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Professional experience of Chinese international pre-service teachers in Australia's early childhood education: professional learning and belonging

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ABSTRACT

International pre-service teachers (PSTs) can struggle to engage with Professional Experience (PE) communities in an Australian Early Childhood Education context. This qualitative case study examines three first-year Chinese international PSTs' PE in different early childhood settings in Australia. Framed by Bourdieu's analytical concepts, this paper explores Chinese PSTs' culturally shaped understanding of PE and mentoring expectations, showing how this dimension of their habitus is differentiated and differentiating. We argue that with a supportive learning community, the rich cultural and linguistic repertoire of international PSTs can add to capital and funds of knowledge of Australian Early Childhood Education.

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Early childhood education; professional experience; practicum; international pre-service teachers; Bourdieu

Introduction

Australia's early childhood education teaching degrees have experienced a surge in enrolment from international students in the last decade. Despite a decline in overall enrolment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of Chinese international students pursuing education degrees in Australian universities (Department of Education, 2021). Many Chinese students view obtaining Australian qualifications and studying in an English-speaking environment as a way to gain an advantage in the competitive job market in China (Blackmore et al., 2017). Additionally, obtaining a teaching qualification, such as a degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE), can provide opportunities for future employment and settlement in Australia. This is because early childhood teaching is one of the professions listed on the Skilled Occupation List.¹

In ECE, mandatory professional experience (PE) offers valuable opportunities for teachers to develop pedagogical skills, knowledge and attitudes towards teaching young children. Research has found that PE can aid in understanding reflective practices for working with children (Recchia & Shin, 2010), help teachers gain insight into children's

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learning processes (McFarland et al., 2009) and provide an understanding of ECE assessment practices (Brown et al., 2017).

Research shows that PSTs from international backgrounds may face difficulties in developing their understanding of cultural and pedagogical differences during PE. These challenges include language and cultural barriers, which can also result in mentoring challenges (Amos, 2017; Barton et al., 2015; Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012; Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the education system and pedagogical practices have a tendency to maintain the distribution of cultural capital among particular social groups or classes, thus contributing to the reproduction of the existing social and cultural structure. For international early childhood PSTs, PE is a professional community where they can develop their ECE skills and knowledge as cultural capital, including their understanding and implementation of pedagogical practices.

In this paper, we examine three Chinese PSTs' PE in different Australian ECE settings, focusing on the interactions and relationships between these PSTs and the PE community where the PSTs undertook their placement at the time of data collection. We use Bourdieu's thinking tools to analyse PSTs' experiences and practices with mentors and professionals in Australian ECE contexts. The concept of social capital as an accumulative resource connects in this paper with professional and mentoring networks. The discussion is guided by the following research question: How do Chinese EC (early childhood) PSTs develop their professional belonging in PE (Professional Experience)?

The paper begins with a review of the literature on PE in ECE, the notion of mentoring in the PE community and international PSTs' challenges in PE. We then provide an explanation of Bourdieu's thinking tools as they informed the design of this study. Following this, we offer an overview of our methodology, followed by a section on findings and discussion. Finally, we present our conclusions and outline the implications of the study.

The role of PE in the ECE degree

According to the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2015), professional experience consists of

... Supervised and assessed teaching practice undertaken over a substantial and sustained period that is mostly in Australia and mostly in a recognised school setting ... [and should] provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe and participate purposefully in a school/site as early as practicable in a program. (p. 36)

In this respect, PE sites aim to support PSTs' skill development in the prospective teaching context (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership AITSL, 2015). Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) assesses and approves early childhood teaching programmes. In undergraduate ECE courses, PSTs are required to attend a minimum of 80 days of PE (ACECQA, 2020). The amount of time PSTs spend with different age groups during PE varies depending on the university programme. The duration of each PE can range from one week to one month. At the end of PE, mentors evaluate PSTs' performance outcomes to determine if they have met satisfactory criteria.

Mentoring and the PE community

During ECE PE, PSTs are assigned to work with a mentor teacher who is sometimes referred to as a supervisor. In the Australian ECE context, mentor teachers are professionals, preferably university graduates,² who work in the field. According to Le Cornu (2015), quality professional experience requires supportive mentoring experiences, a high level of community commitment and partnership. By structuring PE as learning communities, PSTs will have more opportunities to engage in supportive professional learning relationships with mentor teachers, peers and other professional colleagues. This orientation acknowledges the collaborative nature of teaching and leverages the strengths of PSTs in the PE context (Ewing & Le Cornu, 2010).

With consistent mentor support, PSTs are able to learn new pedagogies and interact with children effectively (Jung et al., 2020). Of particular value are reciprocal mentor-PST learning relationships, which lead to a deepening participatory process that encourages open and genuine conversations during PE (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). One aspect of open communication is that specific, timely feedback from mentors, either written or verbal, can inform PSTs' practices in the EC setting (Barton et al., 2017). Such professional communication is characterised by trust and reciprocity (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Despite the benefits of mentor support, many challenges remain. For example, when mentor teachers do not have background information about PSTs, it is difficult for them to gauge how PSTs understand the early childhood setting within a short period of time (Stover et al., 2019). The mentoring relationship can become more challenging when PSTs are defensive or not responsive, which can lead to PST failure or being deemed "at risk" during the PE (Stover et al., 2019). Also of concern is delayed mentor feedback (Barton et al., 2015) and mentors' "sink or swim" attitude towards PSTs with a tendency to withhold suggestions and support (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008, p. 108) or perceive PSTs' engagement with the PE community as "jump in," interact and "have a go" (Miller et al., 2016, p. 36). Moreover, since ECE has traditionally attracted middle-class Australian students, Felton and Harrison (2017) point out that many mentors are not fully prepared to mentor international PSTs. Therefore, recognising and being aware of the challenges that international PSTs may experience during PE becomes critical.

International PSTs' challenges in PE

Australian ECE programmes have experienced a rising intake of international PSTs. McCluskey (2012) argues that there are assumptions that international PSTs will have a working knowledge of the Australian/state education system by the time that they commence their PE. In reality, however, cultural differences become visible during PE, impacting PSTs' negotiation within the PE context (McCluskey, 2012). In the context of ECE, Nuttall and Ortlipp (2012) concur that "English language proficiency, a highly assertive (but not too assertive) and stereotypically 'western' approach to interpersonal communication, and appropriation of the 'culture' of preschools all appear as part of the requirements for the early childhood practicum" (p. 53). In other words, English language use and preschool culture are highly contextual. Without being socialised in Australian early childhood settings, it can be highly challenging for international PSTs (Zheng, Keary,

& Faulkner, 2018). For international PSTs, it takes time to become familiar with the PE settings, which are associated with the distinctive characteristics of the Australian ECE.

Cultural differences in learning can also impact PSTs' professional growth during PE. For example, play-based learning is integral to Australian ECE, while in some Asian cultures, learning and play are separated (Joseph & Rouse, 2017). Cultural differences in ECE pedagogies become visible in ECE PE (Joseph & Rouse, 2017). Due to cultural differences, international ECE PSTs can be seen as "needy" or "below equal" by their mentors for not having the "basics" (Quinones et al., 2020, p. 345).

Bourdieuian concepts in this study

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that a theoretical lens "becomes a transformative perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change" (p. 108). In this study, Bourdieu's thinking tools, field, habitus and capital become the theoretical lens that informs the research design, particularly data interpretation. Rather than embracing a deficit view of international PSTs as being less capable of meeting the requirements of PE, Bourdieu's concepts enable us to recognise existing differences between these PSTs and the ECE PE field that they engage with. Bourdieu (1973) argues

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (p. 80)

In the context of this study, the dominant culture is primarily defined by the field of the ECE PE that PSTs attend. Vuorisalo and Alanen (2015) suggest that the ECE field has its own autonomy and functioning that overlaps with other interrelated fields as a result of being within a broader social-educational context. In this sense, field-specific English language proficiency and familiarity with Australian ECE are recognised and judged as required capital in the field. Grenfell (1996) explains that due to the pedagogical contexts, such as social backgrounds and learning experiences, linguistic competence can raise concerns. In teacher education, PSTs' linguistic competence is an essential element in forming their pedagogic habitus which is redefined as "those aspects of habitus that have a significant effect on practice within pedagogic contexts" (Grenfell, 1996, p. 292). The development of linguistic competence requires dispositions and experiences in a particular context.

Previous research (Barton et al., 2017) shows that for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, English language use during PE can impact not only their confidence but also the successful completion of their PE. In Australian ECE, the English language is the main language used in the field where field-specific English is seen as the legitimate capital.

Social capital is a type of capital that encompasses the relationships shared among group members, providing them with collective ownership of capital and resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Different from other social capital theories, Bourdieu's social capital accrues value in relation to field and habitus and can be mobilised for particular purposes

(Nash, 1990). According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital provides its members with a special credential that indicates a sense of prestige. However, the reproduction of social capital suggests continuous agents' efforts of sociability, requiring individuals to invest time, energy, and specific capital valuable to the group (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, social capital is not naturally given but the product of individual and collective investment strategies, aiming to reproduce the structures of the group.

Central to Bourdieu's theory is the relationship between field and habitus, and for students whose habitus is not aligned with the field, their experiences can sit in contrast to students who are able to feel as "fish in water" (Wacquant, 1989, p. 43). Habitus, as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions/structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72), engenders thoughts, perceptions and practices. In Bourdieusian terms, when international PSTs enter the PE teaching context, there are differences between their original habitus and that of the new teaching field (Amos, 2017; Barton et al., 2015). Grenfell (1996) refers to this mismatch as a dilemma between the teaching field and PSTs' pedagogic habitus. Early experiences such as family and environment play a significant role in forming the basis of capital accumulation and habitus structure (Bourdieu, 1973). For beginning Chinese PSTs, the basis of their habitus regarding ECE was initially structured in China as their primary habitus was developed within families. On the other hand, through formal education in China, these PSTs' knowledge and perspectives in terms of ECE and mentoring expectations are structured as secondary habitus which occurs in academic settings such as schools (Wacquant, 2014). Although new experiences are structuring habitus, due to the trajectory effect of habitus, earlier experiences play a dominating role, as habitus tends to favour new experiences that are reinforcing (Bourdieu, 1990). In this sense, PSTs' perceptions and actions generated by the habitus, together with different types and volumes of capital, explicate their negotiations in the PE field.

In the context of this study, Bourdieu's social capital theorises the power dynamics between the Chinese international PSTs and others based on a sense of membership. Accumulating social capital involves continuous efforts, collectively or individually, and it produces mutual knowledge and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986). The convertibility between Bourdieu's social capital and other forms of capital, which is enabled or disabled by habitus and field, sheds light on how the use of the thinking tools impacts the research design of this study.

Methodology

This paper draws data from a qualitative multiple-case study that explores the PE of three first-year Chinese international PSTs undertaking the Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree in ECE at a university in Victoria, Australia. After the university ethics were approved, 11 PSTs consented and volunteered to participate in this project. Data were collected from pre-post-PE interviews, focus groups, and PE reflective journals. Data was analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's six steps. After reviewing the initial themes from Phase 4, we further defined and renamed the themes with Bourdieu's thinking tools.

This paper focuses on three cases: Tina, Xiaoxi and Tang (pseudonyms), and the selection of these three cases followed Yin's (2017) exemplary case selection. All three

cases are significant since they shared explicit insights into their sense of belonging through interactions with other professional members from their PE. Tina and Xiaoxi went to long day care centres while Tang attended kindergarten. In Victoria, Australia, long day care centres cater to children between the ages of 0–6 years old and typically operate at least 8 hours a day on working days (Victoria Department of Education, 2023). Kindergartens in this study refer to sessional kindergartens for children aged 3–5 years old.

As required by the university, all three PSTs worked with three to five-year-old children. According to Xiaoxi, her PE centre was highly diverse and had many Chinese children. Tang's centre, on the other hand, boasted a diverse mix of children and professionals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In comparison, Tina's centre was less multicultural.

Xiaoxi and Tang have successfully completed their PE. Unfortunately, Tina did not achieve a satisfactory outcome in her first PE which has had a negative impact on her subsequent studies and her progress in PE. In the following discussion, we use Bourdieu's thinking tools to present these three PSTs' PE in Australian ECE settings.

Findings and discussion

Mentoring

Prior to starting their PE, the three participants experienced a mixture of excitement and anxiety. They expressed concerns about their ability to interact with children, their level of English proficiency, and their relationships with mentors. When asked about their expectations for this PE, Tina shared her expectations of mentors:

[I expect my mentor] to guide and supervise [me]. It seems like one-to-one learning in China. I think I can learn a lot from this experience by following [the mentor teacher]. I wish that in the upcoming first practicum, I can follow him/her step-by-step instead of just receiving comments/feedback after I organise some activities without any guidance. I hope she/he won't just monitor me during practicum.

Tina's expectation of receiving explicit guidance from her mentor prior to her PE was similar to a one-to-one learning process that occurred in China. One-to-one learning refers to private tutoring (also known as shadow education), which is fairly commonplace in cities, especially with middle-class families. Middle-class families tend to invest in private tutoring,³ where students can receive additional subject-related help to achieve academic success (Zhang & Bray, 2018). Here Tina's expectation might grow out of her previous one-to-one learning experiences in China through her habitus, as Bourdieu (1990) shows, produced in the conditions of its existence.

After completing their PE, the three participants attended post-PE interviews, reflecting on how their relationship developed with their mentors during PE. Tina commented on this mentoring relationship:

On the first day, my mentor told me that if I had any question, I can go to ask him. He didn't tell what I could do and what I shouldn't do. Since I was unsure about what to do before the practicum, I didn't ask questions. I usually followed what he did. For example, before lunch time, he started cleaning the tables for children and I helped him cleaning. Or I helped him by giving food to children. He never told me what to do and I tried my best to think more to help.

In contrast to Tina's expectation, her mentor was not directive in that he did not tell Tina what to do but it seemed that she did not ask questions either, even though he suggested she could. Le Cornu (2009) argues that mentors should provide explicit teaching skills and approaches to PSTs. PSTs are to be encouraged to be responsible for their learning and take an active role in PE. Similarly, Martin et al. (2017) contend that teacher educators as mentors need to model and support PSTs' practices so that PSTs can develop their professional agency in PE contexts.

Teacher agency refers to how teachers make sense of the situations they are in shaping and adjusting their dispositions to in the context (Biesta et al., 2017). According to Skeggs (2004), agency is a resource to which "some lack access and which they cannot see as a possibility; it is not within their field of vision" (p. 139). Tina struggled to see the possibility of engaging in other activities because she was not given access to it. Consequently, she reported that it was challenging to develop a professional and collegial relationship with her mentor.

In the ECE PE field, PSTs are encouraged to be proactive in developing agency, which is part of developing their professional attributes. However, in Chinese culture, people are encouraged to follow the Confucian idea of 三思而后行 (thinking multiple times before taking action). Jin and Cortazzi (2011) argue that although education in China has changed over time, traditional expectations and values towards teaching and learning are still influential, and these values contribute to shaping the habitus of Chinese PSTs. Dooley (2003) suggests that due to English proficiency challenges, Chinese students can be perceived as more teacher-reliant in Australian learning contexts. As mentioned earlier, Tina was worried about her English language communication prior to and during her PE, and this may have deterred her from asking her mentor questions.

There were differences between Tina's PE expectations and the mentoring practices that she experienced during the PE. Bourdieu (1990) points out that one's habitus tends to reinforce and confirm previously structured perceptions. In Tina's case, it is suggested that the Chinese teacher-student relationship was generated through her habitus and then transferred to the ECE PE field; her unfamiliarity with the context, and her English language concerns may all or separately have impacted her communication with her mentor.

In contrast to Tina's relationship with her mentor, Tang felt supported by her mentor during her second PE. She shared that:

Sometimes, after an activity, my mentor would ask me to think why they did the activity which helped me with thinking and understanding the rationales behind those activities. In general, my mentor was very active in helping me to learn and grow.

Tang's mentor asked her to reflect on the activities she participated in during PE to support her professional growth. Simoncini et al. (2014) found that professional dialogue, such as inquiry conversation, can support PST learning in PE. Tang's mentor initiated professional dialogue which Tang appreciated as a form of professional learning.

For Tang, a collegial and collaborative mentor-PST relationship developed as her mentor encouraged her to become part of the ECE community. Bourdieu (1986) argues "natural distinction" is a result of symbolic power in the form of authority or a particular culture. Mentors who work in the Australian ECE have more field-specific knowledge and are familiar with the culture of the context compared to Chinese novice PSTs. In this

respect, mentors can be seen as having more symbolic power. Instead of maintaining the capital gap with Tang, Tang's mentor helped Tang to achieve effective cultural capital (e.g., ECE field-specific knowledge such as professional reflection). With her mentor's explicit guidance through an inquiry-based mentoring practice, Tang was able to develop her professional understanding of children's learning. Through this, she accumulated cultural capital that was valued in the ECE PE field.

As for Xiaoxi, her mentor welcomed her into the PE field, supporting the development of her cultural and linguistic capital in the field. According to Xiaoxi, "when she [her mentor] asked me to take out the laundry, she would ask me if I understood. Sometimes when I looked confused, she would help me with the task or sometimes she would do it." Similarly, when she did not know how to resolve children's fighting over a toy, "after observing and discussing with my mentor, I learned that I should let neither of them have it and then go to get them other toys."

Bourdieu (1986) maintains that social capital can endow agents with resources and other forms of capital that are collectively owned by the group. Xiaoxi benefited from her relationship with her mentor and grew professionally by obtaining more ECE field-specific knowledge – cultural capital. Dika and Singh (2002) argue that social capital accrued from "the social relationship that allows the individual to claim resources possessed by the collectivity" (p. 33). Xiaoxi's mentor facilitated her engagement in the PE field, which in turn increased Xiaoxi's social capital both by formally legitimising her membership to the group, as well as more informally through connections with knowledgeable others.

Learning communities

All three participants discussed how they perceived their sense of belonging to PE learning communities. We found that in our study, the construction of a sense of belonging moves beyond their relationships with mentors. Their perceptions of themselves as becoming a member of the community implied a sense of belonging. According to Bourdieu (1977), membership is associated with power in a field. As discussed earlier, the volume and types of capital impact the agent's position and power in a given field (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of the three PSTs, whether the PE community recognised their membership influences how they accumulate other forms of capital in the field and develop a sense of belonging. Being welcomed into the learning communities extends beyond mentor-PST relationships as there are other members in the ECE PE field.

Tina reflected upon her relationship within the PE community claiming that a collegial relationship with others seemed missing and led to a strong sense of isolation on her part. Tina reflected:

And usually, for pre-service teachers as myself, I can't join teachers nor children for lunch. So on the third day, I packed my own lunch. I heated it up in the microwave and I wanted to sit with children in the room while they had lunch. However, on my way to the room, the very serious teacher told me that I was not allowed to have lunch with children. So I had to turn around and had my lunch while standing in the hallway alone. I noticed that some senior pre-service teachers were allowed to have lunch in their classrooms but only I, as a first year pre-service teacher, couldn't have lunch inside. The teachers and staff in the centre usually had lunch with children and whenever they had lunch, they would tell me that it was lunch break time. So I needed to bring my lunch and leave the room. I felt isolated.

Tina was unable to use the staff kitchen for the remaining days of her PE so she finished eating her lunch standing in the hallway. In Tina's PE setting, children had lunch in their classrooms and teachers, educators and senior PSTs could have lunch with children. Staff members were also able to use the staff kitchen. This experience happened outside of the classroom, leaving Tina, as a first-year PST, feeling she was an outsider in the PE community. According to Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2015), relationships in PE contexts are defined as "relationship between pre-service teachers and placement staff, including the supervising teacher. Strong support for professional experience from the principal and other leaders is key to effective placements" (p. 3). Despite recognising the crucial role and responsibilities of all PE staff in supporting pre-service teachers' learning in AITSL, Tina's lunch experience failed to reflect the recommended responsibilities outlined by AITSL.

Barton et al. (2015) argue that successful PE takes account of experiences outside of classrooms. The lunch break experience left Tina isolated and not feeling part of a welcoming community. Blackmore et al. (2017) argue that some Chinese international students find it challenging to engage with non-Chinese communities since their previously accumulated social capital is seen as less effective in the Australian context. For Tina, the PE context was a non-Chinese community and she found it challenging to engage with this community as she felt she did not fully belong. O'Connor et al. (2015) note that isolation and other negative experiences can modify PSTs' perspectives on working in ECE. According to Le Cornu (2016), a perceived sense of isolation in PE can threaten PSTs' self-esteem and confidence in working in the field.

For Tina, those who had more power in the PE setting imposed the "natural distinction" as only staff members and senior PSTs were able to join the children for lunch. Although Tina was upset and confused, she did not question the lunchtime hierarchical practice for staff but followed instructions by finishing her lunch standing in the hallway alone.

Bourdieu (1998) suggests that taxonomy is a product of the ontological relations between objective and subjective structures. Sometimes agents can misrecognise the objective structure (Bourdieu, 1998). Tina's perceived objective structure of the PE (her habitus), led to some misrecognition which prohibited her from questioning the social and physical distance between herself and others. As Bourdieu (2001) suggests, habitus is inseparable from the field that produces and reproduces it; Tina's respect for teachers from her Chinese education experiences and a fear of failing the PE structured her decision to have lunch in the doorway. According to Bourdieu and Thompson (1991), the legitimacy of the power embedded in hierarchical relationships fosters a sense of superiority and limit. Through the legitimacy of power, the dominated can misrecognise that "the hierarchy is, after all, an arbitrary social construction which serves the interests of some groups more than others" (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991, p. 23). Through site effects in a social space, capital determines one's position where those with limited appropriate capital become socially and physically distant (Bourdieu, 1999).

In comparison to Tina, who felt isolated during lunch breaks, Xiaoxi had a different experience as Chinese staff members and other pre-service teachers invited her to join them for lunch. She said that "Chinese staff and pre-service teachers sat together (to have lunch)." Although Xiaoxi believed that her English created communication barriers which further deterred her from interactions with other EC staff members during lunch breaks,

she was welcomed by the Chinese staff members in the PE community and felt a sense of belonging in the context.

Bourdieu (1977) argues that one's membership in a group can be affirmed by social activities. When agents' positions in the field are recognised in the field because of the proximity of dispositions and interests, the creation of a unified group (or a community in this study) is more likely to succeed (Bourdieu, 1989). This sense of membership is usually accompanied with obligations, advantages and power (Bourdieu, 1977). The symbolic profit from these lunch break interactions, in the form of social capital that reflects mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), translated into a positional advantage that helped Xiaoxi better negotiate the challenges of PE with the support of these staff members.

From the three PSTs' interactions with other professionals in ECE PE, it is apparent that their sense of belonging, or isolation was negotiated based on their capital and habitus. Bourdieu (2000) suggests that when newcomers enter a field, their habitus does not necessarily have to be the exact habitus that the field requires. However, this habitus needs to be congruent, compatible and close to the field-specific habitus (Bourdieu, 2000). Field, being the "source of specific effects of capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245), mediates the experiences between the three beginning PSTs' and other professionals in the learning communities.

Conclusions and implications

This study shows that growing all forms of capital in PE is particularly important for Chinese PSTs as it mediates their initial PE. We found that when PSTs develop meaningful relationships with others during their PE, they forge a sense of belonging to a professional learning community. The recognition of PSTs' membership by ECE PE communities provides PSTs with an opportunity to mobilise different forms of capital more flexibly. This further contributes to their accumulation of other forms of capital.

As a corollary, PE can likewise undermine preservice teachers' confidence and professional learning. This study demonstrated that taking the initiative or developing and expressing agency is complex, considering Chinese PSTs' prior culture of learning and self-perceived lack of confidence. In this respect, it is important for mentors and the ECE PE community to gain a better understanding of how to support international PSTs' transition into the Australian ECE PE. This finding aligns with an earlier study by Nuttall and Ortlipp (2012), who found that the assessment of PSTs by mentors is shaped by the mentor's assumed cultural characteristics of international PSTs. In this study, for instance, the assumed characteristics of Tina as someone who could proactively ask questions did not match Tina's expectations of explicit mentoring guidance.

At the core of a meaningful relationship between Chinese international PSTs and other professionals in the ECE context, there is an urgent need in teacher education programmes to develop a complex understanding of PSTs' needs and how they can contribute in meaningful ways to culturally and linguistically diverse ECE settings. As suggested by Ewing and Le Cornu (2010), the key to PE learning communities is reciprocity, which recognises PSTs as valuable professional members of the community. To establish a learning community, it is important to acknowledge the different capital that Chinese international PSTs contribute to

the field since capital “does not exist and function except in relation to a field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). Further research is needed into how Chinese international PSTs engage with early childhood communities and pedagogical practices to generate a better understanding of and support for this student cohort.

In current times, the enrolment of international students in Australian teacher education courses is dynamic. We contend that higher education teaching programmes, and in particular, the field of PE, need to reconsider and reconceptualise how to effectively support international PSTs’ professional growth and inclusion during PE. It is important for the ECE sector, PE community and higher education to not only recognise but to draw on the diverse capital international students’ can contribute and not just view these students in terms of economic capital. In this way, the rich cultural and linguistic repertoire of international PSTs can become acknowledged capital in the Australian ECE field.

Notes

1. The Skilled Occupation List (SOL) is a list of occupations that are currently acceptable for immigration to Australia.
2. In Australia, only some early childhood professionals have university degrees and others have diplomas or certificates in ECE.
3. On 24 July 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese State Council jointly issued “the Double Reduction Plan” (the Plan). In the Plan, off-campus subject-based tutoring will no longer be approved (Department of Education, 2022).

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