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Barriers to Preservice Teachers' Engagement During Professional Experience Placement Through the Lens of Industry Partners

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Abstract

Professional experience placements are fundamental to the preparation of preservice teachers. The purpose of this pilot study is to explore the barriers supervising teacher experience in the classroom to offer quality guidance to preserve teachers' learning during professional experience. The sociocultural theoretical framing of the study supports a deeper understanding of the data collected from 99 participants, supervising teachers and placement coordinators who participated in this qualitative study. Data were collected via an online Qualtrics survey. Four key barriers to effective placement engagement were identified through thematic analysis: (1) delays, confusion or uncertainties linked to placement documentation and specific requirements for placement guidance; (2) the timing, frequency and type of communication between the tertiary Professional Experience Liaison Officers and placement coordinators/supervising teachers; (3) preservice teachers' pedagogical preparedness and confidence with content; and (4) contextual factors, including time constraints and additional workload, that affect the recruitment and retention of experienced supervising teachers. These barriers were perceived as not only reducing the overall quality of well-structured professional experience but also affecting the relationships between supervising teachers and preservice teachers. The findings offer insights for universities and industry partners to improve support, structure, communication, and feedback during professional experience placements with a focus on preservice teachers' learning outcomes.

Keywords: professional experience mentors; supervising teachers; professional experience support; professional experience barriers; feedback engagement; placement documentation

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1. Introduction

Empirical studies have shown that preservice teachers' engagement capacity is strongly related to satisfactory outcomes during placement (Du Plessis & Razmjoee, 2025; Fairbrother et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022). Research has further claimed that preservice teachers' engagement improves when they feel that supervising teachers are responsive to their learning and teaching needs (Leenknecht et al., 2017). In turn, this perception of being heard and noticed promotes their self-efficacy and confidence (Moulding et al., 2014) in exploring new teaching strategies and practices. The quality of preservice teachers' placement experiences is intertwined with the challenges faced by their supervising teachers or placement coordinators. McNeilly et al. (2022) revealed the difficulties that supervising teachers experience in effectively guiding and providing targeted feedback to positively influence preservice teachers' preparedness to take feedback on board. Responsibilities such as balancing the needs of preservice teachers with the requirements of

the curriculum within a limited time often restrict supervising teachers' ability to fully support preservice teachers in the classroom. According to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2015, p. 4), supervising teacher responsibilities are related to 'successful classroom teaching and include coaching, assessment, professional communication and the provision of feedback based on evidence'. Likewise, the demands on supervising teachers regarding their own regular teaching responsibilities in addition to ensuring well-structured professional learning for preservice teachers often lead to high levels of stress and feelings of burnout (Bäcklund et al., 2022). Supervising teachers frequently report feeling overwhelmed by the increased workload related to the supervision of preservice teacher placements. As a result, supervising a preservice teacher has the potential to negatively affect their capacity to sustain high-quality teaching practice as well as maintain high-quality support and feedback to preservice teachers (Bäcklund et al., 2022; Hoben, 2021). The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG, 2014) suggested clear guidelines to ensure that 'school leaders actively lead the integration of pre-service teachers in the activities and culture of their school', as stated in recommendation 24 (p. xiv). In addition, evidence has suggested that providing supervising teachers with dedicated and structured time during placement improves the quality of supervising and supports supervising teachers' wellbeing by reducing workload pressure (Byth, 2024). The researchers of this paper, guided by Vygotskian sociocultural theory (1978), argued that preservice teachers' zone of proximal development (ZPD) and supervising teachers' awareness of the ZPD could pose barriers to their careful guidance of preservice teachers' learning during their placement.

The effective supervision of preservice teachers is built on active collaboration among higher education providers (HEPs), school leaders, supervising teachers and preservice teachers within the context of the placement environment, for example, the integration of theory and practice through better partnerships between HEP and schools (TEMAG, 2014, p. 56). First, 'incentivising collaboration and the creation of communities of practice' (TEEP, 2023, p. 13), supervision or mentoring is a shared and collaborative process that 'can help teachers keep their practice up to date and promote collaboration and shared learning' (TEMAG, 2014, p. 44). The researchers of this paper further argued that the delicate professional relationship between the supervising teacher and the preservice teacher is deeply embedded in a tension discourse between the knowledgeable other role and the learner, which is a fluent spatial exchange of knowledge. In a rapidly changing educational landscape, preservice teachers may be the bearer of new knowledge, teaching strategies and a sense of pedagogical mobility and changes, while supervising teachers are the knowledgeable other in terms of context-consciousness and applied pedagogical content knowledge. However, they often see themselves as experts and preservice teachers as novices (Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017). Such relationships can often lead to limited professional learning for preservice teachers (Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017), which may stem from the low preparation of supervising teachers in how to support preservice teachers (Hoffman et al., 2015). According to the Teacher Education Expert Panel review (TEEP, 2023, p. 75):

> . . .to deliver high-quality practical experience placements, including the provision of professional learning, funding and resources. There is often a focus on the alignment between Initial Teacher Education [ITE] course content and practical experience placements. This aims to strengthen the link between theory, research and practice to enhance the effectiveness of ITE.

The Strong Beginnings report (TEEP, 2023) review further suggested 'ineffective relationships between providers, schools, Early Childhood centres and school systems', as evidenced by 'last-minute placement arrangement with minimal time for ITE student

preparation' and 'insufficient support for ITE students. Without specific preparation, they may repeat supervisory practices they previously experienced, and this ineffective cycle will continue (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). In addition, supervising teachers reported that a lack of reciprocal engagement is linked to unmotivated preservice teachers, their indifference to feedback and their inability to develop relationships (Young & MacPhail, 2016).

Second, HEPs and schools/centres need to focus on effective collaboration, individually and in partnership, to support preservice teachers (de Oliveira & Jones, 2024). Partnerships are essential to ensure that preservice teachers receive cohesive and consistent guidance and support during their placement (AITSL, 2024, p. 1). Nonetheless, unclear guidelines and insufficient communication often restrict role clarity and active engagement in regular and ongoing discussions (Young & MacPhail, 2016). Concerns and challenges have shown that new supervising teachers feel unprepared to take on mentoring responsibilities due to the teacher education institutions having limited direct contact with them and that most of the correspondence is conducted with school principals (Young & MacPhail, 2016). Moreover, a lack of shared expectations between placement schools/centres and HEPs creates confusion and tension, which reduces the quality of placement supervision (Mpate, 2024). In accordance with the purpose of this study to develop a deeper understanding of professional experience learning from the perspectives of supervising teachers, the theoretical framing of the study is deeply embedded in Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theories, which guide interpretation of how supervising teachers understand and support preservice teachers' learning during their placements.

Theoretical Framing

This study is framed on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-interdependence theory, which highlights the meaning and effect of positive interpersonal relationships on the teaching and learning space as support for the learning effect. Vygotsky's theory offers a framework for an in-depth understanding of the meaning of professional experience in the teaching and learning space. Research has shown the effect of professional interrelationships on outcomes and performance during professional learning (Du Plessis et al., 2025). In this study, we argue that supervising teachers' engagement and role as the more knowledgeable other (MKO) significantly influence socio-interdependent relationships. The theoretical framing stimulates awareness of preservice teachers' journey in becoming teachers and supervising teachers' awareness of their point of development. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the impact of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) on the development of skills and learning. In this study, the authors argue that an awareness of, and a focus on, the ZPD of preservice teachers linked to professional experience placements impact supervision strategies and improve their teaching and classroom practices. The sociocultural theory and the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) support an in-depth understanding of where the preservice teacher is in relation to linking theory and practice and successfully engaging with applied knowledge. Supervising teachers' integration of the ZPD concept in a specific context offers a sound foundation for preservice teachers to scaffold their learning during placement. It frames and strengthens targeted feedback while ensuring fair assessment and offering conceptual coherence for professional experience learning. The theoretical framing of the study addresses and frames the current challenges supervising teachers expressed regarding professional experience learning. The study frames the need for careful guidance and scaffolded learning for preservice teachers during their placement. Vygotsky's (1978) social-constructivist theory allows for the development of a deeper understanding of the complex learning and teaching environment that develops because of the pre-service teacher as a guest in the supervising teacher's classroom. The framing of this research project using Vygotsky's theory shows the intention to reflect

on the realities of professional experience and the specific needs of supervising teachers and preservice teachers. Identifying the preservice teachers' ZPD is framed by Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on recognising the point of learning and the needs for learning while focusing on the nature of learning challenges. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory further highlights how a knowledgeable adult guides knowledge construction and—in this study—the development of skills to engage in a context-conscious application of theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts. This study underlines the need to understand the lived meaning of being a pre-service teacher and the student in the classroom, with a supervising teacher playing the role of the expected MKO in the classroom.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

As a regional university with a large cohort of preservice teachers across Australia enrolled in studying their units through an online mode, quality support for preservice teachers as well as industry partners is a priority. After receiving ethical approval, participants were purposively sampled to capture perspectives from education partners involved in professional experience placements: supervising teachers and placement coordinators. Eligible participants were those employed as supervising teachers or placement coordinators at schools/centres that had engaged in teacher education placement partnerships with a higher education provider between 2023 and 2024. Information about the study and link to the survey were sent to the official email addresses of partnering schools and centres through the university's central system. They included a participant information sheet and a link to the online survey, which also contained the consent form required for participation. Participants completed the survey through Qualtrics. The duration of these placements typically ranged from 15 to 20 days. A total of 99 staff members (90 female, 9 male) in various placement school roles participated in this study. The largest groups were experienced teachers (23.2%), proficient teachers (17.2%) and those classified as 'others' (18.2%). Principals made up 9.1% of the sample, while heads of departments comprised 7.1% of the staff. The smaller groups included deputy principals, lead teachers, coordinators and mentors. The participants were aged between 35 and 54 years. The majority (64.6%, $n = 64$) reported holding a bachelor's degree. The diversity of roles and levels of experience among participants ensured that a wide range of perspectives were obtained from industry partners involved in placement supervision. These varied views supported the validity of the findings and enhanced a deeper understanding of the barriers.

The online survey, as part of a large-scale project, aimed to identify the key challenges faced by placement coordinators and supervising teachers when engaging in preservice teachers' professional experience placements and development as teachers. The focus in this study is reflected in the main research question: *What are the greatest challenges managed and supervised by schools/centres as industry partners in the context of recent professional experience placements?* The survey took approximately 10 min to complete.

2.2. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed manually using inductive and thematic coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Both authors read through the entire data set to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' reflections. The survey responses were tabled through thematic analysis of responses to specific questions using codes. The initial coding was conducted line by line, identifying key phrases and concepts, which were then assigned descriptive codes. Through iterative reading of the responses, similar codes were grouped into categories. The various categories were further refined into overarching themes and sub-themes. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the coding, both authors

independently coded a subset of the data and discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained, and themes were checked against the raw data to retain participants' voices and ensure credibility. Some direct passages from the survey are presented in the Results section to illustrate participants' authentic perspectives.

3. Results

The findings of this study highlight the key barriers that school staff members perceive during placement engagement, with each significantly affecting the overall quality of their experience:

a. Communication and documentation shared between the HEP and the industry partner prior to preservice teachers' arrival:
   - Timing of receiving documentation;
   - Clarity and accessibility of placement documentation.

b. Effectiveness of the communication between Professional Experience Liaison Officers (PELOs) and the school in professional experience placements:
   - Timing of PELOs' communication with the school;
   - Modes of PELOs–school communication.

c. Preservice teachers' capacity to meet placement demands:
   - Preservice teachers' preparedness for placement;
   - Heavy workload for preservice teachers.

d. Sustainability of the supervising teacher workforce:
   - Recruitment and retention of supervising teachers for placement engagement;
   - Supervising teachers' time constraints affect quality feedback;
   - Capacity building to support supervising teachers.

In the following subsection, each main theme is presented alongside its subthemes, with an emphasis on the key findings that emerged from the participants' perspectives.

3.1. Office for Professional Learning (OPL) Communication and Documentation Prior to Preservice Teachers' Arrival

3.1.1. Timing of Receiving Documentation

The findings show that one of the major challenges the participants encountered during professional experience placement planning and organisation was the timely receipt of placement-related documents. Several staff members stated that they received the required information only a few days before the beginning of the placement or, in some cases, after the preservice teachers had arrived, although they preferred receiving the documentation in advance to ensure well-structured placements. This challenge is often a result of last-minute placement arrangements, which limit supervisors' ability to provide adequate preparation. According to a head of department, 'This was a very last-minute placement. The package was sent quickly, but I didn't have a lot of time between when I got the package and the start of placement' (P6). Similarly, another head of department revealed, 'Although documents were sent prior to the placement, they were received just before the school holidays, and the placement began immediately after the holidays' (P14). Overall, the findings demonstrate that the delay in receiving placement-related information limited the capacity of school staff to effectively arrange the teaching context for preservice teachers.

3.1.2. Clarity and Accessibility of Placement Documentation

Some participants reported that placement documentation was overly detailed, occasionally making it difficult to understand. One proficient teacher stated, 'Some documents were wordy, and I had to sift through them to fully understand the expectations. This was my first time supervising in a while, and things have changed quite a bit. Some information was difficult to locate' (P16). Similarly, another proficient teacher remarked, 'I was somewhat confused by the number of lessons the preservice teacher was required to complete at a minimum and the amount of feedback I needed to provide' (P60).

Supervising teachers consistently emphasised the need for clear expectations and structured communication from universities. Many felt that clearer guidance on placement requirements would improve their ability to support preservice teachers effectively. One proficient teacher expressed, 'My needs were to have a clear document of things students should be doing/displaying in order to have them pass the placement, as I was very unsure for a while if she should have passed or not' (P14). One assistant principal suggested improving the guidance on additional resources, particularly for new supervising teachers: 'Supervising teachers are able to refer to the documents in order to support the placement. Further clarification can be found on the University of New England, UNE website, but this might need to be pointed out a little clearer to new Supervising Teachers (STs)' (P3).

In addition, experienced teachers who supervised preservice teachers explained that documents were missing or incomplete and that they required repeated follow-ups to access details. One year-level head reported, 'There were multiple times staff have had to follow up as to why we haven't received them' (P15). One experienced teacher highlighted the issue of inconsistent document versions and stated, 'The Prac student and I had two different versions of some documents—better version control is needed' (P16). Overall, the findings emphasise the need for clear and brief documentation, as a lack of clarity or ambiguous content can confuse supervising teachers and limit their ability to provide effective teaching support.

3.2. Effectiveness of PELOs–School Communication in Professional Experience Placements

3.2.1. Timing of the Communication Between PELOs and Schools/Centres

The findings show that clear communication prior to placement was beneficial. One head of department said, 'I think an email introducing themselves and outlining their role and contact details would be useful prior to the placement' (P9). Thirty participants reported that the PELOs contacted them early in their placement. Some believed that visits from university liaison officers were sometimes scheduled too early, which made it difficult to accurately identify ongoing issues, as initial difficulties were often caused by the adjustment period. However, the value and effect of visits or engagements too late during the placement are also a concern because of the insufficient change they can make in preservice strategies and practices. One head of department remarked, 'One of the PELOs was just as perplexed as I was about the second visit so early in the practicum. I couldn't understand why they were there when I hadn't requested help, and the practicum student had barely begun to teach' (P5). By contrast, 37 respondents specified that PELO communication and feedback occurred at the midpoint of the placement. One teacher placement coordinator suggested that mid-placement communication could provide a clearer picture of a student's progress, stating, 'Perhaps having some sort of communication halfway through the placement about how the placement is progressing could be helpful to discuss whether it is on track or to flag any issues' (P75). In addition, 26 participants reported that the PELO visited their classes during the final stage or the last week of the placement. One participant noted that late-stage communication was less effective: 'The

PELO visit happened in the last week of placement, at which point it was too late to make meaningful changes or provide additional support' (P33).

Moreover, regular communication was reported as a key factor. The participants noted that while minimal contact is needed for high-performing preservice teachers, more university involvement is required when performance concerns arise. One participant said, 'It is fine if the student is travelling well, but if there is doubt about their performance, it would be expected that consistent contact is necessary' (P7). Overall, these findings suggest that mid-placement communication appears to provide more effective opportunities for intervention.

3.2.2. Modes of PELO–School Communication

Several participants indicated that communication channels play a significant role in the placement process. Among the participants, 36 reported having contact with the PELO via email, while 31 revealed that communication occurred through face-to-face visits. Moreover, 25 participants received support from PELOs through phone calls. The majority of the participants preferred face-to-face communication or Zoom meetings to phone calls or emails. This indicates the importance of in-person engagement, despite its logistical challenges. One participant explained, 'Support from the university often happens through phone calls or lesson observation via Zoom. Where possible, it would be best to have a face-to-face observation take place. I also feel that one check-in phone call isn't enough' (P82). Similarly, one director and one early childhood teacher noted that face-to-face visits helped them 'understand the requirements to best support the student' (P35). Another emphasised that PELOs should be 'easily accessible but not hovering' (P17), which highlights the need for a balanced level of involvement. Some participants suggested a structured approach to these proactive interactions. For instance, one proficient teacher said, 'A phone call with the student and one with the teacher (separately) at the start of the placement, and then a visit towards the middle or end of the placement' (P12) can develop a sense of collaboration and community of practice. Overall, the findings suggest that despite the use of different ways of communication, in-person and virtual meetings are usually preferred to provide clearer guidance and stronger support for both supervising teachers and preservice teachers.

3.3. Preservice Teachers' Capacity to Meet Placement Demands

3.3.1. Preservice Teachers' Preparedness for Placement

The participants stated their concerns regarding preservice teachers' understanding of placement expectations and thorough study of placement documents available, as well as their familiarisation with specific requirements, tasks and the school context before the placement begins. One proficient teacher lamented, 'The student teacher had no idea what to expect from her placement. But when I explained what would happen during the practicum (e.g., observe, start to introduce lessons and then slowly take on more responsibility), she burst into tears and said she didn't know anything about it' (P21). Similarly, one school coordinator stressed, 'It should not be up to the school to teach the student what the university requirements for the placement are' (P85). These reflections highlight that the unpreparedness of preservice teachers for their placement not only puts pressure on school staff but also affects the overall quality of the placement experience and how soon the preservice teacher adjusts and develops during a placement. Some participants suggested possible solutions to improve preservice teachers' readiness. For instance, one proficient teacher proposed, 'I don't think it can be improved except perhaps to offer student teachers a bit of insight into what will happen during the practicum. Perhaps you could even have a willing supervising teacher come to talk to students and

provide face-to-face advice' (P25). Another experienced teacher said, 'Perhaps a short course on what to expect during your practicum would help' (P21).

Participating teachers also emphasised the importance of preservice teachers having essential skills, such as a clear understanding of the syllabus, the ability to take notes during observations and familiarity with the basic lesson plan format. Moreover, the participants reported that preservice teachers lacked confidence in specific subjects, particularly mathematics and English, despite having frequent opportunities to teach them. The teachers also identified classroom management and the use of differentiation strategies—especially at the high school level—as areas in which preservice teachers demonstrated limited confidence. One experienced teacher noted that preservice teachers often had theoretical knowledge of classroom management but questioned, 'When theory doesn't work in practice, how can they work through this?' (P8). Supervising teachers also emphasised the importance of constructive feedback on preservice teachers' performance but noted that their feedback was sometimes ignored by preservice teachers. One highly accomplished teacher said, 'I've had some pre-service teachers who think that they know everything and are not able to see the help we're trying to give them' (P10). Overall, these findings suggest that inadequate preparation about university requirements, teaching knowledge and inattention to feedback may limit preservice teachers' ability to settle successfully into their placements.

3.3.2. Heavy Workload for Preservice Teachers

Several participants mentioned that preservice teachers face high workload demands during their placements due to the combined requirements of teaching responsibilities and university assessments. They further noted that this pressure negatively affected the students themselves and their supervising staff. One proficient teacher explained, 'I'm aware that the student placed at our school did not feel supported by the university during her placement and was very overwhelmed. Having a student be required to submit assessments that form a large part of their final grade while trying to complete a placement is unrealistic. She was overwhelmed, and the stress this places on her had a flow-on effect on both the staff who were trying to support her and the students she was trying to teach' (P61). This concern was echoed by an experienced teacher who stated, 'The workload was just too much. My preservice teacher struggled to keep up with planning, teaching and meeting assessment deadlines, which really affected her confidence and made it harder for her to focus on her performance in the classroom' (P47). In general, the findings indicate that simultaneous teaching and assessment responsibilities led to significant stress for preservice teachers, which, in turn, affected their ability to engage effectively in the placement and those supporting them.

3.4. Sustainability of Supervising Teacher Workforce

3.4.1. Recruitment and Retention of Supervising Teachers for Placement Engagement

Recruiting and retaining suitable supervising teachers for placements was a key challenge identified by the participants. One principal highlighted the difficulty of 'finding teachers to cover the additional release time required for lesson observations' (P27). Another participant noted the challenge of 'attracting supervising staff, as the quality of students on placement may sometimes fall below expectations, and once staff have had negative experiences, they are reluctant to participate' (P55). Furthermore, the findings reveal that some schools and centres experienced the loss of supervising teachers in various ways during placement periods. According to one principal, 'It can be challenging to support students when our own educators are absent due to illness, and securing casual replacements is difficult' (P44). Similarly, a centre director cited the 'loss of a staff member' as a significant challenge (P11). One proficient teacher also mentioned the extreme case

of 'placement cessation due to a death in service' (P30). Overall, these challenges underscore the struggle to recruit and retain supervising teachers, which affects the quality and continuity of placement experiences for preservice teachers.

3.4.2. Supervising Teachers' Time Constraints Affect Feedback

Several teachers noted that finding time for lesson planning and feedback sessions with preservice teachers was a key issue, particularly when managing students with high support needs who demanded substantial staff attention. One supervising teacher explained, 'The classroom teacher does not get any extra allocated time to support the student in discussing future lessons, providing feedback or writing reports. Although my student was very helpful, teaching already consumes most of my spare time, so I struggled with the extra workload of having a practicum student. As a result, I would not take on another student unless I was given an extra 2–3 h per week off class to provide this support' (P37).

In addition, some participants mentioned the limited time available to complete the paperwork required by higher education providers to report preservice performance during placements. One assistant principal remarked, 'The report requirements and the time involved were unreasonable for supervising teachers' (P18). One proficient teacher suggested that 'making paperwork easier to complete and submit, such as providing digital files and an upload option rather than requiring printing and scanning, would significantly improve the efficiency of supervising teachers' (P16). Overall, the findings reveal the challenges in recruiting and retaining supervising teachers, time constraints and additional administrative tasks linked to supervising a preservice teacher. The teachers emphasised the need for more planning time and simplified paperwork to improve support for practicum students.

3.4.3. Capacity Building to Support Supervising Teachers

The participants pointed out that they need to engage in capacity-building opportunities to enhance their ability to effectively support preservice teachers (P9). Specifically, they highlighted the need to develop skills to understand the diverse needs of preservice teachers at various stages of their teacher training (P7) and how to apply the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the graduate level as criteria for assessing preservice teachers' performance in school and classroom contexts (P14). In addition, the participants suggested practical resources, such as an 'FAQ [Frequently Asked Questions] guide' to support supervising teachers in their role (P9).

4. Discussion

This pilot study investigated the challenges faced by schools/centres as industry partners when collaborating with higher education providers to 'deliver integrated and structured professional experience' during placements for preservice teachers (TEMAG, 2014, p. xiv). Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-interdependence and social constructivist perspectives, the findings of this study highlight how collaborative relationships and communication between HEPs and industry partners shape the quality of learning environments for preservice teachers.

The first finding of this study indicates that the perception of placement coordinators and supervising teachers of a well-structured placement is influenced by early communication between the HEPs and industry partners. The delayed receipt of documentation makes it difficult to organise well-structured and integrated placements, as suggested in policy documents (TEMAG, 2014; TEEP, 2023; Quality Initial Teacher Education Review [QITE], 2021). The specific requirements for placement units and the context-conscious integration

in a unique teaching context and resources require in-depth discussions and considerations. This finding is consistent with prior research about timely communication and its effect on the vulnerability and confidence of pre-service teachers during placements (Carroll et al., 2023; Du Plessis et al., 2025). Although this finding emphasises the importance of timely delivery, the content and format of placement documentation are equally vital. A lack of clear guidance and expectations, as well as missing or incomplete documents from HEPs, make the interpretation of information difficult, particularly for first-time supervising teachers. Our finding shows that ambiguous content often creates a feeling of uncertainty and limits supervising teachers' ability to provide effective support for preservice teachers. This is in accordance with prior studies suggesting the importance of clarity and accessibility of information in successful placement school–university partnerships (Du Plessis & Razmjoee, 2025; Young & MacPhail, 2016). From a Vygotskian perspective, early and clear communication functions as a scaffold that allows supervising teachers as the more knowledgeable others (MKO), to guide preservice teachers effectively within their zone of proximal development. When communication is delayed or unclear, this scaffolding process is disrupted and diminishes the social foundation required for effective learning. We suggest that HEPs consistently review and update placement documentation and simplify their guidance while including all important information. Moreover, establishing standard timelines for sending documents can help better prepare supervising teachers and enhance the overall quality of the preservice teacher placement experience.

The second finding highlights that clear and proactive communication, along with the sharing of feedback is beneficial for preservice teachers. The value of this communication and feedback is closely linked to clarity regarding expectations and requirements for schools and higher education providers. The quality communication between PELOs and placement coordinators even before a placement begins plays a significant role. Carroll et al. (2023) demonstrated that clear and open communication can address any possible confusion, set expectations, clarify roles and inform supervising teachers about the support PELOs can offer when required. In addition, the current study emphasises the optimal *timing* of PELO visits. While mid-placement communication was reported to be a more effective opportunity for intervention, initial visits and late-stage visits were found to be less effective. The participants reflected that initial problems at the early stage of placement were often temporary and did not necessarily reflect longer-term concerns. Conversely, visits that occur at the late stage of placement could leave supervising teachers and preservice teachers feeling unsupported due to the limited time available to address issues and provide constructive feedback. We also found that the *method* of communication is just as important as the timing of PELO visits. Although corresponding via email and phone calls remained common, the participants preferred face-to-face communication or virtual meetings. These forms of communication were perceived to increase a stronger sense of collaboration and provide opportunities for a deeper understanding of preservice teachers' needs. In addition, the participants considered that the *frequency* of communication should be tailored to preservice teacher performance. Minimal contact might be sufficient when preservice teachers are 'travelling well' (P7). However, more communication is critical when performance issues arise. As a result, the participants valued PELOs who were 'accessible but not hovering' (P17). This finding suggests that PELOs need to adjust their involvement to avoid being either too controlling or neglectful of the needs of both preservice teachers and supervising teachers. Therefore, the provision of planned but flexible communication strategies allows supervising teachers to focus on mentoring preservice teachers rather than handling procedural challenges. This aligns with Vygotsky's idea that learning is socially mediated through interaction and dialogue. The adaptive communication described by participants reflects the dynamic nature of scaffolding, where

the MKO adjusts support according to the learner's level of competence within the ZPD. Such responsive collaboration reinforces the social interdependence essential for effective professional learning.

The third finding of the study shows that supervising teachers experienced additional pressure when their preservice teachers demonstrated limited understanding of placement expectations, had insufficient pedagogical readiness, lacked confidence in core teaching skills and were reluctant to use constructive feedback. According to the TEEP (2023, p. 72) review:

> Principals reported, in focus groups, that they do not always have adequate control over the capability of supervising teachers and are limited to those who can volunteer time. Processes for selecting mentors may be ad hoc and unstructured…

In addition, preservice teachers' difficulty in balancing teaching responsibilities and university assessments negatively affected supervising teachers' engagement. This finding highlights the importance of conducting pre-placement courses or workshops, delivered either in-person or online, to familiarise preservice teachers with OPL documentation, clarify placement expectations and address their inquiries (Du Plessis & Razmjoee, 2025). Such preparation can not only help preservice teachers settle successfully into their placement but also reduce the burden on supervising teachers and improve the overall quality of professional experiences. This finding can also be interpreted through Vygotsky's framework, which emphasises that learning is most effective when careful guidance aligns with the learner's developmental readiness. Pre-placement preparation helps preservice teachers enter the placement with the foundational skills needed to benefit from mentoring within their ZPD and reinforces the relationship between supervising teachers and preservice teachers.

The fourth finding indicates that recruiting and retaining supervising teachers are affected by interconnected factors, such as time constraints and the need for continuing capacity building. However, AITSL (2015, p. 2) identified that the 'important ingredient of success in professional experience is the contribution of the supervising teacher'. Planning lessons, giving constructive feedback and completing the paperwork required by the higher education provider while simultaneously conducting existing teaching responsibilities within limited timeframes made some participating teachers feel that supervising was unsustainable. Moreover, unexpected teacher absences due to illness, staff changes or sudden crises not only affect the learning of preservice teachers but also add more pressure on placement school coordinators to find replacements quickly. To sustain a strong supervising teacher workforce, effective actions are required at several levels. First, policy makers, HEPs and placement school coordinators need to collaboratively address the issues, such as those identified here, that make teachers demotivate themselves from taking supervisory roles. Second, the provision of targeted professional learning equips supervising teachers to strengthen their ability to conduct high-quality mentoring and assessments. However, without allocating proper funding, no real difference will happen to support the development of future teachers.

The findings of this study show that most of the participants were aged 35–54, while only a few were relatively young (aged 25–34, $n = 12$) and new to supervising, which limits the insights that could be obtained from less experienced supervising teachers engaged in professional learning experience. While this study focused on identifying barriers from the perspective of industry partners, future research could compare perspectives across participant groups to explore how different professional backgrounds shape experiences and engagement during professional experience placements.

5. Conclusions

The researchers conclude with a quote from the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review [QITE] (2021, p. 59): 'School–higher education provider partnerships should be used not only to facilitate professional experience. They should also be used to bridge the gap between theory and practice and connect teachers and academic staff in a meaningful way'.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

APST	Australian Professional Standards for Teachers
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
HEP	Higher Education Provider
PELOs	Professional Experience Liaison Officers
OPL	Office for Professional Learning

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