

Contextualizing Mentoring in Teacher Education: Evidence from the Teaching Practicum in Cambodia

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Mentoring is widely recognized as central to teacher education, yet most research is grounded in Western, resource-rich contexts. Less is known about how mentoring operates in low-income and post-conflict settings shaped by strong sociocultural norms. This study examines mentoring in Cambodia, focusing on the teaching practicum as a critical site for professional development. Using a qualitative cross-case design across three teacher education institutions, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings show that mentoring functions as a hybrid practice, combining emotional support with varying levels of instructional guidance rather than relying on formal structures. These practices are shaped by collectivist values, hierarchical relationships, and respect for authority, influencing feedback and professional dialogue. While emotional support strengthens pre-service teachers' confidence and sense of belonging, instructional development depends on structured interactions such as observation-based feedback and guided reflection. The study reframes mentoring in low-resource contexts as a socioculturally mediated emotional-instructional hybrid and highlights the need for context-sensitive approaches that integrate relational and instructional support.

Keywords: Cambodia, mentoring, pre-service teacher, teacher education, teaching practicum

Introduction

Mentoring is widely recognized as a critical component of teacher education, particularly during the teaching practicum when pre-service teachers (PSTs) begin to negotiate their professional roles in real classroom context (Aderibigbe et al., 2022). Existing mentoring research, however, has been dominated by models and assumptions derived from high-income education systems, where mentoring is typically formalized, well-resourced, and supported by institutional structures (Nuis et al., 2023). Far less is known about how mentoring functions in low-income and post-conflict contexts, where institutional capacity is constrained and mentoring is often informal, uneven, and shaped by sociocultural norms (Hudson & Hudson, 2018).

In such contexts, mentoring cannot be assumed to operate as a structured pedagogical intervention. Instead, it is frequently enacted through relational support, hierarchical supervision, and ad hoc guidance, raising important questions about how PSTs' professional identity development is shaped under these conditions (Hudson & Hudson, 2018). While studies have documented the importance of mentoring for instructional development and emotional support, limited attention has been paid to how mentoring practices are reconfigured when formal structures are partial or absent, and how these configurations influence the kinds of professional identities PSTs are able to develop (Ardi et al., 2025; Mkhomi et al., 2025; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021).

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Cambodia provides a particularly salient context for examining these dynamics. As a low-income country with a post-conflict education system, teacher education institutions operate under conditions of limited resources, high mentor workload, and strong sociocultural norms of hierarchy and respect (Sot et al., 2019). Within this setting, mentoring in the teaching practicum plays a central role in supporting PSTs, yet its form, focus, and developmental impact remain underexplored. Building on earlier work that documented the relational and emotional nature of mentoring during the practicum in Cambodia (Chea, 2024), the present study moves beyond description to theorize how emotional and instructional mentoring interact to regulate professional identity development under constrained conditions.

Addressing this gap, this study investigates how mentoring practices enacted during the teaching practicum shape PSTs' professional identity development in Cambodia. Rather than evaluating formal mentoring programs, the study examines mentoring as it is practiced under constrained conditions, focusing on the interplay between emotional support, instructional guidance, and contextual regulation. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute a contextually grounded understanding of mentoring as a socioculturally regulated emotional-instructional hybrid, extending existing mentoring and professional identity literature beyond high-income settings. Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are mentoring practices enacted during the teaching practicum under constrained conditions?
2. How do instructional and emotional dimensions of mentoring shape pre-service teachers' professional identity development?
3. What contextual, institutional, and sociocultural factors shape mentoring practices and mentoring relationships in these environments?

Literature Review

Mentoring in Teacher Education

Mentoring in teacher education is widely understood as a professional relationship in which experienced teachers support novice or pre-service teachers in developing instructional competence, professional judgment, and identity as educators (Hobson et al., 2009; Izadinia, 2016). Within teacher education, mentoring is commonly embedded in teaching practicum or induction phases and is intended to bridge the gap between theoretical preparation and classroom practice. Research consistently shows that effective mentoring contributes to improved instructional practices, enhanced confidence, reduced anxiety, and stronger professional commitment among novice teachers (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Dreer-Goethe, 2025).

However, despite its centrality in policy and practice, mentoring remains a conceptually broad and context-sensitive construct. Definitions and enactments of mentoring vary considerably across education systems, shaped by institutional structures, resource availability, and professional culture. As a result, mentoring should not be treated as a uniform intervention but as a socially situated practice whose form and outcomes depend on context (Andreasen et al., 2019).

Mentoring Models and Assumptions in High-Income Contexts

Most influential mentoring models in the literature originate from high-income education systems, where mentoring is typically formalized, institutionally resourced, and supported by policy frameworks. In these contexts, mentoring is often conceptualized as a structured developmental process involving regular observation, feedback cycles, goal setting, and reflective dialogue (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Comprehensive induction models integrate mentoring with reduced teaching loads, professional development seminars, and collaborative learning communities, reflecting an assumption that novice teachers require sustained, multi-layered support (Zhang et al., 2025). Similarly, instructional coaching and reflective mentoring models emphasize evidence-based feedback, co-planning, and inquiry-oriented reflection as mechanisms for improving teaching practice (Hayes & Pridham, 2019).

Across these models, several implicit assumptions are evident:

- mentors are trained and selected based on mentoring competence;
- time and institutional resources are allocated for mentoring activities;
- professional relationships are relatively non-hierarchical, allowing open dialogue;
- mentoring is positioned as a developmental, rather than evaluative, process.

These assumptions shape how mentoring effectiveness is conceptualized and measured, often emphasizing instructional outcomes and reflective practice.

Limitations of Transferring Dominant Models to Low-Income and Post-Conflict Contexts

While these mentoring models provide valuable insights, their transferability to low-income and post-conflict contexts is limited. Education systems in such settings often face acute resource constraints, teacher shortages, heavy workloads, and limited professional development opportunities (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). Mentors are frequently appointed based on seniority or availability rather than formal preparation, and mentoring responsibilities are added to existing teaching duties without workload reduction or institutional recognition (Johnson & Griffin, 2024).

Moreover, sociocultural norms play a significant role in shaping mentoring relationships. In many low-income contexts, including post-conflict societies, educational cultures are characterized by hierarchical relationships and strong norms of respect for authority (Hussain et al., 2025). While these norms may promote harmony and emotional safety, they can also constrain critical dialogue, reflective questioning, and reciprocal learning between mentors and mentees. However, within these sociocultural frameworks, hierarchy does not function solely as a barrier to communication. In collectivist societies, adhering to hierarchical expectations can provide a sense of security and professional belonging for novices (Ardi et al., 2025). In this context, compliance is often a socially meaningful strategy used by pre-service teachers to align themselves with established professional norms and group values. By respecting the authority of the mentors, the PST is not merely being passive but is actively participating in a cultural ritual that validates their transition into the teaching community. This dual role of hierarchy as both a regulator of dialogue and a facilitator of professional status is central to understanding the mentoring process as a socioculturally mediated hybrid.

As a result, mentoring in these settings often operates in informal or semi-structured ways, prioritizing emotional reassurance, survival guidance, and socialization into school routines over systematic instructional coaching. This divergence raises questions about the applicability of dominant mentoring frameworks, which may implicitly frame mentoring in low-resource contexts as “deficient” rather than differently constituted.

Emotional and Instructional Dimensions of Mentoring

Recent studies increasingly recognize that mentoring is not solely an instructional or technical activity but also a relational and emotional process. Emotional support such as encouragement, empathy, and reassurance has been shown to play a critical role in novice teachers' wellbeing, confidence, and resilience (Aspfors &

Fransson, 2015; Goegan et al., 2017). In challenging teaching environments, emotional mentoring can reduce stress, affirm professional identity, and sustain motivation.

However, research also cautions that emotional support alone is insufficient for developing instructional competence. Studies demonstrate that measurable improvements in teaching practice are most strongly associated with structured feedback, observation-based coaching, and guided reflection (Hudson & Hudson, 2018; Squires, 2019). The literature thus suggests a necessary but often under-theorized distinction between mentoring that supports emotional adjustment and mentoring that promotes instructional development.

Importantly, few studies examine how these emotional and instructional dimensions interact in contexts where mentoring is constrained by limited structure, training, and resources (Nuis et al., 2023). This gap is particularly salient in low-income and post-conflict settings, where emotional support may be more feasible than systematic instructional mentoring.

Mentoring and Professional Identity Development

Professional identity development is increasingly recognized as a central outcome of mentoring in teacher education. Mentoring influences how PSTs perceive themselves as educators, negotiate professional roles, and develop a sense of belonging within the teaching community (Izadinia, 2016; Zhang et al., 2025). Through mentoring interactions, novice teachers integrate personal beliefs, pedagogical practices, and institutional norms into a coherent professional self-concept.

Research suggests that identity development is shaped not only by instructional learning but also by relational experiences, recognition, and participation in professional communities (Prabjandee, 2022). In this sense, emotional mentoring may contribute strongly to identity formation even when instructional mentoring is limited. Yet, the literature has not sufficiently examined how identity development unfolds when mentoring is informal, uneven, or culturally regulated, particularly in teaching practicum settings in low-resource environments.

Research Gaps

While existing literature provides extensive evidence on structured mentoring and induction programs in high-income contexts, little is known about how mentoring functions when structure is partial, informal, or socioculturally constrained (Hobson et al., 2009; Mkhomi et al., 2025; Nuis et al., 2023). In particular, there is limited empirical understanding of:

- how mentoring practices vary within low-income and post-conflict teacher education systems;
- how emotional and instructional dimensions of mentoring are balanced under constrained conditions;
- how mentoring contributes to professional identity development when formal mentoring frameworks are absent or weak.

This study addresses these gaps by examining mentoring practices during the teaching practicum in Cambodia, a low-income, post-conflict context. Rather than evaluating formal mentoring programs, the study analyzes how mentoring is enacted in practice, how sociocultural norms regulate mentoring interactions, and how emotional and instructional support jointly shape PSTs' professional identity development. In doing so, the study contributes a context-sensitive conceptualization of mentoring as a socioculturally mediated emotional-instructional hybrid, extending mentoring theory beyond dominant models derived from resource-rich settings.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a context-sensitive conceptual framework to examine how mentoring practices in the TP shape PSTs' professional identity development in low-income and post-conflict settings. Rather than assuming the presence of formalized mentoring programs, the framework conceptualizes mentoring as a set of situated practices that vary in structure and emphasis and are shaped by contextual conditions.

At the core of the framework are mentoring practices enacted in the TP, which are analytically distinguished into two interrelated dimensions: instructional mentoring and emotional mentoring. Instructional mentoring refers to practices such as observation-based feedback, lesson planning support, modeling of teaching strategies, and guided reflection. Emotional mentoring refers to encouragement, reassurance, relational support, and affirmation of professional worth. The framework allows for variation in the degree of structure with which these practices are enacted, ranging from informal and ad hoc interactions to more deliberate and organized forms of support.

These mentoring practices are understood to be moderated by contextual conditions, including institutional arrangements (e.g., mentor preparation, workload, availability of guidelines), resource constraints, and sociocultural norms such as hierarchy and respect for authority. Context does not merely surround mentoring but actively shapes how mentoring interactions occur, the balance between emotional and instructional support, and the extent to which reflective dialogue is possible.

The framework conceptualizes professional development outcomes as multidimensional, with particular emphasis on professional identity development. Outcomes include instructional competence, reflective capacity, professional confidence, and sense of belonging within the teaching community. While emotional mentoring may support confidence and identity formation, instructional development is expected to depend on the presence of more structured mentoring interactions. The conceptual relationships guiding the study are illustrated in Figure 1.

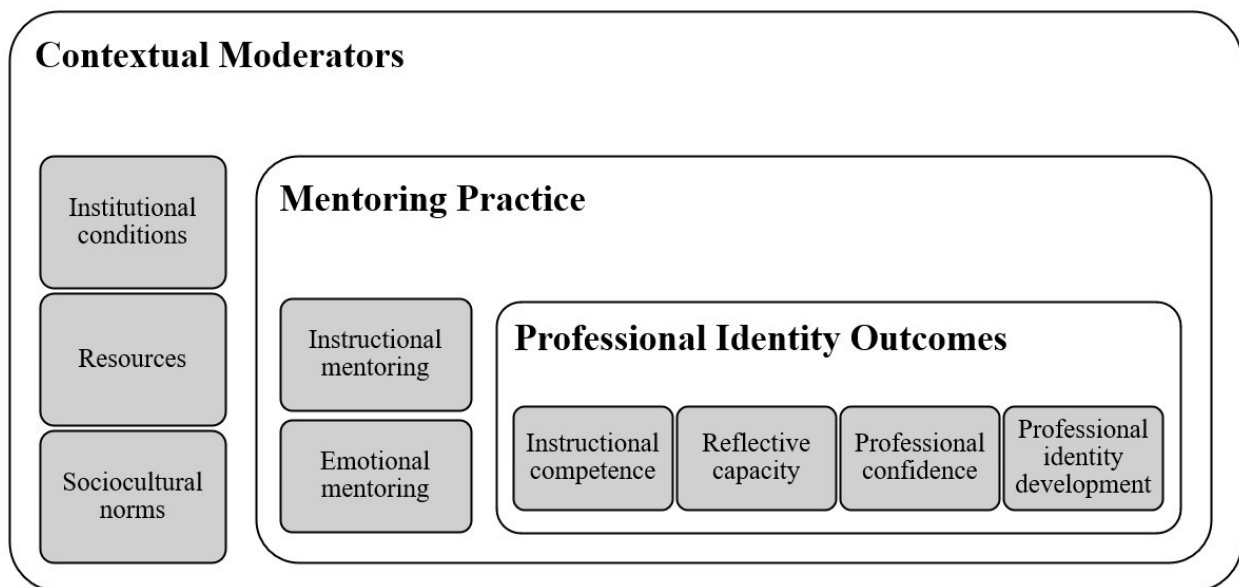


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Illustrating Mentoring under Constrained Conditions.
 Source: Created by author based on literature review

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative cross-case study design to examine how mentoring practices during the teaching practicum influence pre-service teachers' professional identity development in low-income and post-conflict settings. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore how mentoring is enacted in practice, how it is shaped by contextual conditions, and how participants interpret its influence on their professional development (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The cross-case design enabled comparison across multiple teaching practicum contexts, allowing identification of both shared patterns and context-specific variations in mentoring practices (Yin, 2009).

Research Context

The study was conducted across three teacher education institutions and their associated practicum schools in Cambodia. These sites were selected because they represent typical features of low-resource teacher education environments, including limited instructional resources, heavy mentor workloads, and uneven mentoring structures. The practicum schools varied in location (urban and rural) and institutional support, enabling meaningful cross-case comparison.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to capture perspectives from key stakeholders directly involved in mentoring in practicum. Purposive selection ensured participation of mentors with at least one year of experience mentoring PSTs. Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment to locate experienced mentors in rural or understaffed locations. Participants were assured confidentiality and voluntary participation. The final sample consisted of 36 participants as presented in Table 1.1.

Case	Subject	Pseudonym	Gender	Experiences
Case A	Math	TEM#1	Female	4 years
		SM#1	Male	1 years
		PST#1	Male	Year 3 PST
		PC#1	Male	4 years
	Physics	TEM#2	Male	4 years
		SM#2	Male	1 years
		PST#2	Female	Year 3 PST
		PC#2	Female	4 years
Case B	Chemistry	TEM#3	Female	4 years
		SM#3	Male	2 years
		PST#3	Female	Year 3 PST
		PC#3	Female	4 years
	Biology	TEM#4	Female	2 years
		SM#4	Male	2 years
		PST#4	Male	Year 3 PST
		PC#4	Male	4 years
Case C	Khmer	TEM#5	Female	12 years
		SM#5	Male	9 years
		PST#5	Male	Year 1 PST
		PC#5	Male	9 years
	Geography	TEM#6	Female	8 years
		SM#6	Male	10 years
		PST#6	Male	Year 1 PST
		PC#6	Female	3 years
	Moral Civic	TEM#7	Female	15 years
		SM#7	Male	7 years
		PST#7	Female	Year 1 PST
		PC#7	Male	3 years
	Economic	TEM#8	Male	10 years
		SM#8	Female	6 years
		PST#8	Male	Year 1 PST
		PC#8	Female	6 years
English	TEM#9	Male	12 years	
	SM#9	Female	5 years	
	PST#9	Male	Year 1 PST	
	PC#9	Female	14 years	

Table 1. Participants' demographic information (*Note: TEM = teacher education mentor; SM = school mentor; PST = pre-service teacher; PC = practicum coordinator. PST experience is reported by year of study because participants had not yet entered in-service teaching at the time of data collection.)

This sample size was considered sufficient to support in-depth qualitative analysis and cross-case comparison while allowing for analytic saturation within themes.

Data Collection

Data were collected over the practicum period using three complementary methods to enable triangulation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. Interview questions focused on mentoring practices, instructional and emotional support, contextual constraints, and perceived impacts on professional identity development. The interview guide was informed by the conceptual framework but remained flexible to allow participants to raise context-specific experiences.

Classroom Observations

The researcher conducted 18 classroom and mentoring observations across the three practicum sites. These observations were purposively sampled to include two sessions for each of the nine PSTs: one before the mentoring session and one after the mentoring session. This longitudinal approach was chosen to observe changes in mentoring feedback and the PSTs' instructional adaptation over time. While the primary focus was on the PSTs' teaching, these 18 sessions simultaneously captured the mentoring practices of the nine SMs and nine TEMs during their mentoring session. PCs were excluded from observations as their roles are primarily administrative and do not involve direct classroom mentoring. Observations focused on:

- mentor-mentee interactions,
- forms of instructional and emotional support,
- feedback practices and reflective dialogue,
- mentees' instructional practices and professional engagement.

Observation protocols were aligned with measurable indicators of mentoring effectiveness (e.g., clarity of instruction, questioning techniques, classroom management). Field notes captured both instructional behaviors and relational aspects of the mentoring interaction.

Practicum Documents

Relevant practicum documents such as lesson plans, mentor feedback forms, practicum assessment forms, and institutional mentoring guidelines were collected and analyzed. These data sources provided objective evidence of mentoring structures, expectations, and assessment practices, enabling triangulation with interviews and observations data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke's (2006, 2023) approach. The analysis aimed not merely to categorize data but to generate themes that represent shared patterns of meaning relevant to the research questions. The analytic process involved six iterative phases:

1. Familiarization: Transcripts, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly to gain an overall sense of the data.
2. Initial coding: Codes were generated across the dataset, capturing meaningful features related to mentoring practices, contextual influences, and professional development.
3. Theme development: Codes were examined for patterned meaning and clustered into provisional themes that captured how mentoring functioned across cases.
4. Theme refinement: Themes were reviewed, compared across cases, and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes.
5. Defining themes: Each theme was defined in analytic terms, focusing on *how* mentoring practices operated and *why* they mattered for professional identity development.
6. Writing and interpretation: Themes were interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework and existing literature.

Both deductive and inductive coding were used. Deductive codes were informed by the conceptual framework (e.g., instructional mentoring, emotional support, contextual constraints), while inductive coding allowed unanticipated patterns to emerge from participants' accounts. Themes were developed through interpretive engagement with the data rather than simple aggregation of topics, ensuring analytic depth.

Cross-case analysis was embedded within the reflexive thematic analysis by examining how themes were expressed across the three practicum cases. Attention was given to both convergent patterns and meaningful variation in mentoring practices and identity outcomes. This analytic strategy supported interpretation of mentoring as a contextually mediated process rather than a case-specific phenomenon.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the study's credibility and methodological rigor, several strategies recommended by Anney's (2014) were employed:

- Triangulation: Use of multiple data sources (interviews, observations, documents) to validate findings.
- Member-checking: Participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to ensure accuracy.
- Audit Trail: Field notes, coding processes, and analytic decisions were documented.
- Peer Debriefing: Emerging findings were discussed with academic colleagues to test analytical coherence.

These strategies support credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings.

Ethical approval and informed consent

This study adhered to established ethical standards for educational research. The research design, data collection methods, instruments, and participant sampling were reviewed and approved by the Graduate School Ethics Committee (No. HR-ES-000960; May 12, 2023) prior to data collection. Permission was obtained from the target school, and informed consent was secured from all participants, who were informed of the study's

purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the voluntary nature of participation. Interviews were conducted at participants' convenience, with permission granted for audio recording. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by omitting identifying information and allowing participants to skip any questions without consequence.

Findings

The findings are organized according to the key thematic areas that emerged across interviews, observations, and document analysis. These themes reflect the mentoring processes, contextual influences, developmental outcomes, and assessment indicators identified in the conceptual framework.

Theme 1: Mentoring as Relational Support Rather Than Instructional Guidance

Across all three cases, mentoring during the teaching practicum was enacted primarily as relational and emotional support, while instructional mentoring remained limited, informal, and uneven. This pattern was consistently reported by PSTs, SMs, TEMs, and PCs, indicating a shared understanding of mentoring as a supportive presence rather than a structured pedagogical practice.

SMs frequently described mentoring in affective terms, emphasizing encouragement, reassurance, and emotional protection for PSTs as they navigated classroom challenges. For instance, during a mentoring session in Case C and Case B, the mentors noticed the PSTs looked visibly distressed after struggling with classroom management. Instead of opening the lesson plan or discussing specific teaching strategies, the mentor smiled warmly, patted the PST on the shoulder, and focused entirely on encouragement:

"I focus on encouraging them so they don't feel afraid of teaching. If they feel supported, they can perform their teaching confidently." (SM#7, SM#3)

A similar pattern was observed in Case C with SM#5, where the mentoring session took place in a casual setting over tea. The mentor used a soft, reassuring tone and avoided any written critique, explaining that:

"PSTs are usually nervous. My role is to calm them and tell them they are doing okay." (SM#5)

In both instances, the interactional sequence began and ended with emotional affirmation, leaving little room for the instructional guidance typically expected in formal mentoring models.

PSTs across cases echoed this experience, describing mentoring as emotionally reassuring but pedagogically limited. While they valued the support they received, they noted the absence of detailed instructional feedback:

"My mentor always tells me not to worry and to be confident, but we rarely talk about how to improve my lesson." (PST#2)

"I feel supported, but sometimes I want more advice about teaching methods or classroom management." (PST#6)

Teacher education mentors acknowledged this imbalance between emotional and instructional mentoring and attributed it to contextual constraints such as time pressure and workload:

“Ideally, mentoring should focus on teaching strategies, but in reality, most of the support becomes emotional because mentors are very busy.” (TEM#4)

Practicum coordinators further confirmed that mentoring expectations were loosely defined at the institutional level, which contributed to the dominance of relational support:

“There is no clear guideline telling mentors how to mentor. So they support PSTs in their own way.” (PC#5)

Classroom and mentoring observations reinforced these interview findings. Across observed practicum lessons, mentors were commonly present but post-observation feedback was brief and general, often consisting of affirmations such as “good job” or “keep trying,” with limited reference to instructional strategies or student learning. Analysis of practicum documents similarly revealed an emphasis on supervision and evaluation, with little guidance on how mentors should provide structured instructional support.

Analytically, this pattern suggests that mentoring under constrained conditions prioritizes emotional reassurance and identity affirmation over systematic instructional development. As a result, PSTs’ professional identity development was oriented toward becoming *confident and resilient teachers* rather than *reflective and pedagogically agentic professionals*. Emotional mentoring enabled PSTs to remain engaged in the practicum, but the limited instructional dimension constrained opportunities for deeper professional learning.

Theme 2: Hierarchy as a Regulating Force in Mentoring Interactions

Across all three cases, mentoring interactions were strongly shaped by hierarchical sociocultural norms, which regulated communication, feedback practices, and opportunities for reflection. Hierarchy influenced not only *how* mentoring was enacted, but also *what kinds of professional identities* PSTs were able to develop during the practicum.

PSTs consistently positioned mentors as authority figures whose guidance should be accepted rather than questioned. This deference limited dialogic interaction and constrained opportunities for reflective engagement:

“I usually just listen to what my mentor says. I don’t want to ask too many questions because I am still a student.” (PST#6)

Similarly, another PST explained that questioning mentor feedback could be perceived as disrespectful:

“Even if I am not sure about something, I don’t feel comfortable asking. I just follow.” (PST#5)

School mentors, in turn, often viewed their role through an evaluative lens, emphasizing correction and supervision rather than collaborative inquiry:

“PSTs need to follow advice because they don’t have much experience yet.” (SM#5)

Teacher education mentors explicitly linked these mentoring dynamics to broader cultural expectations regarding seniority and respect:

“In our context, mentors are seen as seniors. It is not common for PSTs to challenge.” (TEM#6)

Practicum coordinators further acknowledged that institutional arrangements reinforced hierarchical mentoring relationships. Assessment responsibilities placed mentors in positions of authority, making reflective dialogue secondary to evaluation:

“Mentors have to assess PSTs, so the relationship is naturally hierarchical.” (PC#7)

Observational data corroborated these accounts. During post-observation feedback sessions, mentors typically spoke at length while PSTs listened silently, occasionally nodding but rarely responding or asking questions. Feedback was delivered in directive terms (e.g., “You should do this next time”) rather than as reflective prompts. No instances of negotiated goal-setting or co-analysis of teaching practice were observed.

Importantly, hierarchy did not function solely as a constraint. For novice PSTs, particularly those in their first year of practicum, hierarchical mentoring provided identity recognition and legitimacy. Being guided by a senior teacher affirmed their emerging status as teachers:

“When my mentor corrects me, I feel like I am really becoming a teacher.” (PST#7)

Analytically, this theme reveals a dual function of hierarchy in mentoring. On the one hand, it constrained the development of agentic and reflective teacher identities, limiting PSTs’ opportunities to articulate pedagogical reasoning or challenge instructional decisions. On the other hand, hierarchy enabled the formation of legitimate and compliant professional identities, grounded in respect, adaptation, and acceptance within the school culture.

Thus, mentoring under hierarchical conditions shaped professional identity not primarily as autonomous professionalism, but as relational belonging within an ordered institutional structure.

Theme 3: Partial Structure and Uneven Professional Identity Outcomes

Across the three cases, professional identity development among PSTs varied considerably, not according to the existence of formal mentoring programs, but according to the degree of structure embedded in everyday mentoring practices. Where mentoring included recurring observation, feedback routines, or guided reflection however informal PSTs demonstrated broader professional growth. Where such structure was absent, identity development remained narrow and centered primarily on confidence and classroom survival.

In several cases, PSTs described how repeated mentoring interactions helped them move beyond basic teaching performance toward greater instructional awareness:

“After several observations, my mentor started to point out how students responded. I began to think more about my teaching, not just finishing the lesson.” (PST#3)

Similarly, another PST noted that consistent feedback even when brief supported reflective thinking:

“Each time my mentor observed me, I tried to improve one thing. Slowly, I understood what I needed to change.” (PST#9)

School mentors in these contexts described their mentoring as routine-based rather than formally structured, but still intentional:

“We don’t have a formal model, but I always observe and give feedback. We talk about what worked and what didn’t.” (SM#1)

Teacher education mentors confirmed that such partial structure often depended on individual mentor commitment rather than institutional policy:

“Some mentors naturally guide PSTs step by step, even without clear guidelines.” (TEM#2)

In contrast, in settings where mentoring remained largely informal and episodic, PSTs' professional identity development was more limited. PSTs in these contexts emphasized confidence and classroom presence but reported little growth in instructional decision-making:

"I am more confident now, but I'm not sure if my teaching has improved much." (PST#6)

Observation data supported this distinction. In cases with partial structure, mentors provided targeted comments on lesson organization, questioning techniques, or student engagement. In less structured contexts, feedback remained general and motivational. Document analysis further revealed that while lesson plans and feedback forms existed, their use varied widely, resulting in inconsistent mentoring experiences across cases.

Analytically, this theme highlights uneven professional identity outcomes shaped by mentoring structure. PSTs exposed to partial instructional mentoring began to develop reflective and improvement-oriented identities, characterized by attention to student learning and pedagogical adjustment. In contrast, PSTs whose mentoring lacked structure primarily developed confidence-based identities, focused on endurance and role fulfillment rather than instructional growth.

Importantly, these findings suggest that formalized mentoring frameworks are not a prerequisite for meaningful professional identity development. However, some degree of structure such as regular observation, feedback, and reflection is necessary to extend identity development beyond emotional resilience toward pedagogical agency.

Discussion

This study examined how mentoring practices enacted during the teaching practicum shape pre-service teachers' professional identity development in low-income and post-conflict contexts. Rather than assessing the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs, the study focused on how mentoring operates under constrained institutional and sociocultural conditions. The findings provide insight into mentoring as a situated practice that simultaneously supports, regulates, and limits professional identity development resonating with prior research that view mentoring as embedded in social relationships and institutional norms.

Mentoring as Emotional–Relational Support Under Constraint

The findings show that mentoring during the teaching practicum was enacted primarily as emotional and relational support, with instructional mentoring occurring inconsistently and often informally. This pattern reflects the realities of low-resource contexts, where mentors face heavy workloads, limited guidance, and ambiguous expectations (Mkhomi et al., 2025). This aligns with research showing that mentoring relationships provide *emotional and socio-relational scaffolding* that supports PSTs' motivation, confidence, and a sense of belonging, key aspects of professional identity (Izadinia, 2016). However, the predominance of relational support in this study also challenges assumptions in some earlier mentoring frameworks that emphasize instructional coaching as the primary mechanism for professional growth (Prabjandee, 2022).

However, the dominance of emotional support also shaped the *type* of professional identity being formed. Rather than fostering reflective or pedagogically agentic identities, mentoring tended to support identities centered on confidence, endurance, and role acceptance. This aligns with research showing that mentor teachers' emotional engagement and relational support are central to PSTs' identity outcomes, but may not always translate to deeper instructional development without structured pedagogical guidance (Dreer-Goethe, 2025).

Emotional mentoring is thus a contextually adaptive response, supporting professional survival while simultaneously constraining deeper instructional growth (Madzore, 2025). This finding also challenges mentoring models developed in high-income contexts, which often assume the availability of time, training, and institutional support for systematic instructional coaching (Nuis et al., 2023). In contrast, this study highlights emotional mentoring not as a deficit, but as a contextually adaptive response one that supports professional survival while simultaneously constraining deeper instructional development.

Hierarchy and the Regulation of Professional Identity

A key contribution of this study lies in theorizing hierarchy as a regulating force in mentoring interactions. Hierarchical norms shaped who could speak, question, and reflect during mentoring, positioning mentors as authority figures and pre-service teachers as compliant recipients of guidance. These dynamics limited dialogic mentoring practices and reduced opportunities for critical reflection and pedagogical agency (Mkhomi et al., 2025).

At the same time, hierarchy played an enabling role in professional identity formation. For novice pre-service teachers, recognition by senior teachers affirmed their emerging identity as legitimate members of the profession. This dual function of hierarchy complicates simplistic interpretations of power relations in mentoring. Recent research highlights how scaffolded support and tiered mentorship help early-career teachers gain confidence while respecting local cultural norms (Squires, 2019). Rather than viewing hierarchy solely as an obstacle, the findings suggest that it simultaneously enables identity recognition while constraining identity expansion.

This insight contributes to professional identity literature by showing that identity development is not uniformly progressive or agentic, but socially regulated. Studies highlight that emotional and relational dimensions of mentoring are integral to identity work, particularly when pedagogical structure is limited (Dreer-Goethe, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). In contexts where respect for authority is culturally valued, professional identity is shaped through compliance, adaptation, and relational belonging, rather than through autonomy and critical dialogue.

Partial Structure and Selective Professional Identity Outcomes

The findings further demonstrate that professional identity development varied according to the degree of structure embedded in mentoring practices. Importantly, these variations were not determined by the presence of formal mentoring frameworks, but by everyday practices such as repeated observation, feedback routines, and opportunities for reflection. This finding aligns with research showing that structured mentoring practices, even with minimal or informal, help PSTs integrate theory and practice and support their evolving professional identities (Ardi et al., 2025; Madzore, 2025).

This challenges assumptions that formalized mentoring programs are a prerequisite for meaningful professional learning. Instead, the findings suggest that partial structure when aligned with contextual realities can support more expansive identity development. Where such structure was absent, professional identity remained narrowly focused on confidence and classroom survival (Hussain et al., 2025).

These results reinforce the view of professional identity as selective and uneven, shaped by available mentoring practices rather than linear developmental trajectories. Identity outcomes depended not only on mentoring intentions, but on how mentoring was enacted within institutional and sociocultural constraints.

Conceptual Contribution

Taken together, the findings contribute to mentoring and teacher education literature by conceptualizing mentoring in low-income and post-conflict settings as a socioculturally regulated emotional-instructional hybrid. This conceptualization moves beyond viewing mentoring as either formal programmatic support or informal relational care (Ye et al., 2025). Instead, it highlights mentoring as a practice shaped by emotional labor, hierarchical norms, and partial institutional structures.

By foregrounding context, this study extends existing mentoring models and cautions against uncritical transfer of frameworks developed in high-income settings. It emphasizes the need to understand mentoring not only by what it intends to do, but by what it is practically achieve under constraint and within specific cultural and institutional norms.

Implications for Teacher Education

The findings of the study suggest that strengthening mentoring in contexts like Cambodia does not necessarily require comprehensive formalization or high-cost interventions. Rather, the focus should be on implementing minimal structures that serve as mediating artifacts. These are low-burden tools that provide just enough scaffolding to trigger instructional dialogue without overwhelming the mentor or violating cultural protocols of harmony.

First, emotional mentoring should be recognized as a legitimate and necessary component of practicum support, rather than treated as secondary to instructional coaching. Acknowledging the emotional-instructional hybrid allows institutions to value the relational work mentors already do. By maintaining this emotional foundation, mentors create the psychological safety necessary for PSTs to eventually engage with more challenging instructional feedback.

Second, efforts to strengthen mentoring should focus on introducing minimal and context-sensitive structures such as the '3-2-1 Feedback Template' rather than imposing comprehensive formal frameworks (Madzore, 2025). Implementing a simple template (where mentors document 3 strengths, 2 areas for growth, and 1 specific goal) provide a neutral platform for guided reflection. This 'minimal structure' shifts the burden of critique from the mentor's personal voice to a formal tool, making it easier to provide instructional guidance without appearing overly critical or confrontational.

Finally, mentor preparation should explicitly address hierarchical dynamics and explore whays to foster reflective dialogue without disrupting culturally valued norms of respect and authority (Smith et al., 2025). One such strategy is the establishment of 'Peer-Mentoring Circles' among PSTs. These circles allow for horizontal, low-stakes pedagogical dialogue among equals. This structure complements the traditional mentor-mentee hierarchy: the School Mentors remains the respected figure of authority and emotional support, while the Peer Circles provide the technical, instructional spaces for PSTs to critique and learn from one another.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on the teaching practicum period and a specific national context. Future research could explore how mentoring practices evolve over longer periods or examine interventions that introduce partial mentoring structures while remaining culturally responsive, particularly in low-income and post-conflict settings. Comparative studies across cultures and contexts could also further unpack how mentorship and hierarchy interact across diverse education systems.

Conclusion

This study examined how mentoring practices enacted during the teaching practicum shape pre-service teachers' professional identity development in a low-income and post-conflict context, with particular reference to Cambodia. Drawing on interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study shows that mentoring plays a significant role in supporting novice teachers' professional development, though its influence is uneven and closely shaped by contextual and institutional conditions.

The findings indicate that mentoring during the practicum functions primarily as emotional and relational support, while instructional guidance is enacted inconsistently and often informally. Where mentoring practices included recurring observation, feedback, and opportunities for reflection, even without formal frameworks, pre-service teachers demonstrated broader professional growth, including greater instructional awareness and reflective engagement. In contrast, where mentoring remained largely ad hoc or reassurance-focused, professional identity development was narrower, centering on confidence and classroom survival rather than pedagogical agency. These findings underscore that emotional and instructional dimensions of mentoring are interdependent: emotional support sustains engagement and belonging, while instructional guidance enables identity expansion beyond basic role acceptance.

The study also highlights the central role of contextual moderators in shaping mentoring practices. Hierarchical norms, mentor workload, limited guidance, and resource constraints regulated mentoring interactions and constrained reflective dialogue. Importantly, hierarchy did not function solely as a barrier; it also enabled professional legitimacy and identity recognition for novice teachers. Professional identity development thus emerged as a socially regulated process, shaped by recognition, compliance, and partial agency rather than autonomous professionalism.

Conceptually, this study contributes to the mentoring and teacher education literature by framing mentoring in constrained contexts as a socioculturally regulated emotional-instructional hybrid, rather than a formalized developmental intervention. This perspective challenges assumptions embedded in dominant mentoring models derived from high-income contexts and emphasizes the need to understand mentoring as a situated practice shaped by institutional capacity and professional culture.

The findings suggest that strengthening mentoring in low-resource settings does not necessarily require comprehensive formalization. Rather, modest and context-sensitive structures such as regular observation, guided feedback, and protected time for mentoring can meaningfully extend professional identity development when they complement existing relational support. Recognizing emotional mentoring as legitimate while gradually strengthening instructional dimensions offers a realistic pathway for improving practicum experiences without imposing externally derived models.

In conclusion, mentoring remains a vital component of teacher education in challenging environments, contributing not only to instructional learning but also to confidence, legitimacy, and professional identity formation. Its effectiveness, however, depends on how emotional support, hierarchy, and structure interact within specific contexts. Understanding mentoring in this way provides a more nuanced and contextually grounded foundation for future research and practice in teacher education systems similar to Cambodia's.

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Mentorálás a tanárképzésben: tapasztalatok a kambodzsai tanítási gyakorlatról

A mentorálást széles körben a tanárképzés központi elemének tekintik, ám a kutatások többsége nyugati, erőforrásokban gazdag környezetre épül. Kevésbé ismert, hogy a mentorálás hogyan működik olyan alacsony jövedelmű és háború utáni környezetben, amelyet erős társadalmi-kulturális normák határoznak meg. Éppen ezért jelen tanulmány a kambodzsai mentorálást vizsgálja, különös tekintettel a tanári gyakorlatra, mint a szakmai fejlődés egyik kulcsfontosságú elemére. Három tanárképző intézményre kiterjedő kvalitatív, eseteket összehasonlító kutatási módszert alkalmazva az adatokat interjúk, megfigyelések és dokumentumelemzés útján gyűjtöttük. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a mentorálás hibrid gyakorlatként működik: ahelyett, hogy formális struktúrára támaszkodna, az érzelmi támogatást különböző szintű pedagógiai iránymutatással ötvözi. Ezeket a gyakorlatokat a kollektivistá értékek, a hierarchikus viszonyok és a tekintély iránti tisztelet alakítja, ami hatással van a visszajelzésre és a szakmai párbeszédre is. Míg az érzelmi támogatás erősíti a tanárképzésben részt vevő hallgatók önbizalmát és a közösséghez tartozás érzését, a pedagógiai fejlődés olyan strukturált interakcióktól függ, mint a megfigyelésen alapuló visszajelzés és az irányított reflexió. A tanulmány a forráshiányos környezetben zajló mentorálást társadalmi-kulturális közvetítésű érzelmi-pedagógiai hibridként értelmezi újra, és rávilágít arra, hogy a kontextusra figyelemmel lévő megközelítésre van szükség, amely ötvözi a kapcsolati és a tanulási támogatást.

Kulcsszavak: Kambodzsai, mentorálás, tanárjelölt, tanárképzés, tanári tevékenység