

A phenomenological inquiry into prospective EFL teachers' perceived sense of belonging in school placement

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ABSTRACT: While the sense of belonging has seen a surge of interest in the field of social psychology, there has been a scarcity of research on the construct during school placement in initial teacher education (ITE) programs. The present study set out to explore the sense of belonging experiences of three prospective English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher during school placement along with the contributing factors involved in establishing a sense of belonging. The findings from exploratory focus group interviews with the participants and their graphic elicitation tasks revealed that interpersonal relationships and institutional factors possess essential roles in establishing a sense of belonging during school placement. Finally, pedagogical implications are discussed so as to enhance the effectiveness of school placement designs in ITE.

Keywords: sense of belonging, practicum, pre-service teacher education

Una investigación fenomenológica sobre el sentido de pertenencia percibido de los futuros profesores de EFL en la colocación escolar

RESUMEN: Si bien el constructo de pertenencia ha visto un aumento de interés en el campo de la psicología social, ha habido una escasez de investigación sobre el sentido de pertenencia durante la colocación escolar en los programas de formación inicial del profesorado (IDP). Basado en esta premisa, el presente estudio se propuso explorar las experiencias de sentido de pertenencia de tres futuros profesores de EFL durante la colocación escolar junto con los factores contribuyentes involucrados en el establecimiento de un sentido de pertenencia. Los hallazgos de las entrevistas exploratorias de grupos focales con los participantes y sus tareas de elicitación gráfica revelaron que las relaciones interpersonales y los factores institucionales desempeñan un papel esencial en el establecimiento de un sentido de pertenencia durante la colocación escolar. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones pedagógicas con el fin de mejorar la efectividad de los diseños de prácticas escolares en IDP.

Palabras clave: sentido de pertenencia, prácticum, formación inicial de docentes

1. INTRODUCTION

Being defined as the placement of pre-service teachers in schools for the purpose of observing classroom dynamics and gaining teaching experiences before stepping into the actual teaching profession, School Placement (SP) possesses a crucial role in shaping the quality and efficacy of initial teacher education (ITE) programs worldwide (Busher *et al.*, 2015; Donlon *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, considerable attention is devoted to the design of SP experiences that are both effective and engaging, aiming to equip prospective teachers with the necessary skills and competencies for developing successful teaching practices and fostering teacher identity (Barnett & Reddy, 2017; Chen & Mensah, 2018).

A factor closely associated with pre-service teachers' SP is a sense of belonging during the practicum (Espinoza *et al.*, 2021; Nislin & Pesonen, 2019; Ussher, 2010). Given a sense of belonging plays a major role in pre-service teachers' SP (Cavanagh & King, 2020), the transition to the actual teaching environment could make them vulnerable if they lack belonging during the practicum (Gray *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, a lack of belonging during SP is likely to pose a threat to the pre-service teachers' sense of efficacy (Celik, 2008; Mahmoudi, 2016), which can have a major impact on their teaching practices during the practicum. The uncertainty surrounding feelings of belonging is likely to trigger affective responses that might have negative consequences (Dewhurst *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, being closely associated with environmental and individual factors (Mahar *et al.*, 2013), increased levels of sense of belonging to an educational community has the potential to positively contribute to pre-service teachers' well-being (Nislin & Pesonen, 2019), professional relationships with mutual trust and respect (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009), social connectedness with shared values and experiences (Laker *et al.*, 2008), and professional affiliation and approval (Caires *et al.*, 2012). More specifically, sense of belonging has been acknowledged to be linked with effective SP (Dewhurst *et al.*, 2020; Donlon *et al.*, 2020; Ussher, 2010). In other words, pre-service teachers who experience a sense of professional belonging during SP are more likely to display higher levels of well-being. Thus, this dynamic affective orientation of pre-service teachers appears to be an intriguing phenomenon that has yet to be explored in the second of foreign language (L2) teacher education studies on SP.

Indeed, there is a strand of research on the association between pre-service teachers' sense of belonging during SP and their lived experiences in new educational settings (e.g., Dewhurst *et al.*, 2020; Gu, 2013; Walker, 2008). However, what has remained unexplored is pre-service EFL teachers' understanding of the sense of belonging during the SP. More specifically, a deeper understanding of the interpersonal factors that are likely to form the pre-service teachers' sense of belonging remains underexplored (Pendergast *et al.*, 2020). Employing a phenomenological approach can provide invaluable insights into understanding how they might experience a sense of belonging during the ITE program. This qualitative approach seeks to identify the phenomenon from the experiential perspective of the participants (Byrne, 2001). The current study thus aims to uncover the lived experiences of pre-service EFL teachers to better understand the antecedents of their sense of belonging during the practicum.

Despite a body of research on the interplay between the sense of belonging and SP (Olsen *et al.*, 2022), the present study makes an original contribution to the field by exploring the

specific factors that contribute to the sense of belonging among pre-service EFL teachers in ITE settings. Unlike general descriptions or generalizations, this study's unique contribution lies in its phenomenological approach, which facilitates a contextual understanding of pre-service teachers' experiences. By examining the specificities of their SP contexts, program designs, and personal backgrounds, the study aimed to identify the sense of belonging experiences of prospective EFL teachers in the Turkish ITE context and explored how these experiences can provide insights for future SP designs. The findings might not only help contribute to a more thorough enhancement of the pedagogical knowledge and identities of prospective L2 teachers, but they might also provide insights for developing more effective SP designs in EFL undergraduate programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sense of belonging in school placement

Sense of belonging was first introduced to the field by Maslow (1943) as one of the psychological needs in the Hierarchy of Needs Model. Belongingness is generally defined “as a sense of membership in and acceptance by a group” (Wentzel, 2022, pp. 1931), which contributes to self-actualization (Wang *et al.*, 2021). A common consensus posits that a sense of belongingness is more susceptible to contextual factors rather than merely being an individual psychological state (Gillies, 2017). The association of sense of belonging during SP has been taken into scrutiny in different educational contexts (Dewhurst *et al.*, 2020; Donlon *et al.*, 2020; Johnston & Dewhurst, 2021; Pendergast *et al.*, 2020; Pesonen *et al.*, 2016). These studies aimed to explore prospective teachers' sense of belonging during teaching practices and drew conclusions regarding the impact of SP on their future academic careers. For example, Johnston and Dewhurst (2021) conducted interviews with seventeen prospective teachers to gain insights into their experiences of belonging during field visits in the Scottish ITE context. Results showed that prospective teachers' achievement of belonging is influenced by individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors. Moreover, acknowledging the prominence of belonging as an essential component in developing positive relationships in practicum, Dewhurst *et al.* (2020) employed hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the dynamic interplay between primary school pre-service teachers' sense of belonging and their practicum experiences. In this regard, they aimed to identify the participants' lived experiences of belonging. Findings revealed four major themes related to the sense of belonging during practicum, which include being welcomed (the preliminary impressions), settings and procedures (the school and class climate), interpersonal interactions (the role of cooperating teachers in developing a sense of belonging), and strategic behaviors (strategies that help pre-service teachers become more engaged in the practicum). These findings highlight the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment during practicum to foster a sense of belonging and enhance pre-service teachers' engagement.

In another recent study by Donlon *et al.* (2020) on the association between pre-service teachers' involvement in non-teaching activities during practicum, their sense of belonging and teacher identity demonstrated that the participants were generally intrinsically motivated to engage in SP. Alongside the teaching activities, they stated to benefit from the non-teaching

activities in developing their sense of belonging to the school community. Out of a wide range of activities, they revealed that three non-teaching activities majorly contributed to their engagement in the practicum which were meetings, observations, and assistance. They reported that these three activities assisted them in becoming active members of the school community with increased levels of competence and autonomy. In their study, these activities were also acknowledged to foster positive relationships between cooperating teachers, school administrators, and pre-service teachers. In a different study, Pendergast *et al.* (2020) conducted a systematic literature review analysis to synthesize the findings of the studies that explored the relationship between a sense of belonging and SP. Among the sixteen contemporary studies in the related field, only two studies recruited English and modern languages pre-service teachers as participants in their study. In the first study, Roberts and Graham (2008) investigated modern language pre-service teachers' abilities in self-directing and proactive social strategy use. The participants reported employing strategies to obtain approval and autonomy by fitting into the school community. In the second study, Johnston (2010) sought to identify the challenging experiences of pre-service secondary school English teachers related to their sense of belonging. Results indicated that in some cases pre-service English teachers were regarded as "peripheral participants" which resulted in their perception of being devoid of a member status in the school community. Considering the overall findings of the sixteen studies, the results indicate the critical role of cooperating teachers in providing opportunities for prospective teachers to experience a sense of belonging. More specifically, the studies highlight the impact of essential factors in establishing good relationships among stakeholders, encompassing being welcomed by supervising teachers, establishing relatedness, mutual connecting, supportive relationships, communication, gaining trust, and eliminating negative relationships.

Indeed, social identities have a major impact on establishing and shaping a sense of belonging. Becoming a teacher is thus an act of becoming a member of a social community (Fajardo Castañeda, 2014). Belonging exhibits a higher level of importance in different contexts and engagement periods in the SP, thus both classroom teachers and supervising mentors need to have an increased level of awareness to establish and invest in perceived sense of belonging among pre-service teachers (Donlon *et al.*, 2020). Belonging has also been acknowledged to produce not only academic but also individual positive outcomes, such as growing mental well-being (Nislin & Pesonen, 2019), and identity formation (Fajardo Castañeda, 2014). As long as pre-service teachers feel that they are valued and mattered by the members of the school community they are interacting with, they are more likely to attain a member status and experience belonging more in-depth (Ussher, 2010).

Although there is research evidence that the scrutiny into pre-service teachers' sense of belonging might enlarge the understanding of dynamic and complex features of SP in English language programs, there is a paucity of studies that grasp how pre-service EFL teachers perceive their sense of belonging during their field visits. An investigation into the lived experiences of EFL teachers through using qualitative data collection tools might shed light on the factors that alleviate and/or foster sense of belonging during SP, and how a sense of belonging can be facilitated. Apparently, no such studies have probed into an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of EFL teachers in a specific ITE context. The current study probed to firstly identify the sense of belonging experiences of

the prospective EFL teachers throughout the SP in the Turkish ITE context, and then to identify whether the prospective teachers' sense of belonging experiences can provide insights and shape future SP designs. An understanding of the experience of sense of belonging during SP could not only provide implications regarding the efficacy of the placement, but also offer an insightful agenda regarding the professional development path of pre-service teachers on an individual basis.

3. METHOD

For the purposes of the present study, a descriptive phenomenological inquiry was employed to explain EFL pre-service teachers' lived sense of belonging experiences (see Giorgi, 2009). The seven steps followed in the inquiry are concrete descriptions, sense of the whole, meaning units, transformations, constituents and structure, communication of the findings, and interpretation of the structure and constituent parts (see Giorgi, 2008, 2012). Concrete descriptions pertain to the raw data obtained through interviews while sense of the whole means transcriptions that present the reading for holistic comprehension. Meaning units include the transitions in meaning. Transformations are the interpretational variations in the data depending on the expressions of the participants. Constituents and structures emerge as the interpretations construct the new phenomenon beyond the expressions. Communication of the findings is associated with the discussion of the constructed constituents and their relatedness to build the structure. Lastly, from a multi-disciplinary perspective, the interpretation of the structure and constituent parts are related to drawing external links with the findings through related literature. To gain an enriched understanding of EFL pre-service teachers' experiences of belonging, this study aimed to enhance their narratives by employing the seven-step approach. By doing so, the research sought to contribute a new perspective to the existing body of knowledge and achieve a holistic comprehension of the notion of belonging among EFL pre-service teachers.

3.1. Research setting

In ITE programs in Turkey, final-year undergraduate EFL students studying in state and private universities are placed in a variety of practicum schools and engaged in a 12-week intensive practicum schedule so as to develop an initial repertoire of knowledge and skills about the dynamics of the classroom and the actual practices of teaching. The school experience is divided into two distinct sections, corresponding to the fall and spring semesters. The first section commences in September and ends in January, providing an observation-based opportunity within this timeframe. Subsequently, the second section spans from February to June, encompassing a separate period for more actual engagement. According to the guidelines set by the Turkish Council of Higher Education, prospective EFL teachers are required to spend a total of 6 hours per week in schools throughout both academic semesters. In the initial semester, they undergo a mandatory 12-week observation period, after which they begin actively teaching in various grade levels that align with their preferences during the second semester. The preparation process for the practice entails several steps, such as crafting the lesson plan, seeking feedback from cooperating teachers and supervisors, delivering the les-

sons, and engaging in reflection sessions to evaluate the practice. While there may be minor variations in the practical experiences based on contextual factors, all prospective teachers are assigned 72 hours of practice to fulfill during each term. The research participants in this study were selected from a cohort of pre-service EFL teachers who were placed in a private middle school primarily due to its proximity to their residential addresses. Private middle schools in Turkey often prioritize language teaching using diverse materials tailored to students' needs and interests, and they adopt a communicative approach aligned with the Common European Framework implemented by the Turkish Council of Higher Education.

3.2. Participants

The participants were three female pre-service EFL teachers, aged 21, under the pseudonyms of Emma, Olivia, and Sophia. They were senior students in the English Language Teaching program at a university in Turkey. At the time of data collection, they successfully completed a total of 210 credits, equivalent to sixty-one courses. All the participants completed the first module of the SP in the first semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. They voluntarily participated in the current study and were willing to be placed in a private school based on their previous experiences. Given they already had continuous communication with the first author, who was also their mentoring instructor, they could genuinely express their perceptions regarding their concerns at the ITE program. This allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of sense of belonging during the practicum. To represent the broader population of pre-service EFL teachers in the program, this group of pre-service teachers was selected based on their regular attendance in classes and their progression to senior student status. The authors obtained oral informed consent from the participants, and they were ensured that their personal and private data would be kept confidential.

3.3. Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data from the participants. The first instrument was a graphic elicitation technique that was used by the participants to express their thoughts more clearly and broadly before the interview (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). The technique of diagramming and visual elicitation elicits valuable contributions from interviewees that may be difficult to obtain through other methods (Crilly *et al.*, 2006). Visualizing and mirroring their perceptions, thoughts, and connections between concepts allows interviewees to articulate their perceptions in a more comprehensive manner. This approach can thus enrich the depth of data obtained from the interviews, allowing researchers to refer to the details of the graphic elicitation to obtain more detailed clarifications from the participants in the interviews. The second data collection instrument was exploratory focus group interviews, which offers a valuable approach, particularly when individual interviews remain inadequate in understanding the phenomenon being studied (Vaughn *et al.*, 1996). In this approach, the participants can generate new insights through group interactions, and it allows the researchers to uncover shared experiences and collective meanings. In the present study, the participants were engaged in collaborative discussions, and they collectively constructed their perception regarding their sense of belonging in the ITE program.

3.4. Data collection procedure

The data collection procedure lasted for nearly a month in the Spring semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. After the participants completed 2 months of field visits, they were instructed to join an exploratory focus group interview through which their perceptions and beliefs regarding the effectiveness of SP on the development of their sense of belonging were taken into closer scrutiny. At the outset, before commencing the focus group interviews, each participant was instructed to draw a graphic elicitation, which aimed to capture their anticipated relationships with the various stakeholders within the school and their personal perception of belonging. This stage lasted almost an hour. Graphic elicitation is a visual data collection method, which enables the participants to broaden their interpretations of interview questions and stimulate creative thinking. It enables participants to provide insights, share their experiences, and express their opinions on a social phenomenon in a visual format (Bagnoli, 2009). To introduce the method, the researchers provided a sample diagram and explained how it was constructed. This allowed the participants to become familiar with the process. Then, individual interpretations were elicited by examining the diagram. By drawing their personal mind-maps, the participants were encouraged to articulate their thoughts on their graphs so as to activate their background knowledge before the focus group state was conducted. After the completion of the graphic elicitation, participants made references to their generated ideas in the diagram from time to time throughout the focus group interview.

3.5. Data analysis

Specifically, incongruent with the principles of the phenomenological inquiry, the authors basically followed Giorgi's (2009) procedures for data analysis that could offer systematicity, communicability, and transparency of the coding process: 1) transcribing interviews, 2) reaching a holistic understanding, 3) constructing meaning units based on the experiences of the participants, 4) grouping interrelated units of meanings, 5) translating the meaning units, 6) forming textural descriptions for each participant, (7) searching for major structures that could represent the entire textural description, (8) evaluating the textural description, and (9) synthesizing the structure from all participants' accounts (see Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Prior to focus group interviews, the three graphic elicitation diagrams were reviewed by the researchers. Given the diagrams were the baseline for the subsequent interview, the researchers analyzed each participant's diagram, using them as a guide to anticipate and be aware of the potential contributions and insights that the participants might offer during the interviews. This preparation allowed the researchers to effectively engage with the participants and facilitate in-depth discussions. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the first researcher shared her commentary and interpretations with the participants. This allowed for a collaborative process where the participants had the opportunity to review, verify, and validate the final version of the data. Through this iterative and participatory approach, the researchers ensured the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings.

4. RESULTS

The results are presented under two major themes, namely interpersonal relationships and institutional factors based on the qualitative analyses of the individual reflections of the participants.

4.1. Interpersonal relationships

The analyses of the graphic elicitations and exploratory focus group interview indicated that prospective EFL teachers value their relationships with the classroom teachers, students, and administrators in the school while establishing their sense of belonging. The graphic elicitations presented below (see Figures 1, 2, and 3) demonstrate different dimensions of relationships between classroom teachers, students, administrators, and themselves. As evident, participants expressed their ideal relationship with the classroom teachers as creating mutually positive and appreciative connections. They suggested that classroom teachers should behave kindly, and they should help and support pre-service teachers in challenging or adaptational situations. One of the participants elaborated on the critical role of being helpful by stating that classroom teachers should not afford assistance only when they look for it. Instead, they should be sensitive to the academic and non-academic needs of the pre-service EFL teachers.

It is highly important for classroom teachers to cater for our non-academic needs. Unfortunately, my classroom teacher is present only at times when I call her. She never talks to me about my progress, and my feelings. The lack of communication between us results in demotivation on my side. (Olivia, Focus Group)

More specifically, participants reported that teachers should spare special time for them to reflect collaboratively on their teaching progress, touch on their weaknesses and strengths in SP period through continuous feedback and provide practical guidance to improve their teaching effectiveness.

I suggested to my classroom teacher we should gather weekly about our SP progress. We could discuss what we experienced throughout the week in the meetings and come up with practical solutions for the problems that we would face. However, we could not arrange such a meeting due to the heavy workload of the English teachers in the school. (Sophia, Focus Group)

They also stated that teachers' attitudes had an immediate impact on their attitudes and perceptions about the effectiveness of SP. They believe that it is henceforth necessary to establish a genuine teacher-teacher relationship rather than an intern-teacher relationship, which helps pre-service teachers become more engaged in their practice of teaching and forming their sense of belonging.

My classroom teacher always behaves as I am one of her colleagues. She sometimes shares new information that she has learned about one of her students. This apparently shows that it is important for her to share the private information of her students with me, as I have an important role in her class. (Sophia, Focus Group)



Figure 1. Graphic elicitation 1

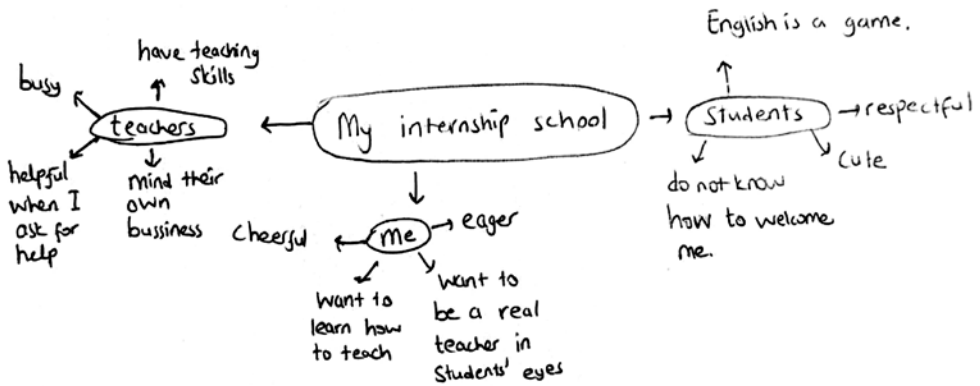


Figure 2. Graphic elicitation 2

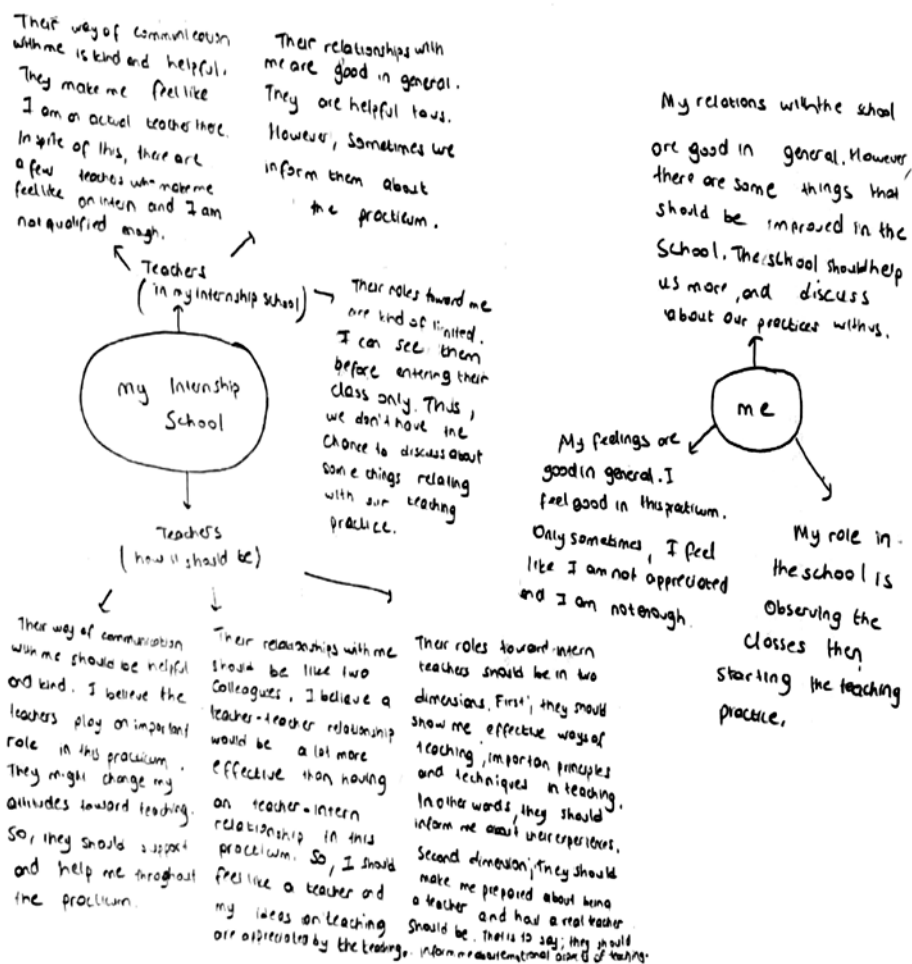


Figure 3. Graphic elicitation 3

4.1.1. The relationship between classroom teachers and prospective EFL teachers

During the focus group interview, the participants described their vision of an ideal relationship between classroom teachers and prospective EFL teachers. They highlighted that their classroom teachers facilitated the learning process, offered support, and provided ongoing feedback throughout the SP experience, which paved the way for their formation of sense of belonging. One participant stated her thoughts as follows:

They are completely open to assisting us, they make us feel that they will support us in any way. (Olivia, Focus Group)

On the other hand, the participants also stated that classroom teachers remained insufficient in some cases in satisfying the needs of the prospective EFL teachers due to their heavy workload:

... And we can understand it from teachers. In other words, they are tired, they are busy, and sometimes they even try to give us feedback, but sometimes they cannot even provide feedback due to the intensive workload. Because they always have one-to-one lessons. There are parent meetings. They have so many activities apart from their classes. (Emma, Focus Group)

In order to overcome the problems related to heavy working conditions, the participants suggested that collaborative planning throughout the field visits could be essential. They emphasized the importance of involving prospective EFL teachers in collaborative planning during field visits, as it helps them develop a stronger connection to their profession and also eases the workload of classroom teachers. In fact, being able to be involved in each step of practicum planning (e.g., observation/practice time, planning a course, materials, having a lesson together with the cooperating teacher, introducing themselves to the students) would make it possible to foster their sense of belonging and enhance their overall engagement in the teaching process. One of the participants expanded on the significance of collaborative planning in light of mutual negotiation as follows:

I think it is necessary to talk about the expectations of both teachers and interns from the very beginning, and act in cooperation accordingly. (Sophia, Focus Group)

4.1.2. *The relationship between students and prospective EFL teachers*

The participants stated that students should perceive pre-service EFL teachers as genuine teachers rather than mere trainees or learners. It is noteworthy to highlight that classroom teachers should prioritize this sensitive concern of pre-service teachers. They need to be cognizant of this aspect while introducing pre-service EFL teachers to the students in the classroom. Classroom teachers can also play a crucial role in effectively involving pre-service EFL teachers in classroom activities, thereby fostering their engagement and integration into the teaching process. The participants also conveyed a sense of being treated as guest teachers within the school environment. They specifically described the concept of a "guest teacher" as generating a sense of exclusion (unbelonging) from the school community, thereby resulting in the perception among students that pre-service EFL teachers were temporary individuals who would teach occasionally and then depart. This sentiment was reflected in the following excerpts:

Frankly, we feel that we are interns there. In other words, like a sister and brother relationship, even though they always give us a teacher's uniform, we feel like we are interns. In other words, I think many things can be done to involve us in the training process and to become a little more like a teacher. (Olivia, Focus Group)

They usually call us guests. "We have a guest teacher". In general, when we say guests, something different crosses children's minds. (Emma, Focus Group)

As apparent, students are highly influenced by their class teachers' perceptions and attributes to the pre-service EFL teachers. The fact that classroom teachers introduced pre-service teachers as guest teachers to the students resulted in students regarding the pre-service teachers as temporary or assisting guests in their classes. Although pre-service EFL teachers exerted efforts to increase their sense of belonging to the school such as dressing formally, they were challenged when their professional identity was not recognized properly by the students.

4.1.3. *The relationship between school administrators and prospective EFL teachers*

With respect to the idealized relationship between school administrators and prospective EFL teachers, the participants expressed the view that respectful and caring behavior from school administrators was crucial for them to develop a sense of belonging to the school. They emphasized the importance of not feeling excluded or disconnected from the school community. In one of the unfortunate cases that Emma experienced with the assistant manager, she expressed that the lines regarding the relationship between administrators and pre-service teachers were strictly drawn.

That's why, for example, I said to my friends: "I don't like this school very much", because even when we enter the teachers' room, some teachers chat with us, some act like we don't exist! For example, I saw the assistant manager, the lady and I even told Olivia that she was not smiling at all. On the way to school in the morning, I said good morning and he just looked. He actually made me feel so bad. So, in this school, you are a trainee student and I think the role of the teacher is very sharply drawn. (Emma, Focus Group)

Furthermore, the participants frequently pointed out the importance of being recognized and appraised by the school admins. They stated that they felt more connected and related to the workplace and became an active member of the school community when they were appreciated and engaged by the admins in the non-teaching activities.

When I went to the other internship school where I worked voluntarily, on my first day, they arranged breakfast with the primary school principal and the primary school vice principal, and we had breakfast and drank coffee or something. Knowing that you are truly valued is actually very valuable. They know the thing, if we value the people, they will give the maximum benefit to our school. Yes, they know that. That's why, for example, I said to my friends: "I don't like this school very much", because even when we enter the teachers' room, some teachers chat with us, and some act like we are not there. For example, I saw the assistant manager, and I even told Olivia that she was not smiling at all. On the way to school in the morning, I said, 'Good morning' but she just looked. She made me feel bad. (Sophia, Focus Group)

4.2. Institutional factors

Another recurrent theme related to fostering the sense of belonging during SP pertains to the institutional factors. During the focus group interview, the participants repeatedly asserted that the classroom teachers' workloads at the private school made them work excessively, to

carry out tasks beyond their job description, and thereby have inadequate communication with the prospective EFL teachers. The constant rush of attending classes and parental meetings served as a barrier preventing the establishment of the desired relationship with the teacher candidates. The insufficient time for establishing a healthy relationship among stakeholders resulted in less connectedness to the school environment, which can be understood from the following excerpts below:

They are tired, they are busy, sometimes they even try to give us feedback, but sometimes they cannot even provide feedback due to their workload. They always have one-to-one lessons. There are parental meetings. They have so many duties apart from teaching. (Olivia, Focus Group)

For example, I was able to receive feedback for the lesson I taught on Monday only one day before because the teacher replied late to my message because of the exam rush, he even said, "If it will be difficult for you, I can support you too." But I somehow handled it. As my friends say, we are chatting with them like this: "Sir, I noticed something like this, how can it be improved?", but in such a quiet time, they only have a single recess. There is one hour of class time, during which the teachers who are in the fifth grade hold meetings, except for the third lesson, since there is always such a rush, we cannot actually talk about the questions in our minds in such detail. (Emma, Focus Group)

The participants also highlighted the significance of orientation sessions from the very first weeks of SP as this kind of introduction could help them feel more related to the school community, along with the advantage of becoming familiar with the physical infrastructure.

An orientation can be organized for us. This orientation is not only the physical presentation of the institution, but one week before going to the internship, to show us how teachers design materials, whether they make a lesson plan weekly, whether they do it daily or monthly, according to what criteria, etc. I'm wondering about one more thing. How do they make use of digital applications? (Olivia, Focus Group)

5. DISCUSSION

The objective of the current study was to gain insights into the sense of belonging experienced by prospective EFL teachers during their SP in ITE programs and to utilize these experiences to inform the development of future SP designs in the programs. The initial theme derived from the analysis of the data revealed that the participants placed significant importance on their interactions and relationships with classroom teachers, students, and school administrators. This is echoed in Pendergast *et al.*'s (2020) study, which indicated that prospective EFL teachers are more likely to experience a sense of belonging within the school community when they receive continuous support, help, and feedback from their classroom teachers. Aligned with Ryan and Deci's (2022) self-determination theory (SDT), which posits the individuals' fundamental psychological need for relatedness, pre-service EFL teachers' sense of belonging is susceptible to their sense of relatedness and their interpersonal connections within the school environment. Since the pre-service EFL teachers' desire for social connections is influenced by the quality of their relationships and interactions with

classroom teachers, students, and school administrators, their support, respect, and inclusiveness can pave the way for the pre-service EFL teachers to experience a heightened sense of belonging and connection to the school community.

The findings can also be discussed by applying Wenger's (1998) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of the communities of practice (CoP) to pre-service EFL teachers in ITE programs. Three characteristics of CoP are posited as mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. A CoP refers to a group of individuals who come together to pursue a shared domain of knowledge or expertise and engage in collective learning (Wenger, 1998). In the context of a school, teachers and administrators form an educational CoP as they share knowledge, collaborate, and engage in professional development activities. Within this community, there are opportunities for interaction, mutual learning, and the development of a shared professional identity. Given a CoP provides a setting for members to exchange ideas and collectively work towards common goals, it can foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose among its members. Since pre-service EFL teachers engage in collaborative activities, such as classroom observations, lesson planning, and reflective discussions in ITE programs, they actively contribute to the educational community of the school. The ongoing interaction and mutual engagement in such educational communities can enhance pre-service EFL teachers' sense of relatedness, promote their professional identity, and thereby shape their sense of belonging. Inel Ekici's (2018) study similarly indicated that integrating a CoP approach in a teaching practice course can have a beneficial impact on pre-service teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. In other words, the utilization of CoP within the course positively influences how confident and competent pre-service teachers feel in their teaching abilities.

More particularly, it is noteworthy that the effectiveness of CoP practices can vary depending on the experiences of the local community of teachers in the professional contexts (Canagarajah, 2012). Relatedly, studies conducted in different teaching contexts, including the present study, demonstrate a wide array of experiences of sense of belonging among pre-service teachers (Dewhurst, 2021; Donlon *et al.*, 2020; Johnston, 2010). Acknowledging the sense of belonging as a context-sensitive phenomenon, it becomes more essential to develop specific strategies to increase belonging in response to the needs of the pre-service teachers in specific contexts. Although professional development is facilitated through collaborative practices, the role of personal traits needs to be highlighted. Individual characteristics of teachers can have a major impact on shaping the sense of belonging (Pesonen *et al.*, 2021). Expectedly, while more resilient and enthusiastic teachers could experience higher levels of belonging in their profession, teachers who face burn-out and job stress might feel lower feelings of belongingness to the school community. Knowing that pre-service teachers are at the initial step of their teaching journey where they shape their attitude and beliefs about their profession, belongingness could be experienced relatively with more fluctuations. In a recent study, Derakhshan and Zare (2023) indicated that altruistic teaching, which refers to putting a special emphasis on the well-being of individuals without expecting a return, flourishes their sense of belonging. Therefore, teacher educators should provide pre-service teachers ample opportunities to experience and build on this positive feeling in their future altruistic teaching and learning practices.

The participants also reported that their classroom teachers' inability to cater to their needs was mainly because of their heavy workloads at school. This is echoed in Malm's

(2020) study, in which classroom teachers reported heavy workloads as one of the negative consequences of maintaining their positive relationships and constructive dialogues with the pre-service teachers. According to Bakker and Demerouti's (2014) job demands–resources theory, excessive job demands, and insufficient job resources are more likely to lead to job strain and eventually result in burnout. The classroom teachers' high level of workloads may thus impede their ability to provide optimal support and guidance to pre-service EFL teachers. Aligned with emotion crossover theory, an individual's emotional state is likely to be transmitted to another in the same social setting (Härtel & Page, 2009). Results have also found that even individuals' perception of social interaction partners' emotional states can be contagious (Tam *et al.*, 2019). In the context of classroom, classroom teachers' negative emotional experiences such as job strain and burnout due to their workloads are more likely to be transmitted to the pre-service EFL teachers. The burden of such negative emotional experiences can be overwhelming and distressing for inexperienced and novice pre-service EFL teachers who are still in the early stages of developing their professional identities. These emotional challenges can potentially hinder their growth, confidence, and overall well-being during this crucial phase of their teaching journey.

Results also indicated that prospective EFL teachers highly value the relationships they establish with the students during SP, emphasizing the significance of being seen not as temporary guest teachers, but as genuine English teachers who deserve the same level of respect as their fellow colleagues. As an important component of Strayhorn's (2012) theory of belonging, it is evident that prospective EFL teachers tend to develop a sense of belonging as a consequence of mattering. The findings are also echoed in Dewhurst *et al.*'s (2020) study, which revealed that when pre-service teachers are appreciated and involved in school activities as active members of the community, they experience a deeper and more authentic sense of belonging. Given EFL learners' teacher appreciation is closely associated with foreign language teaching enjoyment (Derakhshan *et al.*, 2022; Ergün & Dewaele, 2021; Solhi *et al.*, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2023), being respected and recognized by EFL learners in the class can foster pre-service EFL teachers' teaching enjoyment and can eventually establish a positive teacher-learner relationship. Additionally, through being recognized as legitimate teachers, prospective EFL teachers are better positioned to fulfill their role as facilitators of language learning and contribute to the overall language learning experience of their students.

The participants also highlighted the significance of developing positive relationships with school administrators so as to foster a stronger sense of connection and belonging to the school community. Indeed, establishing productive lines of communication with school administrators can not only promote pre-service EFL teachers' sense of investment and commitment to the school, but can also lead to a deeper integration within the school community. Furthermore, positive relationships with school administrators can provide opportunities for recognition, collaboration, and professional growth, which in turn contribute to the overall well-being and professional identity of the prospective EFL teachers. The findings are aligned with Olcum and Titrek's (2015) study results, highlighting the significant impact of school administrators on teachers' job satisfaction. The result is also consistent with Dos Santos's (2021) study findings, which indicated that negative administrative style, along with other factors such as negative self-efficacy and sense of isolation, can contribute to pre-service teachers' decision to leave the teaching profession after completing the practicum. This

suggests that the quality of relationships with school administrators can have a significant influence on pre-service EFL teachers' professional sense of belonging experiences and their decision to continue or leave the profession.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study explored the sense of belonging experiences of three pre-service EFL teachers during the SP along with the contributing factors involved in establishing their sense of belonging. The findings from exploratory focus group interviews with the participants and their graphic elicitation tasks shed light on the significance of interpersonal relationships in shaping the sense of belonging of pre-service EFL teachers during the practicum. The results highlight the influential role of classroom teachers, students, and school administrators in fostering pre-service EFL teachers' sense of belonging experiences within the educational context. By recognizing the prominence of these relationships, teacher education programs can develop strategies to foster effective communication and create an inclusive environment with the purpose of nurturing positive and meaningful interactions between the stakeholders. To further enhance the effectiveness of the communication among stakeholders, collaborative sessions and meetings could be facilitated at regular intervals for a more transparent SP process. Moreover, the results highlight the significance of designing an orientation program to familiarize the pre-service EFL teachers with the operationalized procedure of the school community and how teachers carry out their basic duties on a daily basis before they commence their actual teaching experiences during the SP. In the case of the present study, the participants posited that they would develop a professional sense of belonging if they were oriented to the school in the early days rather than trying to figure out the procedure on their own. Indeed, such introductory programs can act as survival-orientations which can help pre-service teachers make smooth transitions from novice to a more skillful practicum (Heikonen *et al.*, 2017). It is also important to engage pre-service EFL teachers in not only teaching but non-teaching practices such as meetings, material designs, and other departmental commitments so as to develop their professional sense of belonging and integration within the school community. The inclusion of pre-service EFL teachers in non-teaching practices helps to create a shared purpose and collaborative atmosphere, and thereby makes them feel like integral members of the educational community. The major and supportive role of mentoring instructors also needs to be emphasized. Through weekly meetings with pre-service EFL teachers, they can facilitate their professional development through valuable guidance and constructive feedback so as to address any concerns or challenges they may encounter. These regular interactions would allow mentoring instructors to better understand the specific needs of the pre-service EFL teachers and offer personalized support. By fostering a strong mentor-mentee relationship, mentoring instructors can thus empower pre-service EFL teachers to enhance their professional growth, boost their confidence, and navigate their journey toward becoming effective and successful educators.

7. LIMITATIONS

This study needs to be considered with its limitations. Firstly, we conducted the study with a small number of participants. Listening to the voices of a larger group of pre-service EFL teachers would be beneficial in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of their sense of belonging experiences in the ITE program. Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific context of a private institution. Future research can consider comparing the sense of belonging experiences of the participants in different educational contexts. Furthermore, the study relied on self-report data in focus group interviews supplemented by graphic elicitations. Given the fact that pre-service EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions of belonging may change over time and be influenced by various factors, exploring the longitudinal aspects of belonging with the purpose of keeping track of the dynamic nature of the sense of belonging would be a fruitful research avenue. Lastly, incorporating multiple data sources and methods, such as observations or interviews with other stakeholders, could also provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

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