

Article

Perspective of Supervising Teachers and Tertiary Supervisors on Professional Learning for Professional Experience

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Abstract

To examine current support mechanisms for supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors in professional experience placements, we investigated the perceived effectiveness of and explored strategies for enhancing university–school collaboration through the lens of situated learning theory, operationalized via a Communities of Practice framework. Data were collected from 282 interview participants across multiple institutions. Findings reveal opportunities for enhancing support mechanism availability and effectiveness, with many supervising teachers expressing interest in additional preparation and ongoing support. University supervisors highlight opportunities to strengthen communication and resource allocation to enhance school collaboration. These findings suggest that systematic investment in community-building approaches, strengthening domain knowledge, fostering mutual engagement through collaborative professional learning, and developing shared practices through effective boundary objects, is essential to transforming fragmented supervision practices into coherent communities of practice that enhance professional experience quality and university–school partnerships.

Keywords: school–university; preservice teachers; supervising teachers; tertiary supervisors; professional experience



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1. Introduction

Placement experiences constitute a core component of initial teacher education university programs internationally, variously termed practicums, student teaching, or teaching internships. Within the Australian context, these are designated as Professional Experience (PEX). The emphasis on “professional experience” stems from the recognition that high-quality, practical teaching experience is essential in preparing preservice teachers for the realities of their future professional work in classrooms. PEX placements allow preservice teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, develop their professional identity, refine classroom management, and enhance instructional skills under the guidance of experienced mentors, known within the Australian context as supervising teachers or

mentor teachers, forthwith titled supervising teachers in this paper. Central to the PEX ecosystem are key stakeholders from both universities and schools. From universities, there are the preservice teachers who are completing the PEX placement, and the university academics and tertiary supervisors who support them in this, chiefly through visits, advice, and other contact during the placement. On the school side there are supervising teachers, who directly supervise the placement and PEX coordinators, who provide support for all supervising teachers and preservice teachers involved in PEX at a school. The quality of PEX placements relies on the expertise, collaboration, and clear understanding of roles for all stakeholders. In Australian PEX contexts, supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors are often appointed with few formal requirements beyond experience and enthusiasm. This makes access to well-designed, context-responsive professional learning essential to ensure they are well prepared to support preservice teachers effectively.

1.1. The Australian Initial Teacher Education Professional Experience Context

Policies and strategies shape approaches to initial teacher education PEX within their relevant contexts both within Australia and globally (Le Cornu, 2015). Whilst we acknowledge international contexts might vary in scope and focus, this paper focuses specifically on the Australian context, where PEX remains under researched (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). This focus enables a deeper examination of the structures, practices, and challenges unique to the Australian system. Like other previous work, (see Ledger et al., 2020) we argue that this study holds significance for an international audience as it offers a contextualised understanding of the perspective of supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors regarding professional learning for PEX that can be interpreted within other international contexts.

PEX placements are complex and resource intensive (Andrews et al., 2025; Le Cornu, 2015). When universities and schools work together to create holistic PEX programs, they involve a diverse range of stakeholders including preservice teachers, supervising teachers, and tertiary supervisors, whose interactions and roles significantly shape the outcomes of these placements both at the individual tripartite and wider collective levels. Given the pivotal influence of supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors in providing developmental and instructional supervision against teaching practices (Roofe & Cook, 2017), it is essential to critically examine the literature on their roles, attributes, and the supports necessary to facilitate effective supervision.

1.2. The Role of Supervising Teachers

Supervising teachers are typically experienced educators who volunteer to engage in this additional work alongside their regular classroom teaching (Grimmett et al., 2018; S. L. McDonough, 2018; Peters, 2011; Walkington, 2005). Le Cornu (2015) identifies several key characteristics and pedagogical attributes required for the role. These include strong relational capacities and interpersonal skills, a willingness to share professional knowledge and engage in reflective dialogue, the capability to support the preservice teachers' lesson planning and curriculum implementation, guidance for the preservice teacher in using student data to inform their teaching, provision of continuous constructive feedback, and assistance in gathering evidence for professional portfolios. Additionally, supervising teachers must provide sound, evidence-based assessment of preservice teachers' performance against graduate teaching standards. Evidently, teachers who supervise preservice teachers are required to juggle multiple roles including being a mentor, role model, supervisor, and assessor.

The supervising teacher–preservice teacher relationship should be characterised by respect and constructive support (Hagenauer et al., 2023). Yet, many supervising teachers

do not receive formal training or development in the mentoring/supervisory process (S. McDonough, 2014) and consequently rely solely on their own experience of mentoring (Clarke & Mena, 2020). This can mean that some supervisory relationships are not optimal with supervising teachers struggling to effectively articulate and transfer their pedagogical expertise to preservice teachers (Hudson & Hudson, 2012). Providing feedback can be challenging. Ellis and Loughland (2017) report that the absence of structured feedback protocols means mentoring conversations often resemble monologues from supervisors rather than dialogic exchanges that could better support preservice teachers' development. Brett and Parks (2022) further emphasises this gap, also noting that some supervising teachers find it difficult to clearly communicate what constitutes 'good' teaching in their written feedback. To address these gaps, researchers suggest various approaches including recorded conversations as a tool for sharing and learning about mentoring practices, development of language frameworks to guide mentoring conversations and communities of practice to support and foster mentoring of preservice teachers (S. L. McDonough, 2018; Winslade et al., 2023). Supervising teachers should be prepared and proactive in establishing positive, more equal, and democratic relationships with preservice teachers (Keogh et al., 2013) relationships with preservice teachers, learning to use positive feedback strategies that promote learning without leaving preservice teacher feeling defeated (Hagenauer et al., 2023). Despite the significant time commitment involved, supervising teachers receive minimal recognition or compensation for this critical contribution to the profession (Keogh et al., 2013; Le Cornu, 2010; S. L. McDonough, 2018).

1.3. The Role of Tertiary Supervisors

Tertiary supervisors are in a multifaceted and complex university-appointed role. This role can be called multiple names across universities, such as university advisor, university supervisor, university liaison officer, university practicum advisor, and tertiary mentor. They act as a bridge between the universities and schools and are responsible for supporting the preservice teacher and supervising teacher during the placement. The role requires adaptability, teaching expertise, and interpersonal skills as tertiary supervisors provide oversight, offer feedback, liaise, and support supervising teachers and mentor preservice teachers during PEX placements. As they circulate across multiple universities and schools, tertiary supervisors must adapt to meet the needs of individuals and specific environments, developing tailored solutions rather than relying on standardized approaches (Holmes et al., 2021). Differing expectations can be confusing, and this misalignment can lead to inconsistent support for preservice teachers and hinder the development of a cohesive PEX (Treacy, 2024). Another potential disruption relates to the transient nature of their role moving between multiple schools and often not being located within a university campus, tertiary supervisors often remain peripheral members of teacher education communities (Barahona, 2019; Okolie et al., 2023). The lack of robust support structures, such as collaborative platforms, can leave tertiary supervisors feeling isolated.

1.4. University–School Collaborations

Whilst supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors play a critical role in high-quality PEX placements, effective collaboration and partnerships between universities and schools remain essential for enhancing the overall quality and impact of these experiences (Hadley et al., 2023; Le Cornu, 2010; S. McDonough, 2014). Systemic barriers including hierarchical structures within partnerships can create power imbalances between schools and universities (Corbin et al., 2019), and difficulties logistical, interpersonal, organizational, and managerial challenges occur when developing collaborative programs (Joughin et al., 2022). This does not have to be the case, universities and schools can en-

hance collaboration through clearer communication channels (Swanson & Duncan, 2025), joint planning (Bernay et al., 2020), shared supervision models (Joughin et al., 2022) and alignment of practices (Hargreaves, 2019). Programs like the PEX Hub in the Charles Sturt University Aspire to Teach Program in New South Wales, Australia, and the La Trobe NEXUS teaching program in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia, exemplify university–school collaborations (Australian Government Department of Education, n.d.).

1.5. Professional Learning in the PEX Space

Despite the critical role that supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors play in pre-service teacher education, research on their professional learning remains limited. With the aim to enhance and ensure quality PEX, universities have implemented various initiatives to support supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors. Establishing support networks and peer collaboration opportunities can provide supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors with the resources and encouragement needed to succeed. Beyond this, targeted opportunities for professional learning are crucial, particularly as many supervising teachers lack formal training in effective supervision, this could constrain their ability to mentor preservice teachers effectively (Hobson et al., 2009; Oates & Bignell, 2019; Uusimäki, 2013).

Currently within Australia, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.) provides supervising teachers online training modules that build capacity in mentoring, assessment, and reflective practice. Some Australian universities are increasingly offering professional learning initiatives to supervising teachers through workshops, online courses, and collaborative sessions with university staff. Likewise, some Australian universities offer professional learning to tertiary supervisors, including orientation sessions, mentoring workshops, and resources aligned with national teaching standards. These approaches are commonly identified in government education departments (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2024; Australian Government, 2023; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014) and within teacher education contexts or broader professional learning environments (Australian Government, 2023; Andrews et al., 2025; Barahona, 2019; Okolie et al., 2023).

The content of professional learning programs is key to participation, learning and enhanced supervisory practices. Previous research notes effective professional learning should reflect the complexities of supervision and focus on mentoring strategies, reflective practice, and assessment literacy (British Educational Research Association, 2022). Many supervising teachers value professional learning led by experienced educators, academic staff, and external experts (Kudenko et al., 2019). As collaborative professional learning is highly valued by supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors, especially when facilitated by experienced educators and external experts, joint activities such as co-observation, shared planning, and combined professional learning sessions foster stronger alignment between university and school contexts.

Supporting supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors can present challenges. These challenges include time constraints in supporting all stakeholders effectively, inconsistent implementation of support mechanisms, mismatched expectations, and limited communication amongst all stakeholders (Joughin et al., 2022). Previous research demonstrates that working as a professional learning community provides the strongest foundation for partnership, with stakeholders valuing collaboration for professional learning, research opportunities, and enhanced preservice teacher preparation (Bernay et al., 2020).

1.5.1. Purpose and Research Questions

Despite previous research highlighting sustained engagement, co-designed initiatives and shared professional learning opportunities fostering deeper alignment and improved outcomes for preservice teachers (Bernay et al., 2020; Kudenko et al., 2019), collaboration through professional learning communities remains a critical yet under-researched avenue for strengthening supervision in PEX. To address this gap, it is essential to explore not only the existing support mechanisms available to supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors but also understand how these supports are perceived in terms of their effectiveness. These considerations inform the following research questions:

What current support mechanisms exist for supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors, and how effective are these perceived to be?

How can universities and schools enhance collaboration to improve the quality of professional experience supervision?

1.5.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Situated Learning Theory and Community of Practice

To understand the complexities of professional learning for supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors, this study draws upon situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as its primary theoretical framework. Situated learning theory proposes that learning occurs through legitimate participation, in real-world practices and within social communities. This theory explains how professional knowledge is constructed through authentic participation within professional communities with experienced practitioners.

As a conceptual framework, communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) operationalizes situated learning theory through its articulation of the specific social structures that enable learning. This framework provides a lens for examining how the learning processes described by situated learning theory unfold within professional contexts. Communities of practice are particularly relevant to the PEX context, where supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors must develop specialized mentoring expertise beyond their classroom teaching competencies.

Wenger's conceptualization comprises three fundamental elements applicable to PEX supervision. The domain encompasses mentoring knowledge, assessment practices, and feedback strategies. The community consists of networks among supervising teachers, tertiary supervisors, and university staff who support one another's learning. The practice refers to shared tools, frameworks, and approaches that members develop through collaborative work.

This integrated theoretical approach reveals critical insights about current challenges and solutions in PEX supervision. Legitimate peripheral participation explains how supervising teachers transition from novice to experienced mentors through gradual engagement with more experienced community members. However, many experience this transition in isolation without systematic community access (S. McDonough, 2014; Clarke & Mena, 2020).

Boundary objects—artifacts and frameworks that maintain coherence across contexts—are particularly important for addressing inconsistencies in PEX practices. Weak boundary objects fail to facilitate shared understanding between school and university contexts. Mutual engagement opportunities strengthen community bonds and facilitate knowledge sharing, yet systemic barriers often limit meaningful engagement. Joint enterprise becomes compromised when stakeholders operate with misaligned understandings of their shared purpose.

Boundary objects, artefacts, and frameworks that maintain coherence across contexts, are particularly important for facilitating situated learning across the school–university

divide. Weak boundary objects fail to support the authentic participation that situated learning theory identifies as essential for professional development. Mutual engagement opportunities strengthen community bonds and facilitate the knowledge sharing that underpins situated learning, yet systemic barriers often limit meaningful engagement. Joint enterprise becomes compromised when stakeholders operate with misaligned understandings of their shared purpose, undermining the collaborative participation that situated learning requires.

2. Research Design

This study sits within a larger study that aimed (Institutional Ethics—H23901) to evaluate the role of supervising teachers, the support they receive, and how university/school partnerships can be enhanced. This manuscript presents the findings from a survey and interviews completed by supervising teachers and university staff (tertiary supervisors and academic staff).

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study included teachers from 29 partnership schools who had supervised preservice teachers ($n = 208$) and university staff ($n = 74$) working with supervising teachers. Participant demographic details that include their age distribution, gender identity, accreditation level, years of teaching and supervision experience are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Supervising Teacher Demographic Data.

Category	Details
Participant Groups	Teachers supervising preservice teachers: 208 University staff working with supervising teachers: 74
Age Distribution	18–25 years: 1% 26–34 years: 20% 35–44 years: 22% 45–54 years: 19% 55–64 years: 20% 65–70 years: 10% 70+ years: 8%
Gender Identity	Female: 78% Male: 21% Non-binary/Third gender: 0.35%
Accreditation Level (supervising teachers)	Proficient: 90% Graduate: 2% Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher: 8%
Years of Teaching Experience	3–5 years: 7% 6–10 years: 23% 11–15 years: 22% 16–20 years: 14% 21–25 years: 12% 26–30 years and beyond: Remaining spread Mean: 15 years
Supervision Experience	80% had supervised 1–10 preservice teachers Mean number supervised: 7.12

Initial recruitment used convenience sampling across 13 university partnership contacts and networks. While Table 1 demonstrates that our sample reflects certain demo-

graphic characteristics of the broader population of supervising teachers and university staff, we acknowledge potential selection bias that cannot be assessed through demographic comparisons alone.

The recruitment approach may have introduced opinion-based selection effects, where individuals' existing views about teacher supervision, university partnerships, or pre-service teacher preparation may have influenced their likelihood of participating when invited. Such selection could mean our sample over-represents educators with stronger opinions (positive or negative) about these topics, or those more engaged with professional development discussions.

These potential selection effects limit generalizability to the broader population and the results of this work should be interpreted with this sampling limitation in mind. Nevertheless, the authors argue that the insights from this engaged sample of supervising teachers and university staff provide valuable perspectives on current practices in teacher preparation.

Of the 74 university staff, 52 held the role of tertiary supervisors. In this role, experienced teachers are hired in a casual capacity by universities and allocated a certain number of hours to visit or support PSTs on their placement. Some tertiary supervisors also worked casually at the university to deliver lectures or tutorials to PSTs ($n = 4$). There were university academics in the sample ($n = 11$) and some university academics worked as tertiary supervisors as part of their role ($n = 6$). One person chose not to disclose their role. A range of universities were included in the sample: Australian Catholic University, Avondale University, Charles Sturt University, Macquarie University, University of Newcastle, University of Sydney, University of Canberra, University of New England, University of Notre Dame, University of Technology Sydney, University of Wollongong, and Western Sydney University.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Survey

The survey comprised closed-ended items and open-ended qualitative questions designed to elicit comprehensive data on supervisory practices. The survey was developed for this study, based on the research questions. Closed-ended items included age, gender, their role, and the affiliated university. The qualitative questions captured more nuanced perspectives on supervisory experiences. This methodological approach ensured data collection that reflected the complexity of supervisory processes across educational contexts and enabled further understanding of participant responses. The survey explored participants' roles in supervision, university affiliations, existing professional learning offerings, and their recommendations for improving supervisory processes. Participants were asked to describe ideal professional learning content and preferred facilitators, as well as ways universities and schools could enhance supervision practices.

2.2.2. The Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Participants could opt to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were designed to gain further insight and explanatory responses to the overarching research questions for this study. This research method was appropriate as it sought to understand the experiences of supervising teachers across the state and provided complementary qualitative data to enhance the survey findings.

2.3. Method

The survey was administered electronically through the Qualtrics© platform and was distributed through mailing lists and via PEX coordinators in schools. The survey was also distributed through the rural learning exchange network mailing list and through the New South Wales highly accomplished and lead teacher distribution list. Survey

participation was anonymous, although some demographic information was collected. Participants did not have to answer every question and could identify if they wished to participate in a follow-up interview. The survey received 335 responses. Any survey that had empty responses after Question Four was removed from the dataset. These responses were removed, as although they provided demographic information, there was no information provided regarding supervising teachers or their experience. This resulted in 282 responses in the dataset. We included participants with missing responses, as we did not need complete responses to analyze the data. The respondents were categorized as either university staff or supervising teachers. There were 208 supervising teachers who responded to the survey and 74 university staff (tertiary supervisors and academic staff).

Participants who completed the survey could opt-in to a follow-up interview. Thirty-one supervising teachers and 19 university staff were interviewed. The supervising teachers were overwhelmingly accredited at Proficient level (90%) and the remainder at Highly Accomplished or Lead level (10%). The participants' teaching careers ranged from 6 to 10 years (23%), 11 to 15 years (29%), 16 to 20 years (23%), 21 to 25 years (6%), 26 to 30 years (6%), 31 to 35 years (10%), and 40+ years (3%). Most participants (68%) had previously supervised between 1 and 10 preservice teachers. With the remainder indicating they had supervised more than 10 preservice teachers. The university staff comprised tertiary supervisors working for between one and five universities (68%), university academics (21%), an academic who also acted as a tertiary supervisor (5%), and a tertiary supervisor who also worked as a casual academic (5%). Interviews were conducted online or face-to-face at the participants' schools. The research team were experienced PEX directors and posed semi-structured and follow-up questions in response to interesting responses they heard. Participants could choose a time convenient for them, and all names, places and universities named in the interviews were de-identified.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data sources provided triangulated evidence for the research questions. Survey questions underwent reflexive thematic analysis ([Braun et al., 2022](#)), while interview transcripts provided further depth to the themes. After survey coding, the interview transcripts were used to highlight the trends, as the interview data provided more insight than the survey responses—due to the nature of semi-structured interviews which enabled clarifying questions where a response was not clear. Supervising teachers and university staff responses were coded separately, but where appropriate, were brought together to present the results. The survey and interview coding utilised NVIVO®, a qualitative software package. Experienced PEX researchers convened meetings to discuss the coding process and examine emergent themes and patterns across the comprehensive dataset, following [Braun et al. \(2022\)](#) process of reflexive thematic analysis.

Participant Coding

Each participant was allocated a code to indicate their position, the data source, and the type of participant they were. Survey respondents who were supervising teachers were labelled SST followed by a number (e.g., SST1 for Supervising Teacher 1). Survey respondents from university staff were coded as SUS followed by a number (e.g., SUS1 for university staff 1). Interview participants were similarly coded, with supervising teachers identified as IST followed by a number (e.g., IST1), and University Staff as IUS followed by a number (e.g., IUS1).

3. Results

The results of this study are reported in this section and are organised by research questions. First, we report on the support mechanisms for supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors and second, we report on how universities and schools can enhance the supervision process.

3.1. Supervising Teacher and Tertiary Supervisor Support Mechanisms

Of the supervising teachers who responded to the survey, 97% were very comfortable or comfortable supervising preservice teachers. Three percent of participants selected comfortable with assisting or guiding a preservice teacher. No participants stated they were somewhat or not comfortable supervising preservice teachers. Further questions were posed about the current support from universities.

Current Support from Universities

When asked how often they receive support from the university, 5% of participants stated they had never received university support. If this is coupled with rarely (29%) and sometimes (25%), it is evident that more than half have stated they do not have regular support from the university. However, 41% noted they have had support (occasionally and very frequently). The variance is likely related to different practices across the universities and the tendency for support to be provided on an 'as needed' basis.

From a community of practice perspective, the inconsistency across universities reflects fragmented communities with weak boundary objects—the shared tools, documents, and frameworks that should facilitate coherent practice across institutional boundaries. The variation in terminology, placement durations, and expectations identified by participants suggests an absence of effective shared repertoire within the broader PEX community. As one supervising teacher noted, "Different universities provide different types of support—this can be challenging for schools to track, particularly when hosting preservice teachers from a variety of universities" (SST4). This fragmentation undermines joint enterprise, as stakeholders operate with misaligned understandings of their shared purpose in supporting preservice teachers' development.

Some identified the support was dependent on whether they asked for it, or whether the student was placed 'at risk' of not meeting the placement expectations. This reactive rather than proactive approach was evident in one teacher's experience: "They were supportive when I needed them, otherwise I don't see them at all" (Teacher, 20 years of experience, SST18).

Although many received very little support from universities, 15% were very satisfied and 26% were reasonably satisfied with the support received. 31% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, while 15% were slightly dissatisfied and 2% were very dissatisfied.

There is a range of support offered by universities, and as noted above, it is dependent on the university, rather than being a consistent style of support. The types of support currently offered by universities and identified by the participants, along with the frequency of mentions, are summarized in Table 2. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each type of support identified by participants.

The participants provided insight into the types of professional learning already offered by universities. The data represented a broad range of strategies; however, these are understood to not be consistent across all universities. In the following section, data will display additional support that supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors indicated they need in addition to what was provided.

Table 2. Support Offered by Universities.

Type of Support	Indicative Quote	Supervising Teachers	Tertiary Supervisors	Total
Tertiary supervisor visits: Supervisor visits preservice teachers at school (in-person or online) to monitor progress and provide guidance.	“A visit to check they are going okay” (SST55)	73	18	91
Support with paperwork or reports: University provides handbooks, guides, and templates for required documentation.	“Evidence guides to support completion of final reports” (SST4)	27	31	58
Support during ‘at risk’ process: University initiates at-risk process when preservice teachers struggle, with supervisors coordinating support and intervention.	“Advice when PSTs are struggling” (SST179) “Additional support of students who experience difficulties during their placements” (SST122)	16	21	37
Informal check-in: Supervisors or staff conduct informal conversations to monitor experience and address concerns.	“Informal conversation with me on how the PST is going” (SST60)	8	26	34
Email: University sends information, reminders, resources, and deadlines via email.	“Relevant information is communicated via email. This includes scaffolds, observation documents and guidelines.” (SST121) “I have had emails from the university” (SST157)	20	9	29
Phone call: Staff call participants for reminders, updates, progress check-ins.	“Phone call check in” (SST194)	16	6	22
Multiple sustained communication streams: University maintains ongoing communication through multiple channels (emails and calls).	“Ongoing open communication, emails, phone calls” (SST40)	9	0	9
Information sessions and training: University offers professional learning and training for supervisors (may count toward accreditation).	“Upskilling training via Zoom offered for those who wish to attend” (SST163)	8	0	8

3.2. Support Required to Enhance Collaboration and Improve Professional Experience Supervision

There was a variety of support that supervising teachers, and university staff identified as needed for supervising teachers. Table 3 provides a summary of the support suggested by the participants, with frequencies indicating how many participants mentioned each type of support. Indicative quotes were selected from participant responses to exemplify each category of support.

When asked about times they were, or were not supported, most supervising teachers identified times that preservice teachers had been placed 'at risk'. It appears that there are mixed experiences for supervising teachers when placing a preservice teacher at risk.

Some supervising teachers reported positive experiences where universities provided timely and comprehensive support. For example: "We required support from the university as one of our preservice teachers were needing an intervention. The university was very helpful, visiting our school on four occasions to support the supervising teacher and preservice teacher" (Teacher, 35 years of experience, SST42). This response demonstrates how effective university support can involve multiple site visits and direct engagement with both supervising teachers and students.

However, other supervising teachers described significant barriers to accessing support: "When accessing support for a struggling student was very difficult to access. On the ground support was not available due to distance. No follow up made by university at the end of the PEX based on suggested outcomes given" (Teacher, 25 years of experience, SST32). This contrasting experience highlights how geographical constraints and lack of follow-through can leave supervising teachers feeling unsupported during critical moments.

The 'at risk' procedures are not consistent across universities. Tertiary supervisors identified that sometimes supervising teachers did not follow the university procedure for 'at risk', and the tertiary supervisors were unable to support the supervising teacher as they might have liked. Some tertiary supervisors have proactively addressed this communication gap by implementing additional check-ins: "In my email to the supervising teacher and the coordinator of the programme in the school, who's usually the Assistant Principal, I include, "Please let me know ASAP if you consider this student teacher to at risk because if so, I may need to make an extra visit." Schools will respond and usually 99% will say, "Oh, this student is wonderful. She/he's doing so well." Occasionally I'll get an "unsure". So, then it's usually followed by a phone call" (TS, IUS10). This section reveals the multifaceted nature of support required to enhance collaboration between schools and universities during PEX placements. The findings demonstrate that supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors require diverse forms of assistance, ranging from administrative improvements such as clearer documentation and centralised contact systems to more substantive professional support including three-way collaborative conversations and pre-placement preparation materials. In the following section, specific data about the prioritized professional learning is shared.

3.2.1. Professional Learning for Supervising Teachers

In this study, teachers identified the professional learning they believed would best support them in their supervising teacher role. Five key areas emerged from their responses.

Feedback was the most common suggestion, encompassing verbal, written, formal and informal feedback approaches to support preservice teachers during their placements. Learning about the university context was the second most frequent request, with supervising teachers wanting to understand university processes and practices, as well as background information about students' prior coursework and placement preparation.

Table 3. Support needed for Supervising Teachers.

Type of Support	Indicative Quote	Supervising Teachers	Tertiary Supervisors	Total
More support: Ensures clear communication between supervising teachers and university staff.	“More immediate communication with supervising teachers, coming directly to us. Some information was lost along the line at times” (SST152)	5	25	30
Course progression summary: Clarifies where placement fits within the degree and expectations for all parties.	“A scope of learning that the PST has been taught (what kinds of schools of thought and styles have been taught in university.) This would be helpful in knowing how to practically apply the theory” (SST132)	13	13	26
Central contact person: Dedicated university liaison responds to queries throughout placement.	“A central contact person, so that emails and phone calls always go to the same person—rather than a rotating team responding to requests during the placement period” (SST4)	5	20	25
Three-way conversation: Preservice teacher, supervising teacher, and supervisor meet to set placement goals.	“To have time to chat as a team with the preservice teachers and tertiary supervisor” (SST31)	20	4	24
Better paperwork: University provides clear documentation and support for reporting requirements.	“Simple, single page guides” (SST57) “More support at school in terms of the uni requirements with reports and payment.” (SST142)	7	14	21
Support for ‘at risk’ students: University enacts at-risk processes with supervisor coordinating support when preservice teachers struggle.	“If they need more time to correct things, let them, or get them out” (SST63)	10	6	16
Professional Learning Opportunity: University offers mentoring and validation for supervising teachers.	“They need training, and they need to be acknowledged and thanked for what they do” (SUS37) “They [supervising teacher] enjoy the intervention of a university supervisor when given as a mentoring role which verifies and congratulates their contribution to the profession. They like to talk through any concerns and are often happy to find their concerns are supported.” (SUS45)	5	9	14
Workload and time: Recognizes time and workload for quality placement support, feedback, and reporting.	“Time to write student teacher reports” (SUS183) “Time to be off class (RFF release from class) so we can provide quality feedback time to our preservice teachers” (SST205) “They need more time allocation if they are going to supervise closely. They are very busy people, and it is often hard for me to determine a time to communicate with them. It’s rushed.” (SUS62)	4	9	13

Table 3. Cont.

Type of Support	Indicative Quote	Supervising Teachers	Tertiary Supervisors	Total
Waiver B employment-based placements: Final-year preservice teachers complete placements in their workplace with clear guidance and support.	“Clarify what is involved. This new Waiver B is causing all sorts of confusion. Is the student a relief teacher on that day or a preservice teacher? Should a teacher be with them if the difficult class is only on a day they are employed?” (SUS14) “Unfortunately, the uni does not have enough time to make weekly visits and check-ins, therefore the role of the school is vital in supporting our new teachers. We currently have a number of waiver B teachers, mostly on full teaching loads” (SST162)	8	0	8
Pre-placement goal setting and review: Shares preservice teacher’s achievements and development areas before placement.	“An analysis of the preservice teacher’s strengths and weaknesses before receiving them would give supervising teachers a chance to better prepare for the students’ academic needs” (SST58)	5	0	5

Communication strategies included requests for advice and best practice examples on how to clearly and effectively communicate guidance to preservice teachers. How to mentor focused on developing productive relationships, building trust, and engaging in growth-oriented mentoring conversations. Finally, how to support preservice teachers encompassed both general placement support and specific strategies for assisting struggling pre-service teachers.

These professional learning priorities can be understood as efforts to build a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) within the mentoring community of practice. The emphasis on feedback strategies, communication techniques, and mentoring approaches reflects supervising teachers' need for common tools and practices that transcend individual experience. The request for 'understanding university context' reveals gaps in boundary-crossing knowledge that limit supervising teachers' full participation in the broader teacher education community of practice.

Figure 1 displays the five most common professional learning opportunities prioritised by supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors.

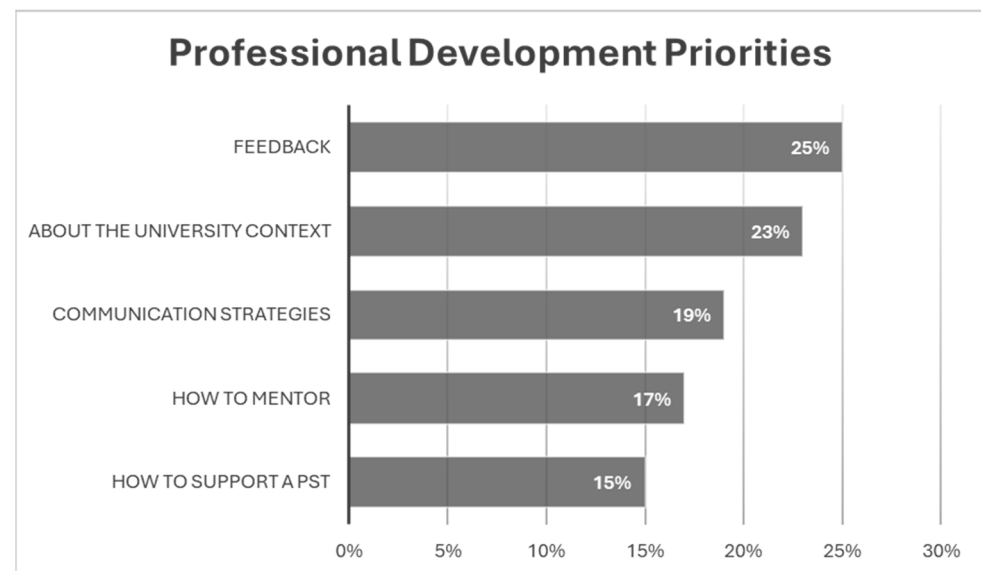


Figure 1. Professional learning priorities.

3.2.2. Feedback

Teachers identified feedback as an area in which they would like to receive additional professional learning, including a focus on constructive and effective feedback and the skills required to enact those. Supervising teachers expressed uncertainty about how to conduct effective observations and provide meaningful feedback, as one teacher noted: "How to complete observations and give quality feedback" (Teacher, 20 years of experience, SST121).

Beyond the mechanics of feedback, others identified a need for skill development in determining what feedback is appropriate for pre-service teachers at different stages of their development: "What kind of feedback is necessary, appropriate or relevant et cetera". (Teacher, 15 years of experience, SST132). These responses indicate a need for training in the technical aspects of classroom observation and feedback delivery.

3.2.3. Understanding the University Context

Many of the supervising teachers felt they did not understand the university expectations and requirements regarding the PEX. A key concern was clarity around university expectations and preservice teachers' workload requirements, as one teacher explained: "I want to know clearly what the expectations from the university are, and of the preservice

teacher”(Teacher, 21 years of experience, IST21). This response reflects a fundamental communication gap between universities and supervising teachers about program requirements and standards.

To address this lack of clarity, some supervising teachers specifically requested more structured guidance tools: “Check lists of expectations for the preservice teachers” (Teacher, 19 years of experience, SST127).

Another teacher emphasised the need for program-specific information: “Clear expectations from each university/degree to support preservice teachers as best as possible” (Teacher, 15 years of experience, SST140). These responses indicate that supervising teachers want concrete, actionable resources that outline specific expectations for different university programs.

Others suggested that concrete examples would help them better understand performance standards at different stages of pre-service teacher development: “Case studies on what is an acceptable level of competency for each of the stages/years of preservice teacher (e.g., what a 2nd year would/should look like, 3rd year etc. What’s acceptable, what’s not” (Teacher, 16 years of experience, SST124). This request for developmental benchmarks suggests that supervising teachers need clearer guidance on how to calibrate their expectations according to where students are in their training.

3.2.4. Communication Strategies

Communication strategies, and development in having difficult conversations were suggested by 19% of respondents. A fundamental need identified by supervising teachers was developing skills in clearly articulating expectations to preservice teachers, as one participant explained: “It would include how to communicate expectations clearly” (Teacher, 6 years of experience, SST206). This response suggests that many supervising teachers struggle with translating their professional knowledge into clear, actionable guidance for preservice teachers.

Beyond general communication, supervising teachers requested specific support for managing challenging conversations when placements are not progressing as expected: “How to have a conversation with a preservice teacher when things are not going the way it was intended” (Teacher, 5 years of experience, SST10). This comment reflects the emotional and professional difficulty of addressing performance concerns while maintaining a supportive learning environment.

Supervising teachers requested more concrete support tools beyond general training, seeking specific language and approaches for difficult scenarios: “Conversation starters for some scenarios such as ‘at risk’ et cetera”. (Teacher, over 30 years of experience, SST141). Notably, this request came from a highly experienced teacher, suggesting that even experienced educators find these conversations challenging and would benefit from structured support.

3.2.5. How to Mentor

Mentoring and coaching were identified as important areas of development. Like feedback, many simply listed ‘mentoring’ as an area of development. This is reflective of a survey methodology, in which participants can provide as little or as much detail as they like. One participant articulated a broader vision for mentoring that extended beyond individual placements to address systemic workforce challenges: “I think the concept of mentoring and coaching over a longer period would result in better outcomes for educators (new and continuing). Providing training for supervising teachers on mentoring and coaching” (Teacher, 10 years of experience, SST7). This response indicates recognition that

effective mentoring could contribute to teacher retention and professional learning across the teaching profession, suggesting the need for formal training in mentoring approaches.

3.2.6. How to Support Preservice Teachers

The concept of supporting a preservice teacher was identified by 15% of survey respondents as an important area for future development. These responses mirror the ways of being supportive of preservice teachers who may be at-risk or teaching techniques and strategies that differed from the classroom teachers' approach. A key challenge identified was how to support preservice teachers whose teaching approaches differ from those of their supervising teachers: "How can I be supportive of different teaching techniques—how can I adapt my mentoring to suit preservice teachers' needs" (Teacher, 5 years of experience, SST147). This response demonstrates professional maturity in recognising that effective supervision requires flexibility and adaptation, rather than simply expecting pre-service teachers to replicate the supervising teacher's methods.

4. Discussion

This study uniquely captures the perspectives of both supervising teachers and university staff (including tertiary supervisors), creating a holistic understanding of the supervisory relationship. The parallel analysis of these perspectives reveals important alignment and misalignment in how stakeholders perceive support needs. The discussion will begin to answer both research questions by first examining the effectiveness of current support mechanisms as perceived by these key stakeholders, followed by an exploration of potential collaborative approaches to enhance the quality of PEX supervision.

4.1. Current Support Mechanisms for Supervising Teachers

This research shows that supervising teachers reported high levels of confidence in their own capacity to support preservice teachers, with 97% indicating they were either comfortable or very comfortable supervising preservice teachers. From a situated learning perspective, this confidence reflects successful learning through authentic participation in mentoring practices over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From a community of practice perspective, this finding suggests successful legitimate peripheral participation within the mentoring community (Wenger, 1998), where these educators have moved from novice mentors to confident practitioners through engagement with real-world mentoring experiences and professional communities. These educators have moved from novice mentors to confident practitioners.

However, the systemic support gaps identified indicate incomplete community structures that fail to sustain ongoing learning and development essential for situated learning processes. Obstacles to supporting preservice teachers stem from systemic fragmentation, not individual teacher deficiencies. Despite supervising teachers' professional self-assurance, the support they received from both schools and universities varied considerably across contexts. This variance undermines the consistent, authentic participation that situated learning theory identifies as crucial for professional development. The findings signal a need for stronger boundary objects and a more coherent and systematic approach to PEX that creates the conditions necessary for situated learning to occur, as similarly advocated by Hadley et al. (2023), Le Cornu (2010), and S. L. McDonough (2018).

The identification of time constraints as a significant barrier highlights the systemic undervaluation of the supervision role in the national broader education system and limited opportunities for mutual engagement among community members (Wenger, 1998). Without structural recognition of supervision as legitimate professional work requiring dedicated time, the quality of supervision experiences will remain contingent on individual

supervising teachers' goodwill and overtime while the community's capacity to develop and refine its shared repertoire of mentoring practices is compromised. Although this barrier is a longstanding one, having been identified in previous studies (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Andrews et al., 2025), it is timely to revisit this constraint in countries like Australia, where teacher shortages persist. Current systemic barriers (Wenger, 1998) including time constraints, geographical distances, and institutional hierarchies fragment what should be coherent learning communities, with emerging findings continue to highlight the complexity of mentoring relationships and the need for institutional support to enable effective supervision.

Traditionally, many Australian universities have provided in situ support for PEX placements, via scheduled visits. Recently and perhaps propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, more universities have changed this model of support, reduced in-person placement visits, and/or are using technology to facilitate support. Given established findings on the value of triadic relationships between university supervisors, mentor teachers, and preservice teachers (Keogh et al., 2013), this pandemic-induced shift toward remote supervision raises important questions about supervision quality and relationship-building in digital environments. Rather than viewing this shift as merely a temporary adjustment, our findings suggest a need to critically examine how technology-mediated supervision changes community dynamics and the nature of the supervisory relationship and develop new frameworks and approaches (Chilton & McCracken, 2017) that maintain meaningful participation across institutional boundaries for effective digital supervision and support practices.

Professional learning was identified as a key area where both universities and schools could enhance support for supervising teachers and emerged as crucial for building shared repertoire within the mentoring community (Wenger, 1998). The primary areas identified for development included providing feedback, navigating difficult conversations, mentoring skills, and specific strategies for supporting preservice teachers and reflect supervising teachers' need for common tools and practices that transcend individual experience. While recent national guidelines highlight the need for universities to establish clearer expectations and support for supervising teachers (Department of Education, 2025), and previous studies emphasize the importance of reimagining the role of mentor teachers through appropriate professional learning opportunities (Grimmett et al., 2018), our findings go beyond merely affirming these requirements by identifying the specific professional learning needs of 208 supervising teachers and 74 university staff. Importantly, our data reveals implementation barriers that affect supervising teachers nationally and prevent effective community building, mainly by impeding the provision of this support, including time constraints, resource limitations, and inconsistent institutional commitment. Although guidelines establish what should happen, they often fail to acknowledge the practical challenges in delivering appropriate professional learning. The specific professional learning needs identified in our study, particularly around feedback and mentoring, reflect the complex role expectations placed on supervisors as they balance the dual roles of supporter and assessor (S. L. McDonough, 2018), yet current support structures often fail to address these tensions.

The findings also identified that supervising teachers desired support in the form of clearer and more consistent information about placements. This clarity might be particularly important where supervising teachers are working with multiple universities, each of which has variations in terminology, placement durations, and expectations that reflect weak boundary objects (Wenger, 1998) failing to facilitate shared understanding between school and university contexts. The idea of consistency and a common approach have been taken up to some degree through Australian national PEX framework documents

([Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2024](#)) and are discussed further in the next section.

4.2. *Enhancing University–School Collaboration for Quality Professional Experience Supervision*

Enhancing university–school collaboration requires deliberate community-building that addresses the three fundamental elements of communities of practice ([Wenger, 1998](#)). There is a need for a more unified professional discourse around supervision practices. The findings indicate that current fragmentation undermines joint enterprise, as stakeholders operate with misaligned understandings of their shared purpose in supporting preservice teachers' development, leading to a two-pronged approach (1) the practical inclusions, and (2) conceptualisation of placement as a nexus of theory and practice.

This study revealed complementary perspectives from both supervising teachers and university staff on the practical inclusions that could enhance the supervision process. From a supervising teacher perspective, emphasis was placed on the practicalities of the placement. This included building the communication processes with universities, a desire to increase university in-person visitation, increased consistency across university administrative processes—identifying areas of concern around pre-placement inclusive of timely notification, and the provision of clear structures, guidelines, and expectations. University staff similarly emphasised communication as essential to enhancing the supervisory process, along with partnership development and stakeholder participation reflecting recognition that effective joint enterprise requires explicit negotiation of shared purpose among all stakeholders. The findings also suggest that greater emphasis could be placed on the role of tertiary supervisors in enhancing the supervision experience, reflecting [Holmes et al.'s \(2021\)](#) research on the multifaceted nature of the supervisory role in educational contexts. The findings point to an emerging model of shared responsibility for PEX, moving beyond traditional university-led approaches toward more collaborative, partnership-based frameworks where schools and potentially universities co-design and co-deliver PEX programs, as advocated by [Joughin et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Hargreaves \(2019\)](#).

The second overarching finding relates to what the literature has termed, the 'third space' ([Daza et al., 2021](#); [Martin et al., 2011](#); [Morrissey et al., 2024](#)). From a situated learning perspective, this third space represents the authentic context where theoretical knowledge and practical application converge, providing the real-world setting essential for meaningful professional learning. This conceptualization aligns with Community of Practice theory's emphasis on joint enterprise—the shared understanding of what the community is about and what matters. This space is conceptualised as a shared one, both in so far as it represents the point of theory practice nexus, but also in terms of collaboration that is required between universities and school-based staff, in delivering high quality placements.

The key aspect of this spoke to the need for each university to work effectively with their supervising teachers, in a collaborative partnership, that acknowledges the expertise all stakeholders can bring. Situated learning theory explains why such partnerships are essential: authentic learning occurs through participation in real professional practices with experienced practitioners, rather than through isolated theoretical instruction. Developing the practice means co-creating effective boundary objects that facilitate coherent supervision while accommodating local contexts. Professional learning that is collaboratively designed and delivered emerges as a key strategy for enhancing supervision quality. This collaborative approach reflects situated learning principles by embedding learning within authentic professional activities where participants engage with real mentoring challenges.

Building the community requires creating structured opportunities for mutual engagement through. Both supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors valued opportunities for shared learning experiences that bridged the university–school divide, particularly

when facilitated by experienced educators and external experts. These shared experiences exemplify situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation, where less experienced mentors learn alongside more experienced practitioners in authentic professional contexts. This finding aligns with [Kudenko et al. \(2019\)](#), who found that collaborative professional learning models were more effective than traditional approaches in improving teaching practice. Within the professional learning, supervising teachers need to be recognized for the central role they play in delivering high quality placements and have their voice afforded a status that reflects this. To fully deliver on the promise of a third space, universities and schools need to work together to create the shared language and conceptual framework that the sector needs to move forward. This Community of Practice approach moves beyond individual skill development toward systemic transformation of the PEX supervision landscape by creating the authentic learning environments that situated learning theory identifies as fundamental to professional development.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the complex interplay between individual supervisory practice and institutional support structures in shaping the quality of PEX placements. While these supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors generally reported high levels of confidence in their supervisory roles, inconsistent support mechanisms and communication processes create challenges that impact the effectiveness of supervision. Enhancing the quality of PEX supervision requires addressing both individual professional learning needs and systemic barriers to effective collaboration. The findings suggest that effective support for supervising teachers and tertiary supervisors should be characterised by clarity, consistency, timeliness, and responsiveness to individual contexts. While the time required for high-quality supervision remains a perennial structural concern, there are steps that can be taken to ensure that the little time supervising teachers have is effectively used. Universities and schools must work together to establish shared understandings, clear communication channels, and collaborative professional learning opportunities that acknowledge the complex and multifaceted nature of supervision. By strengthening these partnerships and addressing the identified challenges, institutions can create more coherent and supportive environments for PEX supervision, ultimately benefiting preservice teachers and the teaching profession.

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