merits of aligning a pre-service teacher to a single mentor teacher for the duration of a practicum. Lovat and McLeod (2006) cautioned:

Indenturing a trainee teacher to one ‘master’ in one context may produce a range of skills pertinent to the particular class in question relative to the strengths and weaknesses of the master teacher but, on its own, it would do little to prepare the teacher for the complex array of differences that characterise the various contexts of learning and the many and varied dimensions of learning to be found within them. (p. 295)

It is also the case, that simply finding mentor teachers is challenging where undertaking a mentoring role places extra pressures on the mentor teacher’s time and emotions (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Ure, Gough, & Newton, 2009). These two issues foregrounded in
Hastings’ study (Hastings, 2004) where she notes that “much of the negative emotions associated with practicum are related to limited time for cooperating teachers to provide effective support to the student-teacher” (p. 144). Yet the literature suggests that although mentoring is complex, time consuming and emotional, it can be mutually beneficial for mentors and mentees (Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough, 2008; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008).

**Process of inquiry**

Following a commitment to constructivism, pre-service drama teachers and their mentor teachers became the participants in this study as we sought to construct a new understanding of how mentoring influences the practicum experience of pre-service drama teachers. Key to this commitment was an imperative to explore the meanings participants made of their experiences and the contexts in which they take place.

Ethics approval was obtained from the pre-service teachers’ university (ethics approval number – 2010/048) and the Education Department of Western Australia (ethics approval number – 5174). Potential participants were then contacted via email, details of the study explained, and written informed consent secured. Five pre-service drama teachers were selected out of a larger cohort of 18 participants. Participants were selected based on their (and their mentor teacher’s) willingness to be involved in the research. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the pre-service drama teachers and details of their practicum school and mentor’s background were withheld to protect their identity.

The site for this field study was the participants’ Assistant Teacher Programme (ATP), an 11-week practicum in their fourth and final year of pre-service training. As part of this extended practicum, a mentor teacher and university supervisor were allocated to each pre-service drama teacher. Pre-service drama teachers were required to teach around four, one-hour lessons each day and undertake an additional extracurricular component – mainly performance rehearsals. It should be noted that these extracurricular responsibilities are an expectation of pre-service drama teachers that is beyond what is usually seen in other learning areas. Table 1 outlines the pre-service teacher’s age, school context, teaching requirements, mentor experience and extracurricular responsibilities.

A range of qualitative methods were utilised to capture the lived experience of participants in authentic ways. First, descriptive field-notes were taken throughout the research process, capturing participants teaching drama lessons twice during the 11-week practicum. These observations included the lesson experience, the physical appearance and health of the pre-service drama teacher, the reactions and engagement of the class students, and the physical setting. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each pre-service drama teacher prior to beginning their ATP and immediately following each of their lessons. These interviews sought to capture the pre-service drama teachers’ perceptions of the lesson, as well as any issues or highlights experienced. Third, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each mentor teacher to gain their insights into practicum, their role as a mentor, as well as perceptions of how their pre-service drama teacher was progressing or issues they were experiencing. Fourth, pre-service drama teachers reflected upon their practicum experiences in the form of an electronic journal.
Following the procedures of thematic analyses outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), data were reviewed and synthesised through selecting, sorting and sifting through participant’s profiles identifying key concepts, patterns and relationships between them.

**Outcomes**

Consistent with mentoring literature (Appl & Spencer, 2008; Moody, 2009; Ralph, 2000), participants’ experiences of mentoring practices were varied, with Cindy, Kyle and Nella benefitting from a range of positive mentoring practices, while Simone and Claire experienced mentoring practices that did not support the kind of learning that it might otherwise have done. Three dimensions of mentoring practices, as experienced, are now described in turn.

**Mentor as role model**

“They made me feel like a teacher rather than a praccie.” (Kyle)

Cindy, Kyle and Nella’s mentor teachers proved positive role models, earning respect and admiration from the pre-service drama teachers. These participants commented on the opportunity to observe their mentor teachers demonstrate distinct drama pedagogy required to facilitate effective lessons. Kyle explained, “It was so good to see how he [mentor teacher] can read the class and change the lesson if he needs.” Nella similarly noted, “I loved to see the rapport she [mentor teacher] had with the kids. They loved her and you could see that they trusted her.” Cindy said, “She [mentor teacher] just knew how to get the best out of those kids. Even those really shy kids that didn’t want to be there. The way she gave them responsibility. It was so good to see.” It was evident that these participants thrived with the support and guidance of their mentor teachers, and believed that their success and enjoyment of their ATP was due largely to the role their mentor teachers played. Cindy admired the professionalism and efficacy of her mentor teacher and aspired to reach that level. In week five, she commented in her practicum journal:

I am having so much fun with my mentor teacher and we get along like a house on fire. She is just amazing to watch teach and I can only hope that one day I can have that [relationship] with my own students.

Further to modelling good teaching practice, it was evident that some mentor teachers modelled the importance of connecting to the wider drama education community and actively sought opportunities for their pre-service drama teacher to network. For example, Nella’s mentor invited her to engage in moderation marking at other schools and Kyle’s mentor invited him to take part in professional development where he met other drama teachers. This enabled participants to see the value of fostering networks with fellow drama teachers. Cindy commented in an interview, “My mentor taught me so much including how important it is to be connected to the drama community as it can be quite isolating in a small department.”

While Cindy, Kyle and Nella gained valuable professional knowledge and benefitted from viewing effective pedagogy, Simone and Claire experienced otherwise. Indeed,
these participants believed that the lack of valuable role modelling impeded their professional development and opportunity to observe effective pedagogy required to deliver quality drama experiences. Claire explained:

I want to see how she [mentor teacher] motivates the kids that don’t want to be here and how to get the kids to be nice to each other and support each other in class. I don’t know the kids yet. I’d appreciate seeing her teach them to learn how they best respond. This room is massive and they just run around like crazy things. I want to learn how to manage that.

While Claire wanted to observe her mentor teaching, Simone believed she was expected to adapt teaching practices preferred by her mentor even when they conflicted with her own ideas about effective teaching. This was highlighted in Simone’s week six practicum journal when she said, “She’s too controlling. I need to be allowed to learn, make some decisions and mistakes. I don’t like using a timer that goes off when time’s up. I want to use my voice and proximity to guide students back.”

Interestingly, Simone’s view of her mentor teacher as being “too controlling” conflicted with how the mentor perceived her role and style. When asked in an interview about her mentoring style, the mentor teacher explained:

I try to support my prac students and help them learn ways that work for me. Simone has timing issues in her classes so I bought a timer [stop watch] for the theatre to help her.

Although Simone’s mentor believed she was being helpful by teaching Simone “ways that work” for her, Simone believed her mentor expected her to adopt the mentor’s teaching style. This was particularly challenging for Simone, as she felt that in order for her to pass the ATP, she would have to “play the game”. Simone expressed her concerns in an interview saying, “We have such different teaching styles. She expects me to do as she does. It just doesn’t come naturally to me. To be honest, I don’t like the way she teaches.”

Furthermore, Simone had clear ideas of the attributes of an effective drama teacher, based on her experiences of drama teachers when she was a student at school. She recalled, in an interview, her school drama teacher as being “open, enthusiastic, energetic and inspiring.” However, the reality of her practicum experience was a mentor teacher who differed considerably to how she imagined a drama teacher should be. This mismatch between expectation and reality disappointed and confused Simone. Furthermore, she felt her practicum experience did not provide her with the standard of mentoring some of her peers were experiencing. She recorded in her practicum journal, “I’m honestly not learning anything of use from her [mentor teacher], whereas some of my friends have got amazing role-models to learn from, I don’t think this is really helping me.”

**Mentor as nurturer**

Further to the professional support and guidance provided by some mentors, it was evident that some participants also received considerable personal support from their mentor teacher. Cindy, for example, said, “She really cares about me and goes out of her way to support me.” The generosity, support and nurturing manner of Cindy’s mentor teacher is highlighted further by the mentor’s own self-reflections. The mentor explained:
I want my prac students to feel supported. I want them to teach areas that they feel passionate and confident about as well. I just want them to have a positive experience. I want to give them as much breadth of experience within the school as I can. I want to be as encouraging and supportive as I possibly can be. Giving them the freedom to work with classes and not to feel like they have to teach in my style or anyone else’s style. I want them to discover their own style of teaching. I try to ensure that they’ve got classes that are well prepared for them as well, so it’s not like they have to take the really difficult classes. I give them experience with my upper-school classes and trust them.

The mentor’s reflection highlights the trust she places on her pre-service drama teachers as well as her desire for them to explore their own teaching style. Furthermore, the mentor’s reflection emphasises the clear vision she has of her mentoring role and how best to support her pre-service drama teachers.

Kyle’s mentor teachers played an integral role in alleviating the anxiety he felt approaching his ATP with the warm welcome they provided. This sharply contrasted to the unwelcoming reception Kyle received at his previous practicum school. He commented in an interview, “They [mentor teachers] could see that I was anxious and went out of their way to make me feel welcome. I felt so comfortable there. They made me feel like a teacher rather than a praccie [pre-service teacher].” The welcoming environment Kyle’s mentor teachers created helped to foster in him a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar and feared environment. This had positive effects on his self-confidence and practicum outcomes.

It was evident that some mentor teachers sought to connect their pre-service drama teacher to the school community by involving them in staff meetings, social events, school excursions and professional development. This in turn, enabled the participants to feel a part of the school community itself. For example, Cindy’s mentor teacher made a point of introducing her to other staff members, encouraged her to go the staffroom every day for morning tea, and invited her to attend non-curricular activities. Cindy wrote in her practicum journal, “I was offered a spot to go to the ski trip! I felt like a valued member of the staff and like people wanted to have me around, which made me feel welcome and a part of the school community.”

While the nurturing practices exhibited by these mentor teachers lead to professional learning and improved self-confidence for their pre-service teachers, Simone and Claire’s experiences reveal practices that prevented learning to be maximised. During an interview, Simone conveyed how distant her mentor teacher was towards her, making her feel uncomfortable and unwanted. She said, “I think she may resent me being here. I don’t teach at my best because I feel anxious around her.”

Claire described her need for more encouragement, support and presence from her mentor teacher, particularly in the early stages of her ATP. Claire wrote in her practicum journal, “I guess my main issue this week is where do I stand? I need my mentor to give me more direction. Actually some encouragement would be nice too!” Claire needed reassurance from her mentor teacher to build her confidence, however, when this was not forthcoming, she experienced considerable angst, which perhaps hindered her professional development.

By week six of the ATP, Claire felt stressed and was anxious about her lack of improvement. Claire disclosed in an interview that her mentor teacher was rarely
present in her lessons and stated, “She has left me to sink or swim alone. Unfortunately, I think I’m sinking and she [mentor] doesn’t seem to notice.”

Interestingly, Claire’s mentor teacher explained her mentoring style in an interview conducted during the ATP. She revealed her desire to give her practicum students freedom and space to explore. While Claire perceived this “space” as a lack of interest or care, this was not the intention of the mentor teacher, who explained:

I let them sink or swim a bit and don’t baby them too much. I mean I’ll encourage them and write some lesson reviews at the beginning until they kind of find their feet. But then after that, I let them have free reign to find out. Because when you start teaching, you’re on your own. You might get a bit of help here and there but you have to become responsible and professional.

Claire’s experience highlights the issues that occur when there is a lack of communication between mentor and pre-service teacher. While Claire desired more encouragement and support from her mentor teacher, she did not communicate this to her mentor teacher, for fear of “appearing needy and annoying”. The lack of communication was perhaps exacerbated by the lack of power Claire felt during the practicum. Furthermore, it is evident that the mentor teacher did not communicate to Claire how well she was doing, which resulted in Claire doubting her ability.

**Mentor as confidante**

For Nella and Cindy, their mentor teachers became allies and confidantes to them during the practicum. This was perhaps due to the extended time spent in practicum schools, the extra hours working together in production rehearsals and the resulting opportunity for mentor teachers and pre-service drama teachers to get to know each other.

Time as a topic is discussed in mentoring literature, suggesting how mentoring roles change as the relationship evolves in a chronological way (Beijaard, Verloop, & Rajuan, 2007; Kostovich & Thurn, 2006; Lai, 2005). In fact, Cindy and Nella developed such strong relationships with their mentor teachers that they were able to confide openly and honestly without fear of appearing incompetent. Confiding in their mentor teachers proved to be a valuable coping strategy for these participants. Even though Cindy and Nella were anxious about the high-stakes nature of the practicum and achieving the highest result possible, they were inclined to speak honestly with their mentor teacher due to the trust, understanding and friendship developed. Nella reflected in her practicum journal, “We’re similar in many ways; you’d think the prac office [Professional Practice Department] paired us up based on a personality match. It’s so bizarre and unfamiliar for me to have a relationship like this with my mentor.”

It would appear that the connection Nella had with her mentor teacher meant that the balance of power was more equal. Sharing similarities to her mentor teacher meant that Nella felt more like a colleague than a practicum student. As a consequence, this more balanced and collegial relationship fostered openness and honesty between the mentor and pre-service drama teacher, which as Beck and Kosnik (2002) asserted, is a highly desirable quality in the mentor/pre-service teacher relationship. Nella’s mentor teacher echoed these sentiments saying:
She will have days where she will look at me and say, “I just don’t know what to do.” I say, “That’s okay. We all have those days. Let it go. How are we going to fix it? Okay, let’s try this.” If she’s scared of something, she’s not alone.

The nurturing, humanistic style embodied by this mentor teacher is evident in her ability to foster a sense of belonging for Nella. The opportunity to confide honestly and ask for help was integral to Nella’s development and ability to thrive during her ATP.

In contrast to where power was shared, the issue of “control” meant that the angst Simone felt continued to grow as she worried how this relationship would impact upon her assessment. Furthermore, Simone and Claire were concerned with how these relationships would impact upon their final assessment and thus chose not to confide their true feelings to their mentor teachers.

Discussion – practicum pathways

This study has shown that mentoring practices were integral to the participant’s confidence, sense of belonging, and ultimate enjoyment of the ATP. This finding mirrors that of Le Cornu (2009), who stated, “There is little doubt that the relationships… whether they be encouraging or discouraging, have a major influence on the pre-service teachers’ practicum experience” (p. 720). The variance and disparities in mentoring styles and quality had significant repercussions for the participants in this research. It is evident that Cindy, Nella and Kyle were at a distinct advantage, as they were given more support and guidance, which boosted their confidence and improved their pedagogy. Whereas, Simone and Claire, lacked a sense of belonging, experienced mismatch between beliefs and the reality of practicum and were more susceptible to stress.

Simone’s predicament highlights the difficulty posed when there are differences in teaching style (Beck & Kosnik, 2002) and personal attributes (Ure et al., 2009) between mentor and pre-service teacher. A clear demarcation of roles and more assertive communication initiated by Simone would have been beneficial to Simone’s relationship with her mentor teacher. This is similarly acknowledged by Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) who emphasised the need for mentors and pre-service teachers to understand each other’s roles and how best to interact.

Learning the value of networking with both the wider school and drama community was an important lesson for participants, where being the only drama teacher in their school, was often isolating. Furthermore, having a “critical friend” and colleague to call upon is useful for beginning teachers to build resilience (Martin, 2006; Paris, 2008); this collegial connection being important given the high attrition rate of beginning teachers. As Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) pointed out, “Teacher learning is facilitated in collaborative cultures, as teachers learn with and from each other reducing feelings of isolation” (p. 1804).

The experiences of participants confirm the importance of an effective mentor in developing the professional efficacy of pre-service teachers (Flores & Day, 2006; Harrison, 2008; Hayes, 2004; Langdon, Alexander, Dinsmore, & Ryde, 2012). Indeed, evidence of mentors modelling distinctive pedagogies required to facilitate effective drama experiences was found in this research, such as: the ability to read a class, ways to foster productive group work, ways to work in an open space, facilitating extra-curricular events, ways in which relationships of trust were developed and fostering a positive
class dynamic. These pedagogies and expertise are integral to successful teaching in drama (Wales, 2009).

It is evident that for the participants in this research, the interactive and relational nature of drama formed a prominent focus in their developing pedagogy and practicum experience. What is interesting, however, is their lack of focus on the blending of pedagogy with the aesthetic (Taylor, 1995). This is perhaps attributed to concerns and anxieties pre-service teachers have with classroom management during the teaching practicum (Brown, Lee, & Collins, 2015; Cakir & Cesur, 2014) and, therefore, much of their attention was drawn to facilitating positive interactions. If this is the case, then pre-service drama teachers maybe missing essential exposure to teaching artistry expertly combining aesthetics with pedagogy.

The research identified two pathways through practicum for these participants: one leading to success, self-efficacy and effective preparation for teaching drama; the second leading to distress, disillusionment and unsuccessful preparation for teaching drama. What this research highlights is that the critical factor in these two pathways was the quality of the mentor teacher support. The interplay between each of these factors informs the effectiveness of the practicum experience and its lasting impact on teachers of drama.

It is therefore critical that supporting pre-service drama teachers in their transition from learner to teacher requires mentors that possess a deep understanding of effective drama pedagogy, the diverse roles and responsibilities of a drama teacher, as well as the emotional support needed by a pre-service drama teacher during practicum.

Specifically, data from this study identified the attributes of an effective mentor teacher for pre-service drama teachers as: (a) supportive; (b) provides guidance and constructive feedback; (c) models effective drama pedagogical skills and understandings; (d) encourages freedom and flexibility; (e) welcoming; (f) fosters a sense of belonging; (g) trusting; and, (h) collegial. While this list of attributes might appear idealistic, evidence of mentors possessing all of these qualities was found in this research.

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that effective mentoring requires a significant investment of time and additional work for drama teachers, on top of an already busy job. This research confirms the generosity exhibited by mentor teachers and, in turn, the satisfaction and enjoyment gained from mentoring. Indeed, these drama teachers see their work as important and that allowing pre-service drama teachers to “sink or swim” is not in the best interests of pre-service teachers themselves, drama students, or the longevity and efficacy of drama education in schools. Teacher education programs have, at least, an ethical responsibility to provide pre-service teachers with quality mentoring so that they may develop the drama pedagogy required to be a successful drama teacher and benefit from an effective induction into the teaching profession.

This research has revealed that pre-service drama teachers work best when a sense of belonging is experienced during practicum, and that mentor teachers play an integral role in this process. Therefore, future research investigating how mentor teachers, and the schools in which they work, create a sense of belonging for their pre-service teachers would be of interest. Furthermore, given the perceived lack of attention in this research on the aesthetic
qualities of drama, further investigation examining ways in which pre-service drama teachers learn to combine content knowledge, pedagogy with the aesthetic is essential.

In closing, this research issues a challenge for teacher education programs and mentor teachers working with pre-service drama teachers. It illustrates that quality mentoring is essential to the training of drama teachers and their ability to hone strong content knowledge, complimented by pedagogical content knowledge. Therefore, the investment made in mentoring pre-service teachers translates to the continued effectiveness and longevity of drama education in our schools and may reduce the number of beginning teachers prematurely leaving the profession.

Note
1. The term “praccie” is Australian slang for a pre-service teacher completing an education practicum.

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References


