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Professional Placements, Mentoring Practices and Workplace Readiness: What are the Connections?

Angelina Ambrosetti, Central Queensland University, Noosa Australia

Abstract

Students enrolled in a teaching degree divide their time between learning the theory and practicing the theory. It is strongly argued that the development of authentic workplace skills and knowledge occurs during practical component of a teaching degree. The introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers has benchmarked the development of particular skills and knowledge at a graduate level. Hence, it follows that the practices used by the classroom-based teacher will influence the growth of the pre-service teacher's workplace readiness. This paper presents a small research project that investigated the practices used by classroom teachers to mentor pre-service teachers during their final placements. The results highlight the connections between the practices employed and the outcomes achieved by the pre-service teachers.



Introduction

In Australia the requirement for pre-service teachers to be workplace ready at graduation is becoming increasingly important as the landscape of what it means to be a teacher changes. The recent introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers ensures that graduating teachers have met benchmarks in professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012). Workplace ready graduates need to ‘hit the ground running’, that is they need to have the capabilities to be able to operate in a classroom in an effective manner and be an active member of the school community. Such capabilities can include the management of learning within a classroom, to work with the learners, design learning experiences based on the needs of all learners, use multi-modal approaches and methods to deliver learning, and integrate creativity and innovation within their work programs (Lynch & Smith, 2006). Thus, a workplace ready graduate in teacher education is primarily one who is able to adapt to the current, yet changing paradigm of teaching and learning (Lynch & Smith, 2006).

Pre-service teacher education degrees, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, consist of both coursework (theory) and practice. Although the debate continues regarding the theory-practice divide, and how to best address the disconnections that can occur between the theory and practice components of a teaching degree (Allen, 2011), it is well documented that authentic practice is an essential component of learning to teach (Darling-Hammond, 2010; House of Representatives, 2007; White, Bloomfield & Le Cornu, 2010). Most pre-service teacher education programs in Australia include several placements that provide the opportunity for the application of knowledge and development of workplace ready skills (Pridham, Deed & Cox, 2013). Therefore classroom teachers are increasingly being called upon to accept pre-service teachers into their classroom for practice teaching. Thus, the role classroom teachers’ play within the process of learning to teach has become increasingly important and has the potential to significantly impact the development of a workplace ready graduate.

This paper investigates the role of the classroom teacher during the professional placement (also known as the practicum). More specifically, this paper focuses on the practices a classroom teacher uses when working with a pre-service teacher and whether the practices



assist in the development of workplace readiness. Pridham et al. (2013) note that the outcomes achieved from a professional placement are shaped by the interactions and enactments that occur. Pre-service teaching degrees usually require the classroom teacher to either mentor or supervise the pre-service teacher during the placement, thus this research refers to practices that are of a mentoring and/or supervisory nature (Ambrosetti, Knight & Dekkers, 2014; Hudson & Millwater, 2008; Koc, 2011). The paper firstly discusses the differences between mentoring and supervision and the practices the two approaches employ. The methodology and context of the research undertaken will be considered before the results are presented, discussed and implications for practice are highlighted.

Context

Classroom-based teachers who volunteer to host a pre-service teacher can be referred to as a mentor or supervisor. These two terms dominate the literature and are often used interchangeably without any notable differences in meaning or practice. However, each term is unique in its definition and the use of such varied terminology has the potential to cause confusion and misunderstanding of both the approach taken and roles played during a placement. This can often be the case when a school or classroom-based teacher is dealing with more than one university.

In the Australian context, several shifts have occurred in the use of terminology when referring to the professional placement in teacher education. Such shifts are attributed to the increase of school based teacher education and the acknowledgement of the value of workplace learning (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen, 2008; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009). A scan of Australian pre-service teacher education literature from the 2000s found that the terms mentoring and supervision were used interchangeably when referring to what occurs within the professional placement. Titles of research papers often included the use of both words intimating that supervision is a component of mentoring or visa versa. Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen (2008) have noted however, that in the pre-service teacher education context the mentor teacher is often considered both a mentor and supervisor and they take on such roles accordingly. Table 1 provides a summary of the general characteristics and roles of mentoring and supervision.

Table 1 Summary of mentoring and supervisory characteristics and roles

	General Characteristics	Roles
<p>Mentoring Whereby a mentor teacher and pre-service teacher work together in order to achieve personal and professional goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationship • Long term relationship • Formal or informal relationship • Hierarchical or non-hierarchical • Reciprocal, mutual relationship • Relational, developmental and contextual components • Reflective • Formative assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporter • Guide • Advisor • Role model • Facilitator • Collaborator • Protector • Colleague/Friend • Evaluator/Assessor • Trainer/Teacher
<p>Supervision The socialization and development of the pre-service teacher into the school and classroom environment through feedback and assessment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationship • Short term relationship • Hierarchical top-down relationship • Developmental and contextual components • Formative and summative assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor • Role model • Expert • Trainer/Teacher • Facilitator • Assessor

Mentoring

Mentoring comprises of a series of social interactions between two or more people. In pre-service teacher education, these social interactions focus on the process of learning to teach (Ambrosetti, 2010). As well as being an interpersonal relationship, mentoring is also a process that involves a number of roles played by both the mentor teacher and the mentee (pre-service teacher). The roles within mentoring are varied and numerous in number. Within the context of pre-service teacher education, the mentor's roles include those that support, guide and advise a pre-service teacher, but there are also those that model behaviour and practice, facilitate development and encourage collaboration and reflection (Ambrosetti et al., 2014). The roles of the pre-service teacher reflect the mentor teachers, and include those of active participant, contributor, collaborator, reflector and observer (Ambrosetti et al., 2014). The roles of the mentor teacher and pre-service teacher change and evolve in response to the needs of the participants (Ambrosetti et al., 2014; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Lucas, 2001).

Mentoring is often viewed as a hierarchical relationship, however it can also be reciprocal where collaboration and mutuality underpin the practices (Le Cornu, 2010). A reciprocal relationship is based on the concept that the participants are equal in status, experience and



development. However, Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2007) outline the characteristics of a relationship that sits between the hierarchical and reciprocal extremes of mentoring, that of an asymmetrical relationship. This type of mentoring relationship acknowledges that one participant may be more experienced and takes the lead within the relationship. Asymmetrical mentoring shares the responsibilities between the participants, therefore providing space for mutuality and collaboration to occur. This type of mentoring is well suited to the pre-service teacher education context as the mentoring that occurs needs to allow the pre-service teachers to be responsible for their own learning and development.

Supervision

The concept of supervision brings to the fore the vision of a boss and his or her workers. Thus, supervision can be described as a top-down hierarchical relationship where each participant knows their position and roles, neither of which do not change throughout the relationship. In the context of pre-service teacher education, Long (1997) likens supervision to a teacher/learner behaviourist model whereby the pre-service teacher copies the supervisory teacher's actions in order to learn what to do and is then assessed on their performance. Assessment is a key role within the concept of supervision, and in Australia, the classroom-based teacher is required to assess and assign a grade to the pre-service teacher during the professional placement. Other roles that are part of the supervision process include those of expert, role model and facilitator. The roles of the pre-service teacher are not documented in the literature, but it can be assumed that they would be in response to the supervising teacher's roles.

Supervision is primarily a process that creates a graduate teacher who knows how to assimilate into the school and classroom environment. Supervision has a distinct focus on the developmental and contextual aspects of becoming a teacher, but does not focus on the growth of relationships within the setting. Although supervision can be classified as an interpersonal relationship, the roles of the classroom-based teacher are concerned with the development of teaching knowledge and skills pre-service teacher rather than the development of personal skills and the resilient self. Ambrosetti (2010) and Walkington (2005), propose that supervision is effective at the moulding the pre-service teacher to both the job of a teacher and the work that occurs in a school.



Method

This research examined mentoring from the perspective of the pre-service teacher. It investigated the types of roles and practices that classroom teachers used during a placement, particularly those that the pre-service teachers found effective in relation to the development of skills and knowledge. Thus the research intended to make connections between the practices used by the classroom teachers and the development of a workplace ready graduate. The research investigated the question of whether such roles and practices assist in developing their capabilities as graduate teachers. It must be noted that this research project did not investigate the assessment of pre-service teachers by their mentor teachers about their readiness to teach.

The research used a survey as its data-gathering instrument as the pre-service teachers were undertaking a professional placement at the time of implementation. The survey was anonymous, online and contained both open ended or multiple choice questions. The questions were categorized into themes as shown in Table 2. The first theme consisted of three questions that focused on the perceptions that pre-service teachers had of mentoring. The second theme requested the pre-service teachers identify the mentoring that they experienced during their placement. The final theme contained only one question that asked the pre-service teachers to outline the outcomes they had achieved within their professional placement experience. It can be seen from Table 2 that the survey questions used mentoring terminology as opposed to terminology associated with supervision. This was due to the language used in the teacher education program in which this investigation was undertaken. Supervisory language was included the multiple choice questions, however the bias toward the use of mentoring terminology can be considered as a limitation of the study.

Table 2 Survey Themes and Questions

Theme	Questions
Perceptions about mentoring	1. What does mentoring mean to you? 2. What aspect of mentoring is most important to you? 3. What is your ideal mentoring relationship?
Experiences of mentoring	4. What roles did your mentor teacher use? 5. In what ways were you mentored by your mentor teacher? 6. What types of conversations did you engage in with your

	mentor teacher?
Outcomes	7. What are the outcomes of your experiences?

The survey was conducted at one campus of a regional university with a cohort of Bachelor of Education students. Approximately half of the final year cohort participated in the research project with a total of thirty-one undergraduate pre-service teachers responses. At the time of the survey, the pre-service teachers were in the final weeks of a six week internship. Prior to the internship the pre-service teachers had spent a total of fifty days with their mentor teacher and class. The fifty days completed were a combination of work experience and assessable days and were structured as day visits and blocks. Prior to beginning the internship, the pre-service teachers undertook a practicum course which outlined specific requirements of the placement and provided benchmarks for the pre-service teachers aspire to. The small sample size of this research is a second limitation, however the study intended to provide a starting point for further exploration and research.

Research Findings

Theme: About mentoring

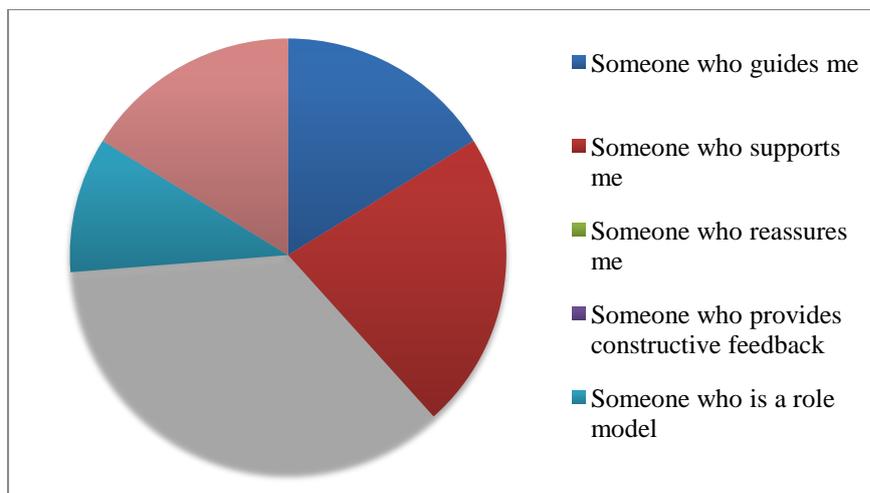
The three questions in this theme asked the pre-service teachers to reflect on their understandings of mentoring and to contextualize them in relation to the professional placement. Question 1 enquired about the perceptions that pre-service teachers have of mentoring. The majority of the respondents simply listed adjectives that reflected their perceptions. Figure 1 provides an overview of the adjectives that were most frequently documented in the responses.

Figure 1. What does mentoring mean to you?



The second question in the theme asked the pre-service teachers to identify the aspect of mentoring that was most important to them. The pre-service teachers were provided with a list of eight options as shown in Figure 2 and were asked to choose one response. Thirty-six percent (36%) of the respondents nominated *someone who provides constructive feedback* as the most important aspect of mentoring. Twenty-two percent (22%) chose *someone who supports me* and sixteen percent (16%) choosing *someone who guides me*. A further sixteen percent choosing *someone who includes me unconditionally* with the remaining ten percent (10%) of the respondents nominating *someone who is a role model* as the most important aspect of mentoring. Three of the options were not chosen at all, namely *someone who reassures me*, *someone who demonstrates techniques to me* and *someone who assesses my performance*.

Figure 2. Aspect of mentoring which is most important



The final question in this theme asked the pre-service teachers to describe their ideal mentoring relationship. This question was designed to confirm and draw together the responses of previous two questions. Several key words were repeatedly use in the responses and these inked back to the responses in the first two questions in this theme. The key words included *support, guidance, feedback* and *sharing* as shown in the following responses.

The mentor guides and supports you, and gives constructive feedback allowing the mentee to take risks and try new things.

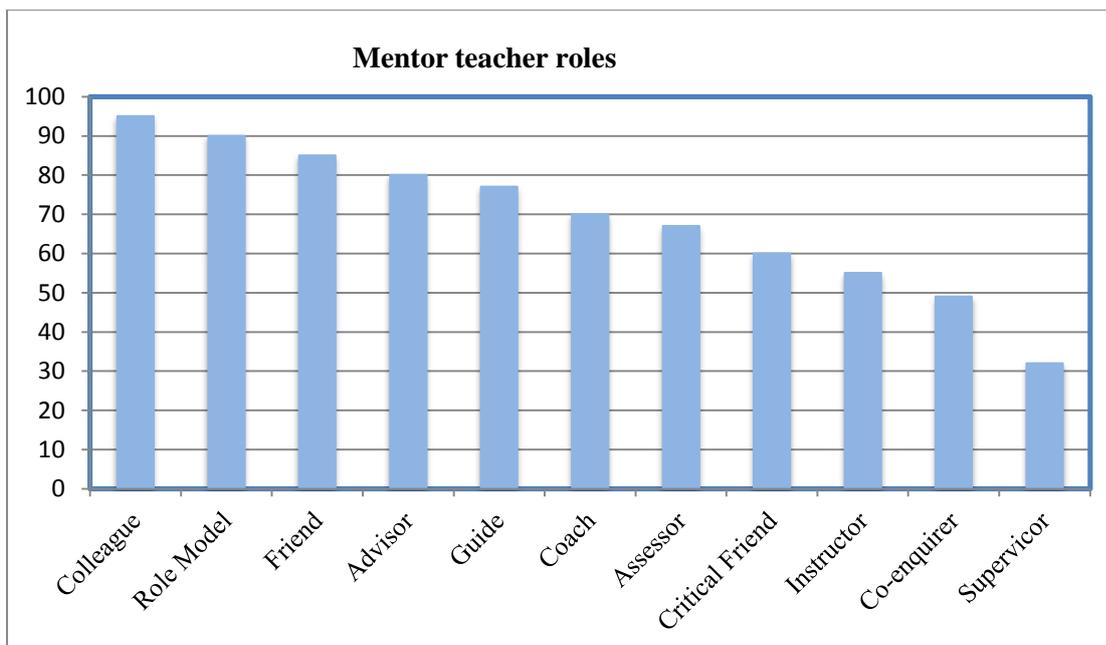
One where we become equals and share ideas and strategies – working together towards a common goal.

A friendly, but professional relationship where the mentor is approachable and we can talk openly.

Theme: Experiences of mentoring

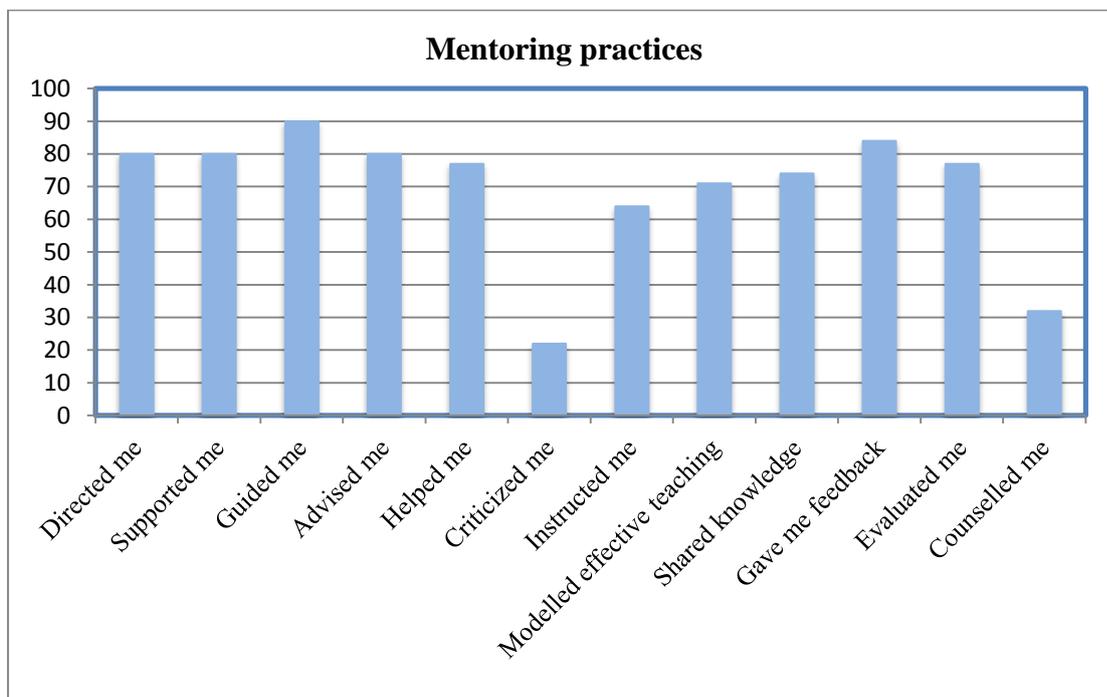
The first question in this theme focused on mentor roles. Specifically the question asked the pre-service teachers to identify the roles that the mentor teacher used during the placement. The pre-service teachers were provided with eleven different roles that were commonly outlined in the research literature regarding mentoring and supervising in the pre-service teacher education context. The participants were able to choose multiple responses. It can be seen from Figure 3 that *colleague* and *role model* were the roles most frequently used by the mentor teachers. The roles of *friend*, *advisor*, *guide*, *coach*, *assessor* and *critical friend* were also frequently used. The least frequently used roles were *instructor*, *co-enquirer*, *colleague* and *supervisor*.

Figure 3. Mentor teacher roles



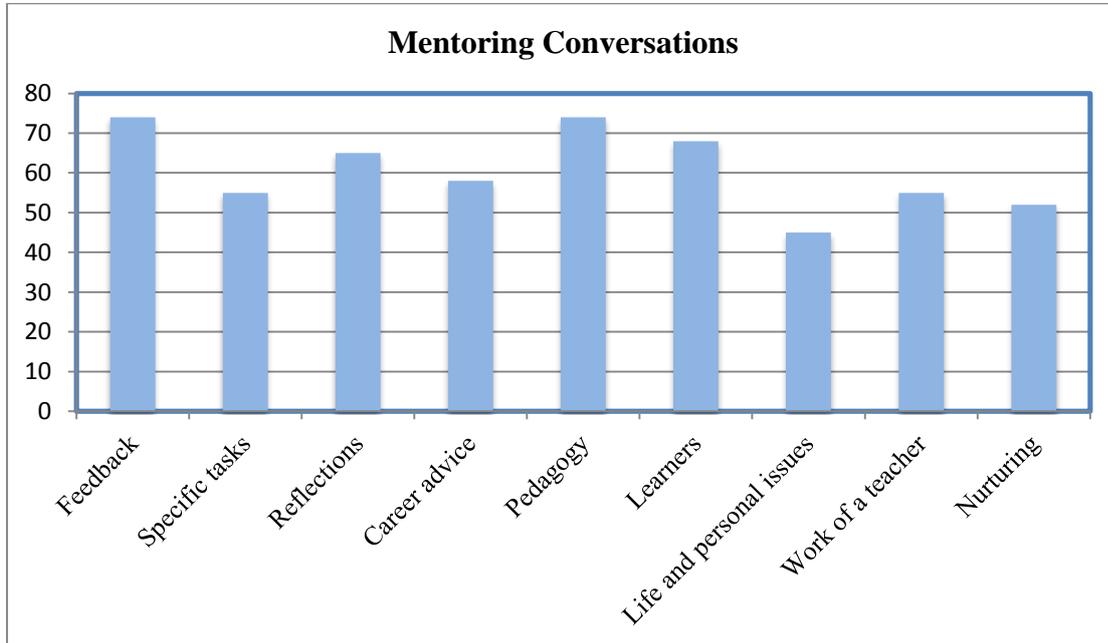
Question 5 asked the pre-service teachers to identify how they had been mentored by their mentor teacher. The question provided twelve mentoring practices and the participants could choose multiple answers. Similarly, the practices outlined in the question were drawn from the research literature that concerned mentoring and supervision. It can be seen from Figure 4 that *guided me* was the mentoring practice that almost all participants identified as being used by their mentor teacher. Other mentoring practices such as *gave me feedback*, *directed me*, *supported me* and *advised me* were also identified as being used by many of the pre-service teachers mentors. The mentoring practices that were not frequently identified as being used by the mentor teachers were *counselled me* and *criticized me*.

Figure 4. Mentoring practices used by the mentor teachers



The final question in this theme focused on the types of conversations that pre-service teachers engaged in with their mentor teacher. The question provided a list of nine types of conversations and the participants were able to choose multiple responses. As shown in Figure 5 the pre-service teachers identified *feedback* and *pedagogy* as the types of conversations that they frequently engaged in with their mentors. Other conversation types that were frequent were those concerning *the learners* and *reflections*. Conversations that concerned *life and personal issues* as well as conversations that were of a *nurturing* nature were also not frequent.

Figure 5. Types of mentoring conversations



Theme: Outcomes

The final theme was targeted the outcomes that the pre-service teachers achieved as a result from the practices that they experienced during their placement. Question 7 was open ended and the analysis of the responses provided by the pre-service teachers saw the emergence of words and phrases concerned with the outcomes they achieved. The majority of the responses contained the word *confidence* and many of the pre-service teachers intimated that this was at the centre of their growth as a graduate teacher. As well as identifying confidence as an outcome of their placement, the pre-service teachers identified their development in terms of knowledge and/or skills as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Outcomes of the professional placement





Discussion and implications

A workplace ready graduate is one who can operate in the current schooling context. The first aim of this research study was to investigate the practices used by classroom teachers with pre-service teachers during a professional placement. The second aim focused on whether the practices used would assist in developing workplace ready capabilities. The findings presented provide some connections between the professional placement and workplace readiness.

As noted in the context and methodology section, mentoring terminology was primarily used within the questions. The responses of the pre-service teachers revealed a sophisticated understanding of mentoring. They described a caring, yet nurturing type of relationship that was tailored to their needs. The types of practices that the pre-service teachers identified as important were those such as providing feedback, giving support, guidance and encouragement. Practices such as sharing, teaching, demonstrating and inclusion were also highlighted as being important. The practices emphasized by the pre-service teachers are of both a mentoring and supervisory nature as predicted by Hennissen et al. (2008).

The teacher roles that the pre-service teachers valued were a mix of relational and developmental roles, and traverse into both mentoring and supervisory practice. Colleague, critical friend, guide and advisor are relational roles, whereas role model, coach, critical friend and assessor are developmental roles played by the mentor teacher (Ambrosetti et al., 2014). Role model is a mentoring/supervisory role that crosses between being developmental and contextual as the modeling can include pedagogical aspects as well as the broader behaviour of teaching and integration into the school environment. This indicates that the classroom teachers who mentored the pre-service teachers during their final placements understood their role in the development of workplace ready graduates.

The types of conversations that were occurring between the mentor teacher and pre-service teacher focused on the job at hand; that of becoming workplace ready. Hennissen et al. (2008) classify the content of mentoring conversations as instruction and organisation, the



pupils and the class, and the subject matter. The content of the conversations that were most frequent concerned pedagogy, teacher feedback, the learners and reflective actions. Such conversations reflect the developmental roles that the mentors were identified as using. Topics such as life and personal issues occurred, but were less frequent and reflect the relational roles played by the mentor teachers.

According to Pridham et al., (2012, p.62) “knowledge creation and application in the workplace is predominantly a social construction”. As stated earlier in the paper, mentoring consists of a series of social interactions; those being between the mentor and the mentee. The outcomes that the pre-service teachers achieved and the way in which they understood the practices that their mentor teachers used, indicates that mentoring can be a conduit for the development of the skills and knowledge needed for workplace readiness.

Assessment of the pre-service teachers did not arise as an issue within the research findings. Despite the fact that assessment divides the mentoring community, the pre-service teachers accepted it as a role that their mentor teacher had to undertake. The role of assessment and/or evaluation in the pre-service teacher context has the potential to cause conflict. However, the use of both formal and informal feedback throughout the placement seemed likely to help alleviate potential conflict. Ideally the feedback provided to pre-service teachers should inform the roles, practices and conversations. Within this study, the pre-service teachers indicated that feedback was a critical inclusion during their professional placement.

This study is a starting point for further exploration and research into the development of workplace readiness during the professional placement, and several implications for practice can be highlighted. Firstly the terminology used within the professional placement with both classroom teachers and pre-service teachers must be taken into account. The roles and practices teacher education programs want mentor teachers to use need to be clearly articulated and named. This paper has highlighted that it is not about whether mentoring or supervisory language is used, but that it about the understanding of what is required is more important. Secondly benchmarks for achievement need to be identified. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers provide an end point, however pre-service teachers need



to know the specific capabilities they need to be able to ‘hit the ground running’ in order for workplace readiness to be developed.

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