

Exploring Student Teachers' Professional Development during Teaching Practice in an ODeL College in South Africa

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Abstract: This study explores student teachers' professional development during teaching practice supervision at schools. Their professional development is important for enhancing student outcomes, and they need to continuously update their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. The participants consisted of ten B.Ed. 4th-year and PGCE students from an ODeL College of Education in South Africa. In this single case study, the researchers chose a qualitative exploratory approach, underpinned by Hudson's Five-Factor Mentor Model as the theoretical framework. Microsoft Teams was used for the semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that student teachers were exposed to real-life working conditions. Mentors were instrumental in improving their professional capabilities through exposure to professional development practices. Furthermore, the student teachers gained practical strategies to manage classrooms effectively. This study supports the continuous professional development of student teachers through mentoring programmes and a collaborative-oriented approach with all stakeholders in the work-integrated learning environment. Future research may explore ways to address the challenges of supervising large student cohorts.

Keywords: Professional development, student teachers, teaching practice, mentoring, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Globally, countries allocate funds as part of their education budgets to develop the professional competence of teachers (Ackah & Udah, 2021). Consequently, successful professional development (PD) is viewed as structured professional learning that transforms teacher practices and enhances student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Furthermore, integrating continuing teacher professional development (CTPD) into PD contributes directly to the formation of competent, reflective practitioners (Sugrue et al., 2017), educational growth (Bali & Caines, 2018), and career learning (Kim & Kim, 2018). As PD for academics has become an essential aspect of the effectiveness of higher education institutions (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2019), one hallmark of instructional development in education is the establishment of student teaching placements in schools, where students interact with learners under the supervision of mentor teachers. In this context, mentoring has developed effectively as a global partnership between institutions of higher learning and schools (Allen et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Rachamim & Orland-Barak, 2018). Mukeredzi (2017) maintained that mentoring is an effective learning catalyst through self-introspection, as students develop self-recognition within the learning environment.

In this global context, mentoring is a partnership between a student teacher and an experienced in-service teacher. This mentorship provides student teachers with greater opportunities to engage in instructional practices in their day-to-day teaching, gain exposure to their new work environments, and direct their professional growth (Barrera et al., 2010). Within such relationships or partnerships, student teachers receive in-service training and support that help them build confidence, solve

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problems, and apply 21st-century skills and competencies, thereby influencing learners (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018; Artman & Crow, 2022). Furthermore, the mentor teacher offers practical assistance, including training the new student teacher, as well as personal and professional guidance, including emotional support to improve the student teacher's self-esteem and foster trust. Ben-Amran and Davidovitch (2024) asserted that professional guidance involves nurturing the mentee's professional identity, instruction in teaching methodologies, classroom management, and the development of a professional mindset. As established above, mentor teachers play a crucial role in mentoring student teachers during teaching practice placements.

Recent studies have extended the global discussion into digital and online contexts, illustrating how work-integrated learning (WIL) and evaluations of online teaching practices influence student teachers' learning in increasingly technology-mediated environments (Martin et al., 2019; Almodaires et al., 2021; Vidergor, 2023). While these studies highlight the potential of online supervision, they also identify gaps in the effectiveness and consistency of professional development (PD) within virtual or distance-based teacher education programmes. Recent studies have indicated that discussions surrounding digital and online contexts are related to online teaching practice evaluations as WIL in a teacher education context (Martin et al., 2019; Almodaires et al., 2021). Research on PD enhancement during online teaching practice has recently indicated that teachers' online learning practices were influenced as part of WIL (Vidergor, 2023). It is argued that beginner student teachers' knowledge and skills are insufficient for classroom practice, but Continuing Professional Development (CTPD) can be applied as a supportive mechanism in modern teacher education.

Within the South African context, professional development (PD) could enhance student teachers' skills and knowledge to meet the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) and the expectations of institutions' teacher education programmes (Salifu et al., 2024). As a requirement of MRTEQ (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2015, p. 6), all teacher qualifications should include PD, as stipulated: "for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes that accredited institutions must use in order to develop programmes leading to teacher education qualifications."

This single case study focused on how students were supported in professional development within an open distance learning (ODEL) context. At the onset of this article, studies were primarily conducted face-to-face and in a blended learning mode. However, little has been reported on mentoring as a strategy for student teachers' PD in an ODeL context. This phenomenon has prompted researchers to explore PD as part of work-integrated learning (WIL) in an open-distance learning context.

Within the South African context, particularly in open distance e-learning (ODEL), these global concerns take on additional complexity. This single case study investigated how student teachers were supported in their professional development at Africa's largest ODeL university. Historically, research on teaching practice in South Africa has focused on face-to-face or blended learning models; however, limited empirical evidence exists on mentoring as a professional development (PD) strategy within a fully ODeL framework. As teaching practice contributes 20% of the TP module mark, alongside an 80% portfolio of evidence, insufficient supervision challenges both the integrity of assessment and the quality of teacher preparation. Although DHET guidelines allow for face-to-face or online classroom observations (e.g., via Microsoft Teams), the operational realities of ODeL continue to complicate the provision of consistent, meaningful mentoring within work-integrated learning (WIL).

Despite the centrality of mentoring and supervision to student teachers' professional development during WIL, there is limited research on how these processes unfold within ODeL contexts. At Africa's largest ODeL university, a significant supervision gap has emerged: of 44,986 final-year

student teachers enrolled in 2023, only 26% received school-based supervisory visits, leaving 73% without the mandated mentoring support required for valid professional evaluation. This shortfall raises concerns about equitable access to quality PD, effective mentoring during teaching practice placements, and compliance with national WIL supervision expectations. The problem this study addresses is therefore the insufficient and uneven supervision of B.Ed. and PGCE student teachers in an ODeL environment, and how this affects their professional development experiences during teaching practice.

Based on the information established above, the main research question is: How do final-year student teachers perceive their professional development experiences during teaching practice at an ODeL College of Education? In responding to the main research question, the following sub-research questions (SRQs) are formulated:

- SRQ1: How does learning from practice as a component of work-integrated learning enhance student teachers' professional development?
- SRQ2: How does learning in practice enhance students' professionalism during teaching practice?
- SRQ3: What roles do mentor teachers play in developing student teachers' personal-professional identity during teaching practice?

This paper next provides the study's framework, which includes the regulatory (MRTEQ policy) and higher education contexts for teacher education in an African context. The theoretical framework and methodology are presented, followed by findings, discussions, and recommendations for online assessments in teaching practice as a WIL approach.

2. Literature Review

This exploratory research is underpinned by Hudson's (2004) Five-Factor Mentoring Model (FFMM) theoretical framework for teaching practice placements (see Table 1). This model encompasses factors such as "personal attributes, system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modelling, and feedback" (p. 4), as applied in this research context.

Table 1: Hudson's (2004) five-factor mentoring model (FFMM)

FFMM Factor	Brief Description
Personal Attributes	Refers to the mentor's interpersonal qualities such as approachability, encouragement, empathy, professionalism, and the ability to build trusting relationships with mentees.
System Requirements	Involves guiding mentees on institutional, curriculum, and policy expectations, including assessment standards, documentation, administrative procedures, and professional responsibilities.
Pedagogical Knowledge	Focuses on supporting mentees' understanding of subject content, teaching strategies, lesson planning, learner diversity, assessment methods, and classroom management.
Modelling	Entails mentors demonstrating effective teaching practices in authentic classroom settings, allowing mentees to observe and learn professional behaviours and instructional techniques.
Feedback	Consists of providing timely, constructive, and reflective feedback to help student teachers evaluate performance, refine teaching practices, and develop professional competence.

In this FFMM, this study integrated these factors into a blended teaching practice approach as part of work-integrated learning at an ODeL university. The justification is that FFMM provided a critical lens on how it supported student teachers' personal, pedagogical, systematic, modelling, and constructive feedback, which are ideal for analysing a blended teaching practice in an ODeL context. Several studies have demonstrated that mentoring, as a process of mentorship, and constructive feedback, as a dimension of work-integrated learning (Hill et al., 2021a; Mena et al., 2017; Aderibigbe et al., 2018; Kurti, 2023), can be employed as a pedagogical strategy. The focus is to integrate theory and practice in the online teaching practice programme at an ODeL college of education. Based on this assumption, this paper used the theoretical framework proposed by Hudson (2004), the Five-Factor Mentoring Model, to enhance understanding of how this model underpinned the current study, which examined mentorship during teaching practice placements and its impact on student teachers' personal growth and professional development. It is argued that Hudson (2004), Kurti (2023), and Reid et al. (2011) agree that mentoring is a crucial part of student teacher development throughout preservice training and during teaching practice at an ODeL college of education. Additionally, scholars view mentoring as an act between an experienced teacher and an aspiring student teacher to guide, facilitate, and support (Aderibigbe et al., 2018).

2.1 Learning from practice as a component of work-integrated learning

Wardoyo et al. (2017, p. 90) stated, "Many studies have discovered that the improvement of professionalism will drive the boost of rewards (professionalisation) that teachers will gain appropriately." Learning from practice (LfP) provides an appropriate framework for student teachers' professional development. However, for student teachers to achieve a high level of professionalism, they should have the opportunity to teach in schools. The aim is to enable them to discern various approaches and methods, thereby enhancing their professional capabilities (Ivannikova et al., 2023). The LfP proposition aligns with departmental requirements. The DHET (2018) stipulates that LfP centres on practices across different settings, learning from various methods, and the scrutiny of lessons. For student teachers, this process is carried out through teaching practice, conducted mostly in classrooms and school settings (DHET, 2018).

The process of LfP forms a vital aspect of professional development for student teachers. Trede and Jackson (2021) argued that the professional capabilities (PC) required for future practices in the world of work remain a challenge for higher education, especially in an uncertain, increasingly complex, and globalised work environment. PC has many implications for student teachers, who must enhance their professional capabilities through professional development. Sancar et al. (2021) claimed that various factors necessitated greater focus on improved teacher skills, educational standards, and professionalism. This scenario raises the question of the type of professional development needed within LfP. Wardoyo et al. (2017) identified three key focus areas for student teachers to consider during LfP. These focus on teachers' pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies.

Regarding pedagogical competencies, De Souza (2021) opined that this should include a focus on introducing a lesson, such as establishing a learning target, linking lessons to prior content, and involving learners. Other aspects include lesson development (students' involvement in the lesson, teaching and learning materials, and activities). Another important facet includes class management and control, such as supervision, addressing misbehaviour, and maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere. Social competencies relate to how students should learn from lesson delivery and personal factors associated with teaching, such as enthusiasm, confidence, warmth towards learners, appearance, and audibility during lesson presentations (De Souza, 2017).

Given the latter, personal and social competence are crucial for professional development (PD). However, Aprile and Knight (2020) cautioned that various factors necessitate a greater focus on improved teacher skills, educational standards, and professionalism. Consequently, Trede and

Jackson (2021) argued that these factors require increased emphasis on enhancing teacher skills, educational standards, and professionalism. Furthermore, professionals should be able to position themselves in practice, demonstrate awareness, and take responsibility for their decisions. According to Aprile and Knight (2020), the dimensions of professional development extend far beyond the mere acquisition and demonstration of practical teaching skills; they also encompass the development of a professional identity capable of responsible and ethical decision-making. This should occur within a framework that intentionally fosters students' reflexivity, problem-solving, decision-making, and adaptability in ambiguous or unpredictable environments (Aprile & Knight, 2020). In addition to studying, observing, and analysing various practices across diverse contexts (DHET, 2018), student teachers should engage in the reflective (both collective and individual) practices described by Van Wyk and Taole (2015), employing a variety of tools during this process. Hence, Aglazor (2017) concurred that student teachers should be "paired with competent, knowledgeable and concerned university supervisors to help them assume the full range of duties of a teacher during this hands-on training" (p. 101-102), while "host teachers have an equally vital influence on aspiring teachers' professional growth and development" (p. 102).

2.2 Learning in practice as a component of work-integrated learning

The DHET (2015, p. 10) stipulated that "learning in practice involves teaching in authentic and simulated classroom environments" to support student teachers' professional growth. Additionally, Ivannikova et al. (2023) concur that "engaging future teachers in such practical experiences within the school setup is a prevalent approach that aims to enhance the quality of education and cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the school education system during the training process for prospective teachers" (p. 199). As a professional development requirement, DHET (2015) states that learning in practice (LiP) focuses on preparing, teaching, and reflecting on lessons. Therefore, Ivannikova et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of lesson planning. Farhang et al. (2023, p. 5901) argued that "the lesson plan forms the basis of education." If neglected, teachers may stray and be unable to accomplish the learning outcomes (Iqbal et al., 2021). Lesson planning should include several aspects, such as appropriate instructional teaching methods and strategies, learning materials, and technology integration (Farhang et al., 2024; Abbas, 2024). Hence, clear and measurable objectives that specify learner outcomes are essential. For example, South African faculties of education prepare students to use the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) as a requirement during their teaching practice for lesson planning. In CAPS-aligned lessons, student teachers should include learning materials and integrate technology in their lesson planning.

Consequently, student teachers' pedagogical knowledge is crucial, especially as they will be exposed to the challenges of the South African educational landscape. Chhatria et al. (2024) confirmed that changing educational contexts necessitate that student teachers become knowledgeable about planning and performing differentiated instructional activities, particularly to respond to different learning styles, abilities, and interests. An important aspect to consider is classroom management (Abbas, 2024), with the student teacher needing to learn how to create a conducive classroom culture. As a result, student teachers need to be empowered with time management skills. They must understand the significance of scheduling time frames for completing and presenting specific lesson components.

Additionally, being culturally responsive and connecting the lesson to real-world applications are important for increasing learner interest and relevance (Daling-Hammond et al., 2017). Therefore, Abbas (2024) asserted that teacher education programmes should be able to respond to the needs of teachers, as they must meet the diverse needs of learners, navigate complex classroom environments, and adapt to ever-changing educational paradigms. Given South Africa's diverse and multicultural educational landscape, the quest to adhere to a culturally responsive curriculum is crucial for student teachers. This is why Chhatria et al. (2024) argued that a culturally responsive curriculum values and

incorporates students' cultural identities and perspectives to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Also important is adopting what Chhatria et al. (2024) termed a "Social Reconstructionist Approach" to address societal inequalities and injustices by integrating social issues and activism into the curriculum.

The MRTEQ policy document (DHET, 2015) and Medina and Mollow (2021) suggest that reflective practice is central to performance analysis. Furthermore, student teachers are encouraged to analyse the effects of their actions on the learning process. Li (2020) reasoned that teachers should critically reflect and identify possible areas for improvement in the teaching and learning process. This process enables student teachers to identify their main strengths and weaknesses, providing opportunities for improvement, particularly in pedagogical planning and teaching (Pinos et al., 2023).

2.3 Roles of mentor teachers in developing student teachers' personal-professional identity

Mentoring as a phenomenon has been widely investigated, yet it requires further research to address gender dynamics in teacher education (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Hudson & Skamp, 2003; Mena et al., 2017; Kurti, 2023). Studies have shown that mentoring can be utilised as a professional development strategy to support student teachers in their learning to teach, contributing to both their professional and personal growth (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Mena et al., 2017; Wright & Smith, 2000). We argue that mentoring is a key driver of student teachers' personal growth and professional development. Kurti (2023) reported that the Five-Factor Mentoring Model positively impacted preservice teachers' personal and professional growth during teaching practice. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that mentoring is crucial for student teachers' ongoing development. According to Hairon et al. (2019), experienced in-service teachers can serve as catalysts for mentoring. Studies have shown that student teachers view mentoring as the most effective way to acquire professional knowledge and competence as teachers. It provides a protective opportunity for experimentation and socialisation within the profession (Hill et al., 2021b; Hudson, 2010; Leshem, 2012; Reid et al., 2011; Mukeredzi, 2017). This process enables student teachers to become proficient in the pedagogical and management skills essential for effective lesson coordination. Additionally, Mukeredzi (2017) contended that mentoring acts as an effective learning catalyst through reflection, as student teachers learn about the 'self' within the teaching context. Furthermore, student teachers must acquire instructional skills, including basic lesson planning and management, with clear guidance from their mentors (Danielson, 2013), and develop professionally (Kurti, 2023; Depaepe & König, 2018).

Mentoring provides a space where the student teacher and the mentor build a professional relationship through the development of teacher identity and awareness of the shift in their roles, from preservice teachers to fully qualified teachers. An important task of mentoring is to help student teachers critically examine the beliefs about teaching and learning that they bring to the profession, particularly the teaching methods they may never have considered. A good mentor offers psychological and emotional support for student teachers' professional development and fosters a positive self-image as future educators (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). Mentors provide feedback and assist student teachers in reflecting on their actions during supervised sessions. Subsequently, feedback may involve critical insights presented in a positive, supportive, and question-based manner. Campbell and Brummett (2007) asserted that teachers can pose questions that encourage students to examine their lesson rehearsals. Consequently, meaningful learning to teach occurs when student teachers can develop their ideas about teaching, have the autonomy to practice these ideas, and take the initiative to enhance their teaching skills (Kemmis et al., 2014). Krueger (2006) advocated for self-analysis through questions that require novice teachers to reflect, speculate, transfer, and draw upon their knowledge base in teaching. Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified three components of effective feedback: establishing a clear purpose or goal,

providing information about the progress being made towards that goal, and indicating specific improvements needed to enhance progress.

Student teachers are expected to learn the subject content before engaging in teaching practice. They must possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge and become familiar with curricular content materials, models, and approaches (Pacpaco et al., 2019). Shumba et al. (2016) outlined the roles of mentors in psychosocial and career-educational development. From Hudson's (2010) perspective, psychosocial functions are divided into role modelling and social support. Mentors assist mentees in developing a sense of professional self, acceptance, and confirmation, thereby becoming role models for them (Maphosa et al., 2007). Since mentors also serve as instructional coaches, they are expected to support student teachers by providing pedagogical, technical, and organisational guidance. Career development also includes integrating teaching styles into classroom methods, evaluating instructional practices, and offering constructive feedback to enhance student teachers' methods and techniques (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). During teaching practice, student teachers receive support from their mentors, encompassing both social and emotional support, especially given students' exposure to a new environment (Mitchell et al., 2017).

2.4 Challenges and opportunities of online mentoring or remote TP supervision

Online mentoring can be regarded as the interaction and engagement facilitated by technology – a process in which electronic media are used as the primary means of communication between the mentor teacher and mentee (Argente-Linares et al., 2017). This has brought several challenges and opportunities. Kumar and Johnson (2019) highlight issues such as student isolation, slow online relationship development, misunderstandings due to the absence of verbal communication, technical challenges, and a lack of technical and online communication competence between the mentor teacher and the mentee. Nkambule and Mukeredzi (2017) found that mentees had misunderstandings about the mentor-mentee roles, while Jiyane and Gravett (2019) reported mentor absenteeism and a lack of professional guidance. Jan and Mahboob (2022) argued that online mentoring has led mentees to feel anxious because they cannot see their mentors face-to-face. Such challenges complicate mentoring in an online environment, which entails learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modelling clear, comprehensive feedback.

Van Wyk and Plaatjies (2025) claim that online supervision practices offer excellent opportunities for professional development, while Mhishi et al. (2024) point out that MS Teams improve students' assessment practices during teaching practice. Gardner et al. (2022) add that this method allows for immediate feedback, enabling student teachers to reflect on lesson shortcomings and make improvements. Taole et al. (2024) assert that one of the most valuable advantages of online supervision during teaching practice is its accessibility to remote areas, and that MS Teams can provide automatic transcriptions of the entire process. Stolte (2021) notes that using MS Teams for remote teaching practice supervision is cost-effective, as it saves time and resources.

3. Methodology

The College Ethics Committee granted permission to conduct research for the study (Ref #2018/03/14/90060059/MC). The ethical protocol and guidelines direct the research regarding anonymity, confidentiality, integrity, and the protection of participants. This research adheres to all these requirements, ensuring that the study is conducted ethically. The study employs an interpretivist lens as a paradigm aligned with a qualitative approach. Purposive sampling was used, involving five fourth-year B.Ed. students and five Senior Phase and FET PGCE students (see Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic and contextual profile of participants

Participant	Qualification	Gender	Subject Methodology	Teaching Context
BEd1	4th Year B.Ed.	Female	Senior Phase, Social Science	Urban Secondary School

BEd2	4th Year B.Ed.	Female	Intermediate Phase	Rural Primary School
BEd3	4th Year B.Ed.	Female	Foundation Phase	City, Primary School
BEd4	4th Year B.Ed.	Female	Senior Phase	Township, Secondary School
BEd5	4th Year B.Ed.	Female	Foundation Phase	Rural Primary School
PGCE1	PGCE	Male	Senior & FET Phase	Urban Secondary School
PGCE2	PGCE	Male	Senior & FET Phase	Township Secondary School
PGCE3	PGCE	Male	Senior & FET Phase	City, Combined School
PGCE4	PGCE	Female	Foundation Phase	Rural, Combined School
PGCE5	PGCE	Female	Senior & FET Phase	Urban, Secondary School

Based on Table 2, although the sample of 10 participants appears small, the study was designed to prioritise depth of understanding of student-teacher professional development in an ODEL context rather than statistical generalisability. This is consistent with qualitative case study principles; this sample size enabled a rich, in-depth exploration of participants' experiences as final-year student teachers. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, as no new themes or insights emerged, confirming the adequacy and rigour of the sample for the study's analytical purposes. The purpose of the study was explained, and participants completed a consent form, but could withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable. The Microsoft Teams platform was used to conduct semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed using a thematic analysis process. The thematic analysis was utilised to identify specific themes and subthemes in the dataset (Morrone, 2024). The thematic analysis was conducted manually. Key steps were followed in the thematic analysis process, such as familiarising ourselves with the datasets. The researchers thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Secondly, specific codes were allocated by assigning labels to meaningful segments of data, which were grouped into categories reflecting recurring ideas linked to participants' extracts (e.g., 4th Year B.Ed. 1-5; PGCE 1-5). Thirdly, after discussing and reflecting on these categories, they were refined into themes that included the core issues and insights regarding student teachers' views on teaching practice. Lastly, new themes were defined. Confirming trustworthiness is crucial for establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings. It serves as an important scientific acid test incorporating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The criteria for credibility were ensured by findings reflected in the raw data, participant member-checking, and extended involvement. Transferability was attained through wide-ranging and thorough explanations; dependability was guaranteed through extensive credentials and the creation of an audit trail; and confirmability was reached by ensuring peer debriefing, which aims to present the researchers' feedback without bias (Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

3. Presentation of Findings

After thematic analysis, several themes emerged from the data sets, including: (1) Enhancing student teachers' professional development through practice, (2) Enhancing student teachers' professionalism in practice, and (3) Developing student teachers' personal-professional identity.

3.1 Enhancing student teachers' professional development from practice

Learning from practice through work-integrated learning environments significantly contributes to student teachers' professional development by providing practical experiences, reflective opportunities, and the skills necessary to thrive in the teaching profession. Such experiences build confidence as student teachers become more comfortable in their roles. Furthermore, working in schools enables student teachers to establish relationships with experienced teachers (mentors) who offer support, advice, and opportunities for future career development. The participants articulate the following:

“She helped me build confidence when teaching and how to manage difficult learners. Her students have a lot of respect, and she always disciplines them in the correct manner, which is something I admire about her.” (Female, Senior Phase, 4th Year BEd1).

Working alongside experienced mentors provides student teachers with valuable insight, practical tips, and constructive feedback.

“At first, I was nervous, but as the lesson continued, I became relaxed, and my learners could also participate and enjoy the lesson. My supervisor ensures I take my time, be relaxed, and not rush through the content and the process. She has been very helpful and informative, and I have learned much from her. During practice supervision, I experienced or have learned how to plan and engage in a well-structured lesson.” (Female, Intermediate Phase, 4th Year BEd2).

Technology has become a crucial factor that requires teachers to be educated and informed about its use in the classroom and in their daily lives. They must adapt to various learning environments to enhance their instructional skills. Participants have indicated the following:

“I have also learned to be more mindful of my internet connection (bad connectivity) and realize the value of receiving feedback from an experienced supervisor even in an online setting. Despite the technical issues, I enjoyed seeing my learners engage with the materials we used and participate in the activity I planned and had adapted to the situation, and found a way to keep my lesson going. I learned that having a properly functioning device is important and realized the importance of flexibility and adapting in teaching.” (Female, Foundation Phase, 4th Year BEd3).

3.2 Enhancing professionalism through learning in practice

Professionalism involves acting with integrity as a teacher, showcasing your teacher identity, being reliable, setting high personal standards, and demonstrating a sense of care as a professional. Moreover, during the teaching practice placements, participants learned from mentors how to plan effective lessons, deliver instruction effectively, create a positive learning environment, and accommodate diverse learners. Some participants noted their exposure to staff meetings, district circulars, and extracurricular activities. This female participant argues:

“Supervision has provided me with support and guidance in various aspects of teaching practice, including learner motivation and fostering a positive learning environment. It has provided me with opportunities for professional growth, reflection, and improvement. While there have been challenges, such as scheduling conflicts and workload pressures, the support and guidance I’ve received have outweighed any difficulties.” (Female, Senior Phase, 4th Year BEd4).

In view of exposure to staff meetings and district circulars, this participant mentioned:

“I was invited to attend staff meetings and was exposed to what and how it was chaired. During these staff meetings, the principal read district circulars of the upcoming 2024 national and provincial elections in May, of which the school is one of the voting stations. This gives us a glimpse of the profession... Before I forget, I went with the school rugby team for the inter-school sports day as part of the school co-curricular activities, such as sports and cultural events.” (Male, Senior & FET phase, PGCE1).

Most participants echoed the sentiment that mentoring in practice helps them grow and become professionals by how mentors demonstrated teaching skills and encouraged them to present effective lessons. This participant mentioned:

“She gave me a lot of advice and helped me with resources for integration in my Foundation Phase lessons. My mentor teacher showed me teaching skills for large classes. She just

encouraged me to do my best, be a good teacher, and do my lessons positively.” (Female, Foundation Phase, 4th Year BEd5).

3.3 Developing student teachers’ personal-professional identity

Professional identity for student teachers has been recognised in the context of open-mindedness regarding experience, instructional delivery, and professional development. Professional development occurs through experiential learning within a learning community, which, in this case, refers to the schools where teachers model effective teaching practices, offer resources and strategies, and support and discuss their work. Students have expressed themselves as follows:

“I would like to be like her and maybe better because time is changing. The available resources make it easier for me and she is hands-on when it comes to the learners. But with me, she can sometimes be very strict; she likes good classroom management. I have learned a lot from her, especially her different techniques..., but I have learned many things from her as my mentor.” (Male, Senior & FET Phase, PGCE2).

Most participants have reported that they have developed confidence and strengthened their skills to organise and implement actions to achieve their desired goals during instructional delivery. This development is important and is known as academic self-efficacy. A self-efficacious teacher can monitor and regulate their efforts and has the confidence to master the subject matter. Mentors focused on guided reflection, with students engaging in informal reflective discussions to deepen their understanding of their practice. Participants offered their opinions as follows:

“She helped me build confidence when teaching and how to manage difficult learners. I feel confident that the students understood the content very well, which is the end, the primary goal of the lesson. She looked at my lesson plan, and I was guided, then she made some suggestions and gave me some tips to use during teaching the lesson. My supervisor makes sure that I take my time, be relaxed, and not just rush through the content and the process.” (Female, Senior Phase, 4th Year B.Ed.).

Mentor teachers are known for providing constructive feedback during observations of student teachers’ lessons, followed by actionable suggestions that help the student teachers improve their teaching skills. In addition, mentors offer emotional support, allowing students to remain motivated and resilient in challenging situations. The following remarks highlight the different types of support that student teachers experience.:

“It was nerve-wracking initially, but I have enjoyed it so far.” (Female, Senior Phase and FET, PGCE2).

It makes you feel that supervision is not something that we have to be afraid of, but a constructive way of assisting one another.” (Female, Senior & FET Phase, PGCE5).

By fulfilling these roles, mentor teachers significantly contribute to the holistic development of student teachers, helping them build a cohesive, confident personal-professional identity.

4. Discussion of Findings

The findings showed that student teachers are gaining invaluable classroom exposure and experience during LfP, which enhances their professional development. Ivannikova et al. (2023) supported this finding, claiming that the teaching practice exercise in schools provides an invaluable opportunity to develop student teachers' professional competence. The participants also referred to their exposure to other school-related dynamics, such as staff meetings, creating positive learning environments, and accommodating diverse learners. The need for student teachers to be prepared for various classroom dynamics is backed by Abbas (2024), who suggested that teachers should possess strong educational knowledge, effective teaching approaches, and classroom management skills to ensure efficient engagement and a conducive learning space. It was noteworthy how the

student teachers embraced technology during the supervision process and demonstrated flexibility and adaptability to ensure the completion of their lessons. This approach aligns with Abbas's (2024) suggestion that student teachers should be prepared to use technology and digital literacy for instructional purposes and personalised learning experiences.

The data also indicate that student teachers' professionalism is enhanced through comprehensive guidance in the planning and delivery of effective lessons (LiP). For this reason, the Teaching Practice Department in the College provides templates and supports to students to ensure that lesson plans focus on specific aspects. Ghorianfar (2024, p. 5905) states that "the important and key subject of lesson planning is to establish a logical and correct connection between the designed objectives, lesson content, teaching and learning methods, and student learning assessment." Van Den Berg and Du Plessis (2023, p. 4) assert that "it is crucial for effective teaching and learning and ensures that the teacher communicates effectively, manages time efficiently, engages students, and provides an accurate assessment and evaluation." The findings suggest that time management in lesson planning is vital. Olivio (2021) states that sound time management techniques enhance performance and that "time management skills may be included in teacher training programs to improve teachers' managerial and administrative activities" (p. 450).

Literature reports that school mentors contribute to shaping, guiding, and influencing student teachers to become professionals during school-based placements (Depaepe & König, 2018; Kurti, 2023; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). School mentors, being experienced in the profession, often feel obligated to support student teachers in their careers (Shumba et al., 2016). Niehoff (2006, p. 41) states that "mentors supporting mentees implies a trusting and respectful relationship, and regardless of subject areas, it appears that the mentoring relationship, including psychosocial support, can affect the quality of the mentoring." Therefore, these school-based mentors could serve as catalysts in developing student teachers' professional identities during teaching practice (Campbell & Brummett, 2007). Participants echoed sentiments about their relationships with mentors: "We learned many things from our mentors." The mentor-mentee relationship provides a learning space where the student teacher and mentor build a professional relationship through teacher identity development and awareness of the shift in their roles from students as preservice teachers to teachers (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Mena et al., 2017; Wright & Smith, 2000). Student teachers are learning about the teaching profession, developing as professional educators, and becoming subject specialists. Scholars note that the mentor-mentee relationship at school builds mutual trust and respect; mentors help mentees develop a sense of professional self, acceptance, and confirmation, thus becoming role models for them (Campbell & Brummett, 2007; Maphosa et al., 2007). Since mentors also assume the role of instructional coach, they are expected to assist the student teacher by providing pedagogical, technical, and organisational skills.

Although it was not the aim to delve into the challenges and opportunities during teaching practice, this study cannot remain silent on the issues that arose in an ODeL context. Findings revealed that students experienced negative emotions, such as 'nerve-wracking' moments before they had to start their lessons. Jan and Mahboob (2022) concur that students experience anxiety because they are unable to see their mentors during online evaluations. Students felt isolated due to the absence of mentors and a lack of communication during their teaching practice (Kumar & Johnson, 2019). Another major finding highlighted poor internet connectivity. Students complained that they were interrupted during their lesson presentations, prompting them to adapt their lessons. Such challenges could be better managed in advance if mentors communicate effectively and provide professional guidance to their mentees (Jiyane & Gravett, 2019). Despite these challenges, student teachers also experienced opportune moments. The statement by one student, "It has provided me with opportunities for professional growth, reflection, and improvement..." underscores the valuable opportunities available to student teachers during teaching practice (Van Wyk & Platjies, 2025). Students emphasised their satisfaction with the support and guidance received from mentor

teachers. The feedback from mentors allowed them to reflect on their lessons and consider how they could improve them. These observations are supported by Gardner et al. (2022), who argue that engagements such as immediate feedback enable student teachers to reflect on lesson shortcomings and make improvements.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The application of the FFMM model highlighted the usefulness of MS Teams as an online platform during the online TP assessments. The purpose of this study is to conclude that student teachers' professional development during their TP supervision at schools was successful. Based on the findings of the study, the FFMM provided a critical lens on how it supported student teachers' personal, pedagogical, systematic, modelling, and constructive feedback, which are ideal for analysing a blended TP in an ODEL context. This research found that student teachers experienced how meaningful and valuable teaching practice can be when they were exposed to real-life classroom teaching and learning environments. Final-year students were matched with mentor teachers during school placements to develop sound relationships and establish themselves with profound professional knowledge. Furthermore, school mentors are accessible and provide invaluable guidance for student teachers' professional pedagogical knowledge. Mentoring is a fundamental component of student teachers' personal growth and PD.

In addition, this study contributes to professional development and student teaching practices by promoting the importance of the mentor-mentee link in enhancing professional knowledge and professional development. Several limitations emerged; a small sample of student teachers was selected, which restricted the generalisability of the findings. This study was conducted at a teacher education college of an ODeL University in South Africa. Thirdly, the results of this qualitative single case study can be applied in mixed-method research, whereby the qualitative and quantitative data can be triangulated simultaneously. Based on these findings, it is recommended that Higher Education Institutions incorporate structured training programmes for mentors to improve their online supervision skills. Furthermore, developing and providing guidelines for effectively using Microsoft Teams for teaching practice evaluations could help bridge mentoring gaps and support meaningful in-situ learning. Future research may explore ways to address the challenges of supervising large student cohorts in ODeL contexts.

6. Declarations

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Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the criteria for data sharing established by the institutional review board/ethics committee.

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