

Sustainable Teacher Development Through Mentoring in A Teaching English to Young Learners Course: A Qualitative Study of Cognition, Identity, and Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT: Mentoring is widely recognized as a key component of initial teacher education; however, its role in fostering sustainable professional development remains underexplored in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) contexts. Grounded in teacher cognition, communities of practice, and teacher identity frameworks, this qualitative case study examines how mentoring contributes to sustainable teacher development in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. The study was conducted within a semester-long TEYL course at a foundation university in Türkiye and involved 48 third-year pre-service English teachers. Data were collected over 12 weeks through classroom observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured focus group interviews, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal three interrelated dimensions of development: (1) cognitive transformation toward learner-centered pedagogical beliefs, (2) increased participation within a community of practice, and (3) the development of professional identity characterized by enhanced agency and self-efficacy. The study conceptualizes mentoring as a multidimensional process that integrates cognitive, social, and identity-related development. It contributes to the literature by offering an integrated framework for sustainable teacher education and provides implications for designing mentoring models that support long-term professional growth in ELT.

KEYWORDS: Mentoring; Teacher Cognition; Teacher Identity; Communities of Practice; Sustainable Teacher Development; Teaching English to Young Learners

1. INTRODUCTION

The global education agenda has increasingly positioned teacher quality as a central pillar of sustainable educational reform and societal development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) calls for inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education and emphasizes the urgent need to substantially increase the supply of qualified and well-prepared teachers (United Nations, 2015). Within this global framework, teacher education programs are no longer viewed merely as sites for knowledge transmission; rather, they function as strategic and transformative spaces for fostering long-term professional capacity. Sustainable teacher development requires the cultivation of reflective, adaptive, and resilient educators who are capable of responding to complex and evolving educational contexts (Day & Gu, 2010; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015).

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), the Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) context presents distinct pedagogical, cognitive, and affective challenges that necessitate specialized teacher preparation. Young learners require developmentally appropriate, interactive, and emotionally supportive instruction that aligns with their cognitive and socio-emotional needs (Cameron, 2001). Moreover, early language learning experiences significantly influence learners' long-term motivation, engagement, and attitudes toward language learning (Copland et al., 2014). Therefore, preparing pre-service teachers to effectively teach young learners is not only a pedagogical necessity but also a critical component of sustainable education.

One of the key mechanisms for bridging the persistent gap between theoretical coursework and classroom practice in teacher education is mentoring. Mentoring has been widely recognized as a powerful pedagogical tool that supports novice teachers in developing practical skills, professional understanding, and classroom competence (Hobson et al., 2009). However, mentoring extends beyond the transmission of pedagogical techniques; it plays a crucial role in shaping how teachers think, interact, and perceive themselves within the profession.

From a cognitive perspective, teacher cognition encompasses teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and decision-making processes, all of which significantly influence instructional practices (Borg, 2003). Pre-service teachers often enter teacher education programs with deeply rooted beliefs shaped by prior learning experiences, which may not align with effective pedagogical practices. Mentoring

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provides a dialogic and reflective space where these beliefs can be challenged, reconstructed, and aligned with more context-sensitive approaches to teaching.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is conceptualized as participation in social contexts rather than as an isolated cognitive process. Wenger (1999) argues that professional learning occurs through engagement in communities of practice (CoP), where individuals gradually move from peripheral participation to more active and central roles. In mentoring environments, pre-service teachers engage in shared practices, collaborative dialogue, and guided participation, which enable them to internalize the norms, values, and practices of the teaching profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Closely intertwined with cognition and participation is the concept of teacher identity, which is dynamic, context-dependent, and socially constructed through interaction and experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teacher identity is not a fixed attribute but an evolving process shaped by reflection, emotional experiences, and professional engagement. Mentoring environments provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to negotiate their professional identities by integrating beliefs, practices, and experiences within authentic teaching contexts.

Despite the extensive body of literature on mentoring, teacher cognition, communities of practice, and teacher identity, these constructs are often examined in isolation. There remains a significant gap in understanding how mentoring simultaneously operates across cognitive, social, and identity dimensions to support sustainable teacher development, particularly within the specialized context of TEYL. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more holistic and effective teacher education models that align with the long-term goals of sustainable education.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate how structured mentoring within a Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) course functions as a multidimensional mechanism for sustainable teacher development. Specifically, the study examines how mentoring:

1. Facilitates cognitive transformation in pre-service teachers' pedagogical beliefs about teaching young learners;
2. Supports social participation through engagement in a mentoring-based community of practice;
3. Contributes to the development of professional teacher identity through reflective and dialogic processes;
4. Aligns these cognitive, social, and identity-based transformations with the broader goals of sustainable teacher development as outlined in SDG 4.

By integrating cognitive, sociocultural, and identity-based perspectives, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of mentoring as a key mechanism for fostering sustainable professional growth in ELT teacher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in an integrative perspective that brings together teacher cognition, sociocultural theories of learning, teacher identity, and sustainable professional development. Rather than treating these constructs as isolated dimensions, this study conceptualizes mentoring as a multidimensional process through which cognitive transformation, social participation, and identity development interact to support long-term professional growth in teacher education.

2.1 Teacher Cognition and Pedagogical Beliefs

Teacher cognition refers to the complex and often unobservable dimension of teaching, encompassing teachers' beliefs, knowledge, assumptions, and thought processes that shape instructional decision-making (Borg, 2003). Research has consistently demonstrated that pre-service teachers do not enter teacher education programs as blank slates; rather, they bring deeply internalized beliefs formed through their own experiences as learners, a phenomenon described as the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 2020). These prior beliefs are often resistant to change and may conflict with pedagogically effective practices unless they are explicitly addressed through reflective and contextually grounded experiences (Johnson, 2009).

In the context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), teacher cognition requires a particularly nuanced transformation. Young learners differ significantly from adult learners in terms of cognitive development, attention span, emotional needs, and learning styles. Effective teaching in TEYL contexts demands developmentally appropriate, interactive, and affectively supportive practices (Cameron, 2001). Therefore, a central objective of mentoring within TEYL courses is to facilitate the restructuring of pre-service teachers' pedagogical beliefs, enabling them to move from teacher-centered assumptions toward more responsive, learner-centered approaches. This transformation is not automatic; it is mediated through guided reflection, feedback, and situated teaching experiences.

2.2 Mentoring as Social Participation: Communities of Practice

While teacher cognition highlights the internal dimension of teaching, learning to teach is fundamentally a social process. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but participation in socially situated practices (Wenger, 1999). Communities of practice (CoP) provide a conceptual framework for understanding how individuals develop professionally through engagement with others in shared activities, discourses, and goals.

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Within teacher education, mentoring functions as a structured entry point into a professional community of practice. Through mentoring, pre-service teachers engage in processes of observation, collaboration, and guided practice, gradually transitioning from peripheral participants to more active and central members of the teaching community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This process of legitimate peripheral participation enables novices to internalize not only pedagogical techniques but also the norms, values, and professional language of teaching.

Collaborative reflection plays a crucial role in this process. Avalos (2011) emphasizes that professional learning is enhanced when teachers engage in collective inquiry and dialogue, which foster shared understanding and professional belonging. In mentoring contexts, such interactions support the development of social capital and collective efficacy, allowing pre-service teachers to navigate the complexities of classroom practice with increasing confidence and competence.

2.3 The Dynamic Construction of Teacher Identity

Closely intertwined with cognition and social participation is the development of teacher identity. Teacher identity is not a fixed or singular construct; rather, it is dynamic, multifaceted, and continuously shaped through interaction, reflection, and experience (Beijaard et al., 2004). It involves how teachers perceive themselves, how they are recognized by others, and how they position themselves within the professional community.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) conceptualize teacher identity as a process of ongoing negotiation that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and contextual dimensions. Pre-service teachers actively construct their professional identities as they engage with teaching practices, respond to feedback, and reflect on their experiences. This process is inherently dialogic and influenced by both internal beliefs and external interactions.

Mentoring plays a critical role in facilitating this identity construction. Through supportive and reflective dialogue, mentors provide validation, guidance, and opportunities for self-exploration, enabling pre-service teachers to develop a sense of professional agency and self-efficacy (Izadinia, 2016). As novice teachers gain confidence in their instructional decisions and begin to see themselves as legitimate members of the teaching profession, their identities evolve from tentative and fragmented toward more coherent and agentic forms.

2.4 Sustainable Professional Development in Teacher Education

The integration of cognitive transformation, social participation, and identity development ultimately contributes to sustainable professional development. Sustainable teacher development extends beyond short-term skill acquisition and focuses on building long-term professional capacity, resilience, and adaptability.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) conceptualize this process as the development of professional capital, which includes human capital (individual knowledge and skills), social capital (collaborative relationships), and decisional capital (the ability to make informed professional judgments). Mentoring contributes to all three dimensions by supporting knowledge development, fostering collaborative engagement, and enhancing reflective decision-making.

Furthermore, sustainable professional development requires emotional resilience and adaptive expertise, particularly in the early stages of a teaching career (Day & Gu, 2010). Mentoring environments that promote reflection, dialogue, and professional belonging help pre-service teachers develop the capacity to sustain their practice over time. In this sense, mentoring can be viewed not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a long-term investment in teacher sustainability, aligning with the global objectives of SDG 4 to ensure qualified and well-prepared teachers.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

Although a substantial body of research has examined teacher cognition, communities of practice, and teacher identity, these constructs are frequently addressed as separate domains. Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how mentoring simultaneously operates across cognitive, social, and identity-related dimensions, particularly within the specialized context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL).

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts an integrative perspective by conceptualizing mentoring as a multidimensional process. In this framework, mentoring functions as a cognitive mediation mechanism that facilitates the transformation of pedagogical beliefs, a social participation structure that supports engagement within communities of practice, and an identity construction space that fosters the development of professional agency.

By examining these interrelated processes within a TEYL course, the study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of sustainable teacher development in ELT teacher education and to contribute to the growing literature on integrated models of professional learning.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the multidimensional impact of mentoring on pre-service teachers' sustainable professional development within a Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) course. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena in real-life settings, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences (Yin, 2018).

Given that teacher cognition, professional identity, and participation in communities of practice are socially situated and dynamically constructed, a qualitative design provided the necessary methodological flexibility to capture these processes holistically. The bounded case of this study was defined by a semester-long TEYL course in which structured mentoring was systematically integrated into instructional practices. This design enabled an intensive analysis of how mentoring operates as a cognitive, social, and identity-mediated process within a specific teacher education context (Tisdell et al., 2025).

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of a foundation university in Türkiye during the 2025–2026 academic year (fall semester). The research context was a compulsory TEYL course designed for third-year pre-service English teachers, who are typically at a critical transitional stage between theoretical coursework and practical teaching experience. The study involved a total of 48 third-year pre-service teachers, all of whom participated in structured mentoring activities throughout the semester. These activities included lesson planning, micro-teaching practices, mentor-guided feedback sessions, and reflective discussions.

To gain deeper qualitative insights into participants' experiences, a subset of 15 volunteer pre-service teachers participated in semi-structured focus group interviews. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure that the selected participants represented a range of perspectives, experiences, and developmental trajectories. This approach enhanced the depth and richness of the qualitative data while maintaining contextual relevance.

3.3 Data Collection

To ensure credibility and depth through methodological triangulation, data were collected over a 12-week period using multiple qualitative instruments, including classroom observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured focus group interviews.

3.3.1 Classroom Observations

Weekly classroom observations were conducted during micro-teaching sessions. A structured observation checklist was used to systematically document mentoring-related processes and participant behaviors. The checklist was designed to capture four core analytical dimensions aligned with the theoretical framework of the study:

- *Teacher cognition*: articulation and transformation of pedagogical beliefs in practice
 - *Communities of practice*: patterns of peer collaboration and movement from peripheral to active participation
 - *Teacher identity*: expressions of confidence, agency, and professional self-positioning
 - *Sustainable teacher development*: evidence of adaptive teaching strategies and reflective engagement
- Additionally, observations focused on the nature of mentor feedback (e.g., directive, dialogic, reflective) and participants' emotional responses during teaching practices, providing insight into both cognitive and affective dimensions of professional growth.

3.3.2 Reflective Journals

Participants were required to maintain weekly reflective journals throughout the 12-week period. These journals served as a critical tool for accessing participants' internal cognitive processes, emotional responses, and identity development over time.

Reflective prompts were designed to align with the four key constructs of the study:

- How their beliefs about teaching young learners evolved (teacher cognition)
- How they experienced collaboration and participation (communities of practice)
- How they perceived themselves as developing teachers (teacher identity)
- How they evaluated their long-term professional growth (sustainable development)

These reflective narratives enabled a longitudinal understanding of change and provided rich, introspective data that complemented observational and interview data.

3.3.3 Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

At the end of the semester, three semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 15 volunteer participants to obtain in-depth insights into their mentoring experiences. The semi-structured format enabled guided inquiry while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and introduce emergent perspectives.

The interview protocol was explicitly designed to align with the four analytical dimensions of the study: teacher cognition, communities of practice, teacher identity, and sustainable teacher development. Questions addressing *teacher cognition* explored

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how mentoring influenced participants' pedagogical beliefs and prompted critical moments of instructional change. The *communities of practice* dimension focused on participants' sense of belonging, participation, and collaboration within the mentoring environment. Questions related to *teacher identity* examined changes in participants' professional self-perceptions, confidence, and sense of agency. Finally, the *sustainable teacher development* dimension addressed participants' perceptions of long-term professional growth, as well as the challenges they encountered and the strategies they employed to overcome them. In addition to individual reflections, the focus group format facilitated collective discussion, enabling participants to co-construct meaning, share common experiences, and reflect on shared developmental challenges. This interactive process provided rich insights into the social and relational dynamics of mentoring.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted systematically over a 12-week period throughout the TEYL course. The procedure was designed to align with the structured mentoring model implemented in the course, ensuring that data captured the dynamic interaction between mentoring, teaching practice, and professional development.

At the beginning of the semester, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. The mentoring process was then introduced as an integral component of the course, including lesson planning, micro-teaching, and feedback sessions.

Each week, participants engaged in micro-teaching activities followed by structured mentoring feedback provided by the course instructor and peers. During these sessions, classroom observations were conducted by the researcher using a predefined observation checklist focusing on cognitive, social, and identity-related dimensions of teaching practice.

Simultaneously, participants completed weekly reflective journals, documenting their evolving beliefs, teaching experiences, emotional responses, and professional self-perceptions. These journals served as a longitudinal data source capturing ongoing cognitive and identity transformation.

Throughout the semester, mentoring sessions functioned as dialogic spaces where participants engaged in collaborative reflection, peer discussion, and guided feedback. These interactions enabled the observation of participants' progression from peripheral participation toward more active engagement within a community of practice.

At the end of the 12-week period, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 15 volunteer participants. These interviews provided in-depth insights into participants' experiences of mentoring, including changes in pedagogical beliefs, perceptions of professional identity, and sense of belonging within the learning community.

All data sources—including observation notes, reflective journals, and interview transcripts—were systematically organized and prepared for thematic analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for a flexible yet systematic identification of patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. This approach was particularly suitable for the present study, as it enabled the integration of both data-driven (inductive) insights and theory-informed (deductive) interpretations aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

The analysis followed six recursive phases. First, all data sources—including observation notes, reflective journals, and interview transcripts—were read repeatedly to achieve deep familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated across the entire dataset, capturing meaningful units related to participants' cognitive, social, and identity-related experiences. Third, these codes were systematically grouped into broader categories to identify potential themes.

In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined through constant comparison across data sources to ensure internal coherence and conceptual consistency. Particular attention was given to how emerging themes aligned with the four analytical dimensions of the study: teacher cognition, communities of practice, teacher identity, and sustainable teacher development. In the fifth phase, themes were clearly defined and named, ensuring that each theme captured a distinct aspect of participants' professional development. Finally, in the sixth phase, an interpretive narrative was constructed to explain the relationships between themes and to illustrate the multidimensional nature of mentoring.

The coding process was both inductive and deductive. While initial codes emerged from participants' narratives, the development and organization of themes were guided by the study's theoretical framework. This dual approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of mentoring as a cognitive, social, and identity-mediated process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were employed in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was ensured through data triangulation across multiple sources, including observations, reflective journals, and interviews. Dependability was established by maintaining a systematic and transparent record of coding decisions and analytical steps. Confirmability was supported through ongoing reflexive awareness of the researcher's interpretive role. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, context-specific descriptions that allow readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

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4. FINDINGS

The reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data—comprising classroom observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured focus group interviews—revealed three interrelated themes that illustrate the multidimensional impact of mentoring on pre-service teachers in the TEYL context. These themes reflect the interconnected processes of *cognitive transformation*, *social participation within a community of practice*, and *professional identity development*, which together constitute the core components of sustainable teacher development.

4.1 Cognitive Transformation: Evolving Pedagogical Beliefs

A central theme emerging from the data was the significant restructuring of participants' pedagogical beliefs. At the beginning of the course, many pre-service teachers held predominantly teacher-centered beliefs, emphasizing classroom control, discipline, and the transmission of knowledge. These initial beliefs reflected deeply internalized assumptions shaped by prior schooling experiences.

However, through sustained mentoring interactions—particularly reflective dialogues and feedback following micro-teaching sessions—these assumptions were progressively challenged and re-evaluated. Mentoring created a dialogic space in which participants critically examined the effectiveness of their instructional approaches in relation to the developmental and affective needs of young learners. As a result, participants began to adopt more flexible, learner-centered perspectives that prioritized emotional engagement, interaction, and responsiveness.

This cognitive transformation was not abrupt but gradual, emerging through cycles of practice, feedback, and reflection. Observational data further supported this shift, showing increased use of interactive activities, student engagement strategies, and adaptive classroom management approaches over time.

One participant captured this transformation as follows:

“Before the mentoring sessions and micro-teaching, I thought discipline and keeping the classroom quiet was the most important thing. Now, I understand that building an emotional connection and creating a safe environment matters much more for children to actually learn.”

This shift illustrates how mentoring functions as a mechanism for mediating teacher cognition by enabling pre-service teachers to move beyond rigid, experience-based beliefs toward more context-sensitive and pedagogically informed understandings of teaching. In this sense, cognitive change was closely linked to reflective engagement and situated practice rather than theoretical instruction alone.

4.2 Social Participation: Integrating into a Community of Practice

The second major theme highlights the role of mentoring in facilitating pre-service teachers' social participation within a professional learning environment conceptualized as a community of practice. Across data sources, participants described a clear developmental trajectory from passive observation to active engagement, indicating a gradual integration into the shared practices of the teaching community.

At the initial stages of the course, many participants positioned themselves as peripheral participants, primarily observing, listening, and hesitating to contribute during collaborative planning and feedback sessions. This hesitancy was often associated with a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes. However, as the mentoring process progressed, participants began to engage more actively in discussions, contribute ideas, and take ownership of instructional decisions.

Mentoring played a critical role in this transition by creating a supportive and dialogic environment that encouraged participation. Through structured feedback sessions, peer collaboration, and mentor scaffolding, participants were gradually positioned as legitimate contributors rather than passive learners. Observational data further indicated increased interaction, idea-sharing, and collaborative problem-solving over time, suggesting a shift toward more active professional engagement.

This progression reflects the process of *legitimate peripheral participation*, in which novices move from the margins of a community toward more central and active roles through sustained social interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). Importantly, this transition was not merely behavioral but also relational, as participants developed a sense of belonging and professional voice within the learning community.

A participant's reflection illustrates this transformation:

“At first, during the feedback sessions, I just listened more and took notes. I was afraid to make mistakes. Later, as my mentor encouraged me, I started suggesting my own activity ideas and truly felt my voice mattered in the planning process.”

This shift demonstrates that mentoring not only facilitates participation but also fosters the development of social confidence and professional agency. As participants became more engaged in collaborative practices, they began to perceive themselves as active members of a professional community. In this sense, mentoring functioned as a social participation structure that enabled the internalization of professional norms, collaborative practices, and shared meanings.

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4.3 Identity Development: Cultivating Professional Agency

Interwoven with cognitive transformation and increasing social participation was the development of participants' professional teacher identity. Analysis of reflective journals and interview narratives revealed a clear trajectory in how participants perceived themselves, moving from a tentative, role-based self-concept toward a more confident and agentic professional identity.

At the beginning of the semester, many participants described themselves as "students completing course requirements," rather than as legitimate members of the teaching profession. Their engagement with teaching was often framed as performative and evaluative, primarily oriented toward fulfilling academic expectations. However, as they progressed through the mentoring process, this perception began to shift significantly.

Mentoring environments played a central role in facilitating this identity transformation by providing emotional support, validation, and opportunities for reflective dialogue. Constructive feedback from mentors, combined with authentic teaching experiences in micro-teaching sessions, enabled participants to reinterpret their role from passive learners to emerging professionals. As participants experienced successful classroom interactions and received recognition for their efforts, their sense of professional self-efficacy and agency increased.

This transformation reflects the dynamic and socially negotiated nature of teacher identity, which evolves through interaction, experience, and reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In particular, mentoring functioned as a critical space for identity construction by enabling participants to articulate their developing teaching philosophies, confront uncertainties, and build confidence in their pedagogical decisions.

A participant's reflection illustrates this identity shift:

"In the beginning, I was just pretending to be a teacher for a grade. After seeing how the children reacted to my lesson plans and hearing my mentor's belief in my potential, everything changed. Now I see myself as someone who can really teach children and make a difference."

This statement highlights the transition from a performance-oriented identity to an internally grounded professional identity characterized by confidence, purpose, and agency. Importantly, identity development was not an isolated outcome but closely linked to both cognitive transformation and social participation. As participants restructured their pedagogical beliefs and became more actively involved in the community of practice, they simultaneously reconstructed their sense of self as teachers.

In this sense, mentoring can be understood as an identity-mediating process that fosters professional agency by integrating cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of teacher development. This integrated development is a key component of sustainable teacher education, as it supports the formation of resilient and reflective practitioners capable of sustaining their professional growth over time.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that mentoring within a Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) course functions as a multidimensional and transformative mechanism that supports sustainable teacher development across cognitive, social, and identity-related domains. Rather than operating as a discrete or short-term instructional support, mentoring emerges as an integrated developmental process through which pre-service teachers reconstruct their pedagogical beliefs, participate in professional communities, and develop a sense of professional identity and agency.

From a cognitive perspective, the findings reveal a clear shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogical beliefs. This transformation supports Borg's (2006) argument that teacher cognition, although deeply rooted in prior experiences, can be reshaped through sustained reflective engagement and contextually grounded practice. The mentoring process in the present study created structured opportunities for reflection, dialogic feedback, and pedagogical experimentation, enabling participants to critically re-examine their assumptions and align their teaching practices with the developmental and affective needs of young learners. This interpretation is also consistent with Johnson's (2009) sociocultural view of teacher learning, which emphasizes that pedagogical understanding develops through mediated participation in situated practice. More recent literature further reinforces this interpretation. In their systematic review of preservice English teachers' practicum, Li and Peng (2024) identify professional identity, beliefs, emotions, and practicum models as central and recurring concerns in current practicum research, suggesting that cognitive change in teacher education is most meaningful when examined in relation to broader professional and contextual processes.

The findings also highlight mentoring as a powerful structure for social participation. Participants' movement from passive observation to active contribution reflects the process of legitimate peripheral participation described by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999). Through feedback, collaborative lesson planning, and shared reflection, pre-service teachers were gradually positioned as legitimate contributors to a professional learning community. In this respect, mentoring functioned not only as guidance but also as an entry point into the social practices of teaching. This result aligns with Avalos's (2011) claim that professional learning is strengthened through collective inquiry and collaborative engagement. It is also supported by more recent studies. For example, Misana et al. (2025) found that social and academic peer support significantly predicted both personal and

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professional teacher identity among preservice teachers, underscoring the importance of participation, recognition, and relational support in teacher learning. Similarly, current work on communities of practice in teacher education continues to show that collaborative participation strengthens professional integration and meaning-making across practicum and mentoring settings.

The identity-related findings of the present study are equally significant. Participants increasingly moved from seeing themselves as students completing course requirements to viewing themselves as legitimate teachers capable of making pedagogical decisions and influencing children's learning. This transformation reflects the dynamic, socially negotiated nature of teacher identity discussed by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009). Mentoring appeared to support this process by offering emotional validation, constructive feedback, and opportunities for authentic teaching practice. In this sense, identity development was not simply an internal psychological shift but a socially mediated process shaped by dialogue, affirmation, and participation. Recent research provides additional support for this interpretation. Zhang et al. (2025) found that mentor support significantly enhanced preservice preschool teachers' professional identity and career decisions, while emotional processes mediated and moderated these relationships. Their findings are particularly relevant to the present study because they highlight that mentoring does not operate solely through pedagogical guidance; it also works through emotional support, which is crucial for professional identity formation. In a similar way, Ardi et al. (2025) showed that reflective mentoring during teaching practicum catalyzed EFL pre-service teachers' professional identity construction, suggesting that mentoring is especially effective when it creates opportunities for reflective dialogue and identity negotiation.

Importantly, the present findings suggest that cognitive transformation, social participation, and identity development should not be understood as isolated outcomes. Rather, they appear to be mutually reinforcing dimensions of sustainable teacher development. As participants revised their beliefs, they also became more active in the mentoring community; as they participated more fully, they began to reconstruct their professional identities with greater confidence and agency. This integrated process supports Hargreaves and Fullan's (2015) concept of professional capital, particularly the interplay of human capital (knowledge and skills), social capital (collaborative relations), and decisional capital (professional judgment). It also resonates with Day and Gu's (2010) argument that sustainable teacher development depends on resilience, reflection, and long-term commitment. More recent work on sustainable teacher education further supports this interpretation. Palavan et al. (2025), for example, report that mentor teachers view teaching practice as essential not only for applying theoretical knowledge and gaining experience, but also for developing professional identity, and they emphasize guidance, feedback, and support as central to sustainable teacher education. Their conclusions reinforce the present study's argument that mentoring should be understood as a long-term developmental investment rather than a limited practicum technique.

Taken together, these findings extend the literature by offering a more holistic conceptualization of mentoring in ELT teacher education. While earlier studies have often focused on mentoring as a source of instructional support or emotional reassurance, the present study demonstrates that mentoring simultaneously operates as a cognitive mediation mechanism, a structure for social participation, and a space for identity construction. This integrated perspective is particularly valuable in TEYL, where effective teaching requires not only technical pedagogical knowledge but also developmental sensitivity, relational awareness, and adaptive professional judgment.

From a broader perspective, the study also contributes to current discussions around Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly Target 4.c, which calls for increasing the supply of qualified teachers through effective preparation and support (United Nations, 2015). The results suggest that mentoring can play a strategic role in achieving this aim by supporting not only immediate pedagogical competence but also the longer-term development of reflective, resilient, and professionally engaged teachers. In this respect, mentoring should be positioned more centrally within teacher education curricula as a mechanism for building sustainable professional capacity.

In conclusion, this study positions mentoring as an indispensable component of sustainable teacher education in ELT. By fostering the integration of cognitive, social, and identity-related development, mentoring supports the emergence of teachers who are not only pedagogically competent but also professionally agentic and capable of sustaining their growth over time. The findings therefore suggest that teacher education programs should move beyond viewing mentoring as a supplementary practicum feature and instead design structured, dialogic, and developmentally sustained mentoring models that prepare pre-service teachers for long-term professional learning and commitment.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single institutional context, which may limit the transferability of the findings to different educational settings. Second, the semester-based design captures only short-term developmental changes and does not account for the long-term sustainability of mentoring outcomes. Third, although multiple qualitative data sources were used, the findings rely on interpretive analysis and may be influenced by researcher subjectivity.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine the persistence of cognitive, social, and identity-related developments during in-service teaching. Comparative studies investigating different mentoring modalities, including digital and

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hybrid formats, would provide further insights. Additionally, exploring AI-supported mentoring tools may contribute to scalable and adaptive teacher education models. Finally, mixed-method approaches are recommended to enhance the robustness and generalizability of findings.

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