

Strategies for Effective Mentorship during Teaching Practice: Enhancing Student-Teachers' Professional Growth through Observation, Feedback and Reflection

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Abstract

Teaching practice (practicum) is a pivotal phase in teacher education during which student-teachers translate theoretical learning into classroom practice. High-quality mentorship – characterized by purposeful observation, precise feedback and guided reflection – significantly influences student-teachers' professional growth, self-efficacy and classroom readiness. This paper synthesizes contemporary literature and empirical findings to propose an integrated mentorship framework that places cyclical observation, dialogic feedback and scaffold reflection at the centre of practicum supervision. Drawing on systematic reviews and recent empirical studies, the article identifies features of effective mentor behaviours, common barriers in practicum contexts and evidence-based strategies for mentor training, institutional policy and pedagogical tools such as structured observation instruments, digital feedback platforms and guided reflective protocols. Practical recommendations for teacher education programmes and school mentors are offered among which is that teacher trainers should facilitate collaborative reflection groups where mentees present evidence and receive peer and mentor questions which socializes reflection and deepens insight. The paper further advocates that in any teacher training programme, mentoring should be viewed not as a one-way supervisory process but as a collaborative partnership aimed at continuous learning and professional renewal for both mentor and mentee.

Keywords: mentorship, teaching practice, observation, practicum, student-teachers.

Introduction

Teaching practice is widely held practice in institutions training teachers. It is acknowledged as the crucible where pre-service teachers test, rehearse and refine their instructional repertoires under real classroom conditions (Ebelechukwu & Eruchalu, 2022). The transition from theoretical coursework to enacted classroom teaching is fraught with complexity – contextual variation, classroom management demands, assessment pressures and the emotional labour of teaching - and presents challenges for novices (Korucu-kis, 2021). High quality mentoring during teaching practice alleviates these challenges and accelerates professional growth by supplying targeted support, modelling and formative critique. Recent research confirms that mentoring affects not only short-term teaching performance but also long-term teacher retention and professional identity formation (Ossai & Ramsaroop, 2025; Nair & Borkar, 2023).

Despite broad consensus about mentorship's importance, the ways mentorship is enacted vary considerably across contexts. Observations can be informal and ad-hoc or structured and systematic; feedback can be vague or actionable; reflective activities can be perfunctory or deeply critical. These variations influence whether mentees experience mentorship as enabling or constraining (Arnsby et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shifts to remote and hybrid approaches raise questions about how to ensure mentoring quality in diverse modalities. Recent studies have investigated mentoring conversations, mentor education programmes and the roles of reflection in mediating practicum outcomes, offering evidence-based insights for improving mentorship design (Maundeni & Kahaka, 2022).

This article argues that the triad of purposeful observation, dialogic feedback and scaffolded reflection should be central to practicum mentorship. Each component plays a distinct role: observation generates reliable evidence of teaching behaviour; feedback translates evidence into actionable guidance; reflection supports internalization and professional judgment. Integrated cyclically, these components create a learning loop that helps student-teachers move from surface performance to adaptive expertise (Suphrasri & Chinokul, 2021). The article synthesizes research from 2020 – 2025, outlines strategies for implementing effective mentorship and proposes practical recommendations for mentor training and policy. Key research questions guiding the review are: 1) What features of observation, feedback and reflection are associated with positive practicum outcomes? 2) What barriers prevent effective mentorship during teaching practice? 3) Which strategies and tools have evidence of effectiveness in supporting mentor practice?

Mentorship in teacher education: Definitions and models.

Mentorship during teaching practice is commonly conceptualized as a relational, developmental process whereby an experienced practitioner supports a novice's professional learning (Maundeni & Kahaka, 2022). Contemporary scholarship reframes mentoring from a unidirectional knowledge transfer to a reciprocal and dialogic process that often includes triadic models (mentor, mentee, university tutor) and even broader "triad plus" models that include student voice or school leaders (Arnsby et al., 2023; Biswas, 2024). These newer models emphasize mutual learning, co-reflection and contextual responsiveness. Such conceptual shifts respond to evidence showing that mentoring engage student-teachers as co-constructors of practice rather than passive recipients of expertise (Shi & Liu, 2025).

Systematic reviews since 2020 have highlighted competences associated with effective mentors: pedagogical knowledge, interpersonal sensitivity, capacity to give targeted feedback and an ability to scaffold reflection. Effective mentor education programmes that develop these competences are increasingly recognized critical levers for improving practicum quality (Banihashem et al., 2021).

Theoretical frameworks: Learning, feedback and reflection.

The proposed integrated mentorship framework builds from three theoretical strands. First, constructionist and experiential learning theories (for example, Kolb) frame practicum as cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation; mentored practicum ideally accelerates that cycle. Second, feedback theories

emphasize that effective feedback must be timely, specific and actionable and should consider emotional face-saving dynamics for novices – otherwise, feedback may be discounted or resisted. Third, reflective practice theory (Schon; later critiques and refinements) positions reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as essential for developing professional judgment; though recent work cautions against superficial “tick-box” reflection and advocates for structured reflective prompts and dialogic reflection. These theoretical lenses together justify an observational-feedback-reflection aide as a pedagogically powerful mechanism (Ramadhan & Umamah, 2024; Panadero & Lipnevich, 2022; Gordon, 2025).

Observation: Types, tools and evidence

Observation is the evidentiary backbone of effective mentorship. The literature distinguishes between formative observation (developmental low-stakes) and summative evaluation (high-stakes, accountability-oriented). Formative observation practices that use structured tools (checklists, rubrics, rating scales aligned to standards) and include pre-and post-observation dialogues are associated with greater mentee learning than ad-hoc observation. Observation instruments such as the Danielson Framework, focused observation checklists and category systems (tally charts, rating scales) have been used across programmes to improve shared language and focus. A structured observation helps the mentor and mentee to target specific practices (including questioning, differentiation, assessment for learning) rather than delivering generic commentary (Tunnel, 2024; Knipp, 2023).

Recent field studies (2020 - 2024) show that when observations are paired with guided pre-briefs (where mentee sets focus) and post – observation reflective dialogues, mentees report greater sense of agency and clear instructional improvements. Conversely, research also highlights that poorly timed, infrequent or purely evaluative observation undermines trust and reduces openness to feedback (Topelberg, 2024).

Feedback: Forms and effectiveness

Feedback in practicum is effective when it is specific, anchored in observable behaviours and oriented toward future action (feed forward). Traditional models such as Pendleton’s rules have been critiqued for formulaic application and contemporary research recombinants dialogic feedback – two-way conversations where mentee’s voice, interpretation and goal-setting are central. Empirical studies from 2020 – 2025 emphasize that feedback, which integrates evidence (observation notes, student work), offers actionable suggestions and balances affirmation with targeted critique, produces better instructional change and higher self-efficacy in student-teachers. Critically, emotional and face-saving considerations matter: mentors who frame critique within a supportive relationship and use scaffolding techniques (small, achievable steps) produce more positive outcomes (Wang et al., 2025).

Digital tools have begun to mediate feedback practices – video-based observation platforms, written comment tracking systems and audio feedback allow timely and scalable feedback cycles; early studies suggest that these tools can enhance reflection and make evidence more concrete. However, technology alone is insufficient without mentor skills in interpretation and dialogue use (Buckingham et al., 2023).

Reflection: Depth, scaffolding and outcomes

Reflection is a central mechanism through which observed practice and feedback become internalized professional judgment. But not all reflection is equal. A consistent theme in recent literature is the need to move student-teachers from descriptive logs to critically analytic reflection that interrogates assumptions, students' learning and alternative instructional strategies. Guided reflective protocols, such as focused prompts, structured journals with evidence-based prompts and collaborative reflection groups, can foster deeper engagement. Studies indicate that scaffolded reflection correlates with improved lesson planning, assessment design and adaptive problem solving. However, the literature also warns against performative or compliance-focused reflection, which yields little real learning (Machost & Stains, 2023).

Current state of mentorship practices

Across contexts, mentorship practice during teaching practice displays substantial heterogeneity. In well-resourced programmes, mentoring is formalized with mentors' training, observation schedules and written feedback protocols; in other contexts, mentoring is informal and dependent on goodwill. Systematic reviews and national case studies report that mentor competence in providing formative feedback and facilitating reflection is uneven and that many mentors lack dedicated mentor education. Studies in the 2020 – 2024 period highlight that mentors' professional development improves mentors' enactment and mentees' outcomes (Augusty et al., 2025).

Observations are often under-used as learning tools: some mentors conduct occasional walk-through without structured pre-briefs or post-observation dialogue, limiting their developmental potential. Where observation is structured – using checklists, pre-brief/post-brief routines and video evidence - mentees report clearer understanding of improvement targets and higher confidence (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2024).

Feedback practices and challenges

Feedback is frequently delivered in ways that reduce its efficacy: ill-timed feedback (given days after the lesson), vague generalities (“be more engaging”) and overly evaluative language hinder mentees' uptake. Conversely, high-quality feedback is timely, evidence-based and co-constructed with the mentee, often culminating in specific, measurable goals. Research also indicates the role of emotion: mentees often engage in face-saving strategies when feedback is perceived as threatening, which can blunt learning from critique. Mentor capacity to frame feedback constructively is therefore crucial (Bjorndal, 2020).

Digital platforms (video annotation tools, shared feedback trackers) appear promising for making feedback timely and concrete, enabling mentors to attach time-coded evidence and for mentees to review performances multiple times. Still, equitable access and mentor's skill in using such platforms are practical barriers (Pesina, 2025).

Reflective engagement among student-teachers

Levels of reflective engagement vary widely. When institutions require reflective journals without offering scaffolds, reflections tend to be descriptive and compliance-oriented.

Programmes that scaffold reflection (prompts linked to observed evidence mentor-led reflective seminars or guided reflective instruments) report deeper analytic reflection and better evidence of instructional change. Emerging research emphasizes meta-cognitive awareness and its relation to reflective practice: reflection that explicitly links beliefs, intentions, and observed student's learning leads to more durable professional growth (Ho & Lau, 2025; Li et al., 2024).

Barriers and success factors

Common barriers include lack of mentor's training, time pressure on school mentors, misalignment between university expectations and school practice, and the, sometimes, summative nature of practicum assessment that discourages candid reflection. Success factors include formal mentor education, structured observation instruments, routine collaborative reflection sessions and institutional policies that recognize mentoring workload. Programmes that intentionally cultivate a culture of trust and co-learning achieve better outcomes (Tournier et al., 2023).

Proposed strategies for effective mentorship

Below are actionable, evidence-based strategies derived from the literature to operationalize an integrated mentorship models:

Strategy 1: Structured, learners-centred observation cycles.

- Observations should be designed as cyclical and formative:
- Pre-observation conversation: mentee identifies 1-2 focus areas (instructional objective, behaviour management, questioning). This aligns expectations and supports agency (Renos & Pontillas, 2024).
- Use of focused observation instruments: Short, domain-specific checklists aligned to standards (for example, formative assessment practices, differentiation tactics). These reduce ambiguity and focus feedback (Ling, 2024; Clapp, 2025).
- Post-observation reflective dialogue: Schedule a debrief within 24 – 72 hours that include evidence review (notes, student work, video) and co-constructs improvement steps. Evidence points to timely debriefs as being more actionable (Hu, 2024).

Strategy 2: Dialogic, evidence-based feedback with actionable feedforward.

- Anchor feedback to observed evidence (time-stamped video or specific observation notes) and connect feedback to students' learning outcomes rather than teachers' personality. This fosters objectivity (Gan et al., 2021).
- Use a feed forward orientation: conclude feedback with clear, sequenced next steps (for example, "next lesson, try abc for three lessons; collect students' responses and we will review"). Small, attainable goals increase enactment (Muresan et al., 2023).
- Train mentees in emotionally intelligent feedback delivery – balancing affirmation and critique, using enquiry-based questioning (What were you trying to achieve? What worked? What would you try differently?), and avoiding sharing language. Studies show that this preserves mentee openness (Nigate et al., 2023).

Strategy 3: Scaffolded reflective practice

- Provide structured reflective templates that require evidence citation (What happened, why it happened, how students responded, alternative strategies, and next steps). Templates should prompt meta-cognitive reflection rather than description (Rivas et al., 2022).
- Facilitate collaborative reflection groups (triadic or small groups) where mentees present evidence and receive peer and mentor questions; this socializes reflection and deepens insight (Wang et al., 2025).
- Integrate reflection with assessment: Use reflective evidence as part of formative assessment, not as a summative compliance exercise; this encourages honesty and growth (Ahmed & Mehmetaj, 2023; Parmigiani et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2019).

Strategy 4: Use of technology to make evidence and feedback concrete.

- Adopt video annotation tools and shared feedback trackers to attach time-coded evidence to feedback and reflection: This allows mentees to repeatedly review performance and compare across lessons. Early studies show promises for video-enhanced reflection, given that mentors are trained in its pedagogical use (Liesa et al., 2023; Wachter & Lewalfer, 2023).
- Ensure digital equity and data privacy: Institutions must provide access and guidelines to avoid exacerbating inequities (Bishop et al., 2022; OECD, 2023).

Strategy 5: Mentors' education and work load recognition.

- Offer targeted mentor training (short courses covering observation skills, dialogic feedback, scaffolding reflection and digital tools). Evidence shows mentor professional development improves mentor practices and mentee outcomes (Arnsby et al., 2023).
- Recognize mentoring in workload allegations and performance metrics - mentoring requires time and should not be added as invisible labour. Institutional recognition supports sustainable programme quality (Usanmaz, 2023).

Implications for policy and practice

1. For teacher education institutions:
 - Embed mentor education as a required component of practicum programmes; align mentor competence frameworks to observation and feedback standards (Ossai & Ramsaroop, 2025).
 - Standardize formative observation protocols across placements to create shared language, while allowing contextual adaptation (Kelly et al., 2020; Dutra et al., 2023).
2. For schools and mentors:
 - Create protected time for pre-brief/post-brief. Conversations and reflective seminars; allocate workload recognition for mentoring duties (Francis, 2023).
 - Use evidence-anchored feedback and scaffold reflection as routine practice rather than adhoc extras (Machost & Stains, 2023).
3. For policymakers:
 - Provide funding or incentives for mentor professional development and for technological platforms that support observation and feedback – especially to address equity gaps in under-resourced contexts (Haleem et al., 2022).

Conclusion

An integrated mentorship model – centred on structured observation, dialogic evidence-based feedback and scaffolded reflection – offers a coherent, research-grounded approach to enhancing student-teachers' professional growth during teaching practice. The literature from 2020 – 2025 underscore that the power of mentorship lies not in isolated acts of advice but in iterative cycles where evidence is gathered, interpreted collaboratively, and translated into reflective action. Institutional investment in mentor education, workload recognition and practical tools (observation instruments, video platforms, reflective protocols) is central to making high-quality mentorship scalable and sustainable. Future research should focus on rigorous evaluations of integrated mentorship interventions across diverse contexts, longitudinal impacts on teacher retention and student learning and the equitable implementation of digital tools. The ultimate measure of success will be whether student-teachers leave practicum not only with a repertoire of techniques but with the professional judgment and reflective habits to adapt teaching effectively to complex classroom realities.

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