



Rethinking university-based mentoring: Supporting pre-service teachers holistically beyond assessment

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Abstract

University-based mentoring during teaching practicums is often framed as an assessment-driven supervisory process, with limited attention to pre-service teachers' emotional and relational needs. In this article we contribute to debates on reconceptualising university mentoring to support more holistic and developmentally responsive teacher preparation. While Hudson's five-factor mentoring model (2004) has shaped much of the mentoring literature, it does not explicitly theorise emotional support as a core mentoring dimension, leaving a conceptual gap in how holistic and relational mentoring is understood during teaching practicum. Drawing on qualitative insights from 170 final-year pre-service teachers, our findings indicate that emotional support, mentor accessibility, and constructive feedback are central to effective mentoring relationships. This study makes a conceptual contribution by extending Hudson's model through the articulation of emotional support as a distinct sixth factor, thereby reframing mentoring as a relational–developmental rather than a primarily evaluative practice. This reconceptualisation offers direction for strengthening university-based mentoring and supporting pre-service teachers' professional identity development and well-being.

Keywords: holistic support, Hudson's five-factor mentoring model, pre-service teachers, teaching practicum, university-based mentoring

Introduction

Teaching Practice (TP) constitutes a pivotal component of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), in offering final-year pre-service teachers (hereinafter referred to as students) the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in authentic classroom settings (Moosa & Rembach, 2020). This period represents not only a significant professional milestone but also a time of emotional intensity and vulnerability (Botha & Rens, 2018; Smit & Du Toit, 2021). As Peterson (2017,

p. 2) has noted, TP often evokes “professional vulnerability,” necessitating personal adaptation and emotional resilience. These demands are particularly intense during the first university-assessed teaching practicum (hereinafter referred to as practicum), where students encounter heightened expectations and scrutiny from university-based mentors.

In response to these demands, students express a strong desire for university-based mentors (hereafter referred to as university-mentors) who offer more than mere academic guidance. They prefer mentors who exhibit empathy, cultivate trust, and provide relational and emotional support alongside professional guidance. A participant in our study stated, “[A]s this is an extremely stressful time for the students, the university mentor needs to be very understanding, sympathetic, and give the student the support and encouragement they need.” This sentiment corresponds with the findings of Ani et al. (2021) and Heeralal (2014), who emphasised students’ appreciation of university mentors who are compassionate, approachable, and able to provide constructive feedback.

Notwithstanding these requirements, university-based mentoring throughout TP often remains narrowly focused on assessment and professional support and development. Typically, institutional norms designate school-based mentors as being accountable for daily guidance, whereas university mentors assume roles as evaluators, facilitators, or academic coaches (Ambrosetti, 2010; Deutschman et al., 2024; Fraser et al., 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2022). This division of work restricts the ability of university mentors to engage holistically with students, and this leads to unmet critical personal and emotional development needs (Dreer, 2021; Du Plessis et al., 2017; Range et al., 2013).

In this article, we contribute to the debate on teacher education by emphasising students’ voices on the kind of university-based mentoring they value during their first assessed practicum. Drawing on Hudson’s five-factor mentoring model (2004), we explore how university mentors might foster holistic development, which, as delineated in this study, encompasses both personal and professional growth. Consistent with Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), Erasmus (2022), and Goodwin et al. (2023, p. 708), we contend that holistic support “addresses an individual’s physical, academic, emotional, and social needs by integrating personal and professional dimensions and combating aesthetic, intellectual, and moral elements.”

We advocate for a re-evaluation of university-based mentoring practices that promotes a transition from assessment-driven supervision and coaching to more relational, responsive, and developmental interactions. Our aim is to identify students’ holistic university-based mentoring needs and to illustrate how mentorship may be innovatively redefined to address those needs more efficiently.

This study constitutes Phase 1 of the broader Peer Enhanced Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (PE SoTL) research project, which, as the first study of its kind at this university, explores mentorship interventions designed to enable university-mentors to provide holistic support to students during their first assessed teaching practicum (see Jooste, 2019; Mthembu, 2019; Strauss, 2022). This first-of-its-kind study at this university expands upon prior research that has advocated for more effective mentoring practices (Hudson, 2013a; Sokhulu, 2022).

The findings from the Fourth-year Initiative for Research in Education (FIRE) project (2015–2018) indicated a substantial discrepancy between students’ mentoring needs and the support provided (Fraser, 2018; Van Putten et al., 2023).

We go on to outline the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that underpin this study, detail the research methodology, present the findings according to three emergent themes, and discuss the implications for enhancing university-based mentoring in ITE.

Contextualising the study

Holistic university-based mentoring needs and support

Mentoring is a cornerstone of effective teacher preparation, particularly during the teaching practicum when students must integrate theory into practice under real-world pressures. While mentoring has focused traditionally on professional development and performance evaluation, there is growing recognition that holistic support, encompassing personal, emotional, and relational dimensions, is vital to students’ growth and well-being (Bieler, 2013; Goodwin et al., 2023). Holistic mentoring can be defined as a humanising, strengths-based approach that nurtures the whole person by fostering academic competence, psychosocial resilience, and teacher identity formation (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). As Salter (2015, p. 76) aptly noted, “[M]entoring should be more than supervision; it should be about growth, trust, and care.”

Despite this growing awareness, much of the literature and institutional practice continues to prioritise performance-based mentoring over relational, emotionally attuned support. This oversight is particularly concerning given the multi-layered demands placed on student teachers during their first assessed practicum. To better understand the scope of holistic mentoring, it is important to examine the specific domains, namely, academic, emotional, social, and personal dimensions, in which students require support.

While holistic mentoring is often described in terms of many different domains of support, following Goodwin et al. (2013) we conceptualise holistic university-based mentoring primarily as a relational practice. Drawing on relational pedagogy and relational mentoring scholarship, mentoring is understood as a socially situated, trust-based process in which learning, professional growth, and identity formation are shaped through ongoing interpersonal relationships rather than isolated supervisory acts (Dreer, 2021; Hudson, 2013a; Noddings, 2013). From this perspective, emotional support, approachability, accessibility, and constructive feedback are not peripheral mentoring behaviours but relational conditions that enable meaningful learning and development during the teaching practicum (Dreer, 2021). This relational framing foregrounds how mentoring interactions are experienced by pre-service teachers and provides a coherent perspective from which to examine their holistic mentoring needs in university-based contexts.

Academic support: Beyond technical guidance

Academically, students often struggle with practical challenges such as lesson planning, classroom management, differentiated instruction, and inclusive assessment strategies (Botha, 2020). These difficulties are often compounded by the stress of formal assessment, which can trigger performance anxiety and reduce confidence. Additionally, sometimes students must manage conflicting expectations from school-based mentors and university mentors, and this often leads to confusion and uncertainty. In this regard, university mentors play a key role in bridging theory and practice by offering pedagogical guidance, instructional feedback, and academic support that directly address the realities of the classroom (Chan et al., 2023; Mthembu, 2019). However, mentoring that remains strictly instructional in focus may fall short of addressing students' broader developmental needs.

Emotional support: An underemphasised need

The emotional strain of teaching practicum, characterised by fear of failure, anxiety, and burnout, is well documented (Ji et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2012). Yet many university mentoring models and practices provide limited scope for attending to these psychosocial stressors. Scholars have shown that when mentors offer emotional support by validating feelings, building confidence, and offering encouragement, students report greater resilience, self-efficacy, and professional commitment (Eby & Robertson, 2020; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Affective mentoring behaviours such as expressing empathy, active listening, and emotional availability are not mere add-ons but are central to creating a safe space in which learning and development can thrive. The omission of these elements from many mentoring models highlights a significant conceptual and practical gap.

Social support and belonging

Socially, pre-service teachers may feel isolated in their placement schools, particularly if they lack support from their school-based mentors or peers (Li et al., 2023; Mwangi & Otanga, 2015). In unfamiliar or under-resourced environments, they often struggle to build professional relationships, thus further intensifying their feelings of vulnerability. University mentors can help students navigate these dynamics by offering guidance on professional interactions, workplace etiquette, and relationship-building strategies (Toom et al., 2017). However, to be effective in this role, mentors themselves must be accessible and committed to building trust-based relationships with their mentees.

Personal identity and well-being

The practicum is not only a site of professional learning but also a transformative personal journey. Many students grapple with identity tensions as they attempt to reconcile their values and beliefs with institutional expectations and school culture (Reeves, 2018). These tensions can erode confidence and increase stress, particularly when combined with personal life demands and heavy workloads. Holistic mentoring recognises this complexity and affirms the need for mentors to support students in shaping their emerging teacher identities, managing work-life balance, and fostering personal growth.

The case for holistic mentoring

Taken together, these challenges expose the limitations of school-based mentoring and affirm the unique role university mentors can play in supporting students holistically. While school-based mentors are often well-positioned to provide daily instructional guidance, university mentors can offer a broader perspective that includes emotional care, identity support, and professional development. As Du Plessis et al. (2010, p. 328) have affirmed, “If, as research indicates, practice teaching is the single most powerful intervention in teachers’ professional preparation, then mentoring is the single most powerful process within that intervention.” This underscores the imperative to reconceptualise university-based mentoring as not only evaluative or academic, but developmentally holistic.

Collectively, these studies underscore the growing recognition that mentoring must evolve beyond technical supervision and instructional coaching to include emotional and relational dimensions of support. However, there remains limited theorisation of what holistic university-based mentoring should entail, particularly from the perspectives of students navigating their first formally assessed practicum. By drawing on Hudson’s model (2004) and proposing its enhancement, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and responsive conceptualisation of university mentoring in ITE, particularly by exploring student perceptions and extending an established framework to include emotional support as a core mentoring dimension.

Theoretical framework - Hudson’s five-factor mentoring model

Building on the conceptual foundation outlined above, we adopted Hudson’s (2004) five-factor mentoring model as its primary theoretical framework. Hudson’s model has been widely applied in teacher education research to examine mentoring effectiveness during a teaching practicum and comprises five interrelated factors: personal attributes; system requirements; pedagogical knowledge; modelling; and feedback (Hudson, 2013a; Hyde, 2019). Together, these factors provide a robust structure for analysing professional mentoring practices in university-based contexts.

However, when viewed through the perspective of relational mentoring, Hudson’s (2004) model does not explicitly theorise the emotional and psychosocial processes through which mentoring relationships are experienced by pre-service teachers. Although relational qualities such as empathy and responsiveness are referenced in the factor of personal attributes, these are framed primarily as individual mentor attributes rather than as a sustained relational mentoring process enacted over time. In response to this conceptual gap, and informed by the findings of this study, we propose emotional support as a distinct sixth mentoring factor that extends Hudson’s model to more fully reflect the holistic and relational mentoring needs of pre-service teachers during high-stakes teaching practicum.

In this study, Hudson’s (2004) five original mentoring factors are retained and used as analytical categories for examining university-based mentoring practices. Each factor is

understood as relationally enacted through mentor–student interactions rather than as isolated mentor actions. Following the discussion of these five factors, we introduce emotional support as a sixth factor, conceptualised as an enabling relational process that mediates how mentoring practices are experienced and taken up by pre-service teachers.

Personal attributes

Personal attributes of an effective university mentor encompass qualities such as being an attentive and responsive listener, providing clear guidance, demonstrating organisational competence, exhibiting enthusiasm and a well-developed sense of humour, and maintaining approachability, patience, and empathy (Hudson, 2016; Hudson & Hudson, 2014). In addition, university mentors are expected to demonstrate authenticity, consistency, honesty, and professionalism, as well as a positive orientation towards student development. These personal attributes contribute to the establishment of trust and credibility in the mentoring relationship and shape students' initial perceptions of mentor support.

Importantly, in Hudson's (2004) model, personal attributes are conceptualised as individual mentor dispositions that influence the quality of mentoring interactions rather than as sustained relational processes. Research suggests that when these attributes are enacted in ways that are responsive to students' reflective practice, they can support confidence-building, motivation, and positive self-perception among pre-service teachers (Albakri et al., 2021; Haas et al., 2022; Hobson, 2016). However, while personal attributes such as empathy, patience, and approachability create favourable relational conditions, they do not in themselves constitute emotional support as an ongoing, intentional mentoring practice.

System requirements

System requirements are crucial to the process of becoming a proficient teacher since they necessitate an in-depth understanding of the goals, regulations, and syllabus created for each topic, school, and Department of Education (Shanks, 2017). Before students enter the teaching profession, university mentors are responsible for introducing them to the essential practices linked with system requirements for effective teaching. These important practices encompass the educational goals for teaching a particular subject in the curriculum, the specific curriculum for that subject, and the school's regulations about the primary subject area being taught (Bird & Hudson, 2015).

Pedagogical knowledge

Pedagogical knowledge is content-specific, and it is expected of university mentors to have sound pedagogical knowledge themselves to guide pre-service teachers in developing pedagogical knowledge of a specific subject (Department of Education, 2015; Zeichner et al., 2015). Competent university mentors support students by assisting them in developing instructional plans, organising teaching materials, imparting expertise in subject matter and teaching methods related to the curriculum and evaluation, scheduling lessons, honing problem-solving abilities, and managing the classroom environment (Hudson, 2004, 2013b; James et al., 2020).

Modelling

Modelling is an essential component of good mentoring since students view their university mentors as coaches and examples of the most significant instructional methods that help in their professional growth (Abongdia et al., 2015). Quality modelling of teaching practices is associated with using language appropriate to the syllabus, demonstrating hands-on lessons, modelling classroom management strategies, and exhibiting effective teaching methods for a specific subject (Albakri et al., 2021; Du Plessis et al., 2010; Haas et al., 2022). We concur with Darling-Hammond (2010, p. 216) who asserted that it is “impossible to teach to people how to teach powerfully by asking them to imagine what they have never seen or to suggest they do ‘the opposite’ of what they have observed.”

Feedback

Providing feedback is a central responsibility of the university mentor and plays a critical role in supporting pre-service teachers’ professional learning and reflective practice (Hudson, 2014). Through feedback, students are encouraged to analyse their teaching, identify areas for improvement, and develop as independent, self-reflective practitioners (Bird & Hudson, 2015). Effective feedback focuses on pedagogical dimensions such as classroom management, learner engagement, assessment strategies, lesson planning, resource preparation, and the development of subject-specific teaching practices (Izadinia, 2016).

While feedback is concerned primarily with instructional and professional development, the findings of this study suggest that its impact is shaped by the relational and emotional context in which it is delivered. Feedback that is clear, specific, and balanced, and that acknowledges both strengths and areas for growth, is more likely to be experienced as constructive and motivating (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2021). Conversely, feedback delivered in emotionally unsupportive or judgemental ways may undermine confidence and inhibit reflective engagement, even when technically sound.

Importantly, we do not conceptualise emotional support as a component of feedback itself, but rather as a mediating relational condition that influences how feedback is received, interpreted, and acted upon. When mentors provide feedback in relationships characterised by trust, approachability, and psychological safety, students are more receptive to critique and more willing to engage in pedagogical risk-taking. Feedback, therefore, remains a distinct mentoring practice, while emotional support functions as an enabling factor that enhances its developmental potential.

Taken together, the five factors of Hudson’s (2004) mentoring model provide a comprehensive account of professional mentoring practices during teaching practicum. However, the findings of this study indicate that these practices are experienced by pre-service teachers from an emotional and relational perspective that shapes significantly their developmental impact. Emotional support is therefore positioned as a sixth factor that underpins and strengthens the enactment of the original five factors by shaping relational and emotional conditions through which mentoring is experienced. Rather than replacing Hudson’s (2004) model, this extension

enhances its explanatory power by foregrounding the relational conditions through which mentoring becomes developmentally effective.

Methodology

Research context

We conducted this study at a large public university in South Africa, and we focused on final-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) students enrolled in an initial teacher education programme. These students completed their first formally university-assessed teaching practicum as part of their degree requirements.

Participants were placed in schools across diverse urban and township contexts in Gauteng Province. The cohort reflected varied socio-economic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, and placement schools differed considerably in terms of resourcing and mentoring capacity. This diversity provided a rich contextual backdrop for exploring students' experiences and perceptions of university-based mentoring.

Research design

We adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges the students' subjective experiences and meanings, and employed a qualitative methodological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A descriptive case study design (Yin, 2016) was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the university-based mentoring needs of students. The use of an open-ended questionnaire as the sole data-collection method was a deliberate choice aligned with the exploratory aims of the study and the size of the participant group ($n = 170$). This approach enabled the inclusion of a wide range of student voices that would not have been feasible through interviews or focus groups within available institutional, ethical, and time constraints. The open-ended format allowed participants to reflect candidly on their mentoring experiences without the influence of interviewer presence or group dynamics—an important consideration in a high-stakes, assessment-related practicum context where power relations may inhibit open dialogue.

Data richness was supported through carefully designed open-ended prompts and pilot-testing of the instrument. Trustworthiness was further ensured through systematic thematic analysis, the use of verbatim excerpts, and adherence to the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. While interviews or focus groups may have enabled deeper dialogic engagement, the chosen method was appropriate for identifying shared mentoring needs and key patterns across a large and diverse cohort and provides a foundation for more in-depth qualitative inquiry in subsequent phases of the broader research project. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

Following Patton (2023), a purposive sampling strategy was used to select students who could provide rich and relevant data. The selection criteria included: (a) being in their final year of training as students at the designated university; (b) having already been assessed by university

mentors; (c) being able to attend a data collection session on campus after the initial teaching practicum period; and (d) providing informed consent prior to participating voluntarily. The final sample consisted of 170 participants, who completed the questionnaire in one of the university auditoriums during a scheduled session following their return from practicum.

The primary research question was: What holistic university-based mentoring needs do final-year pre-service teachers perceive as crucial during their first assessed teaching practicum? To explore this question, a qualitative open-ended questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was pilot-tested beforehand to ensure clarity and relevance. It was comprised of five broad questions aimed at eliciting detailed responses regarding mentoring experiences and expectations. Participants were asked to provide insights on five key areas: 1) Specific areas where additional support was needed from the university-mentor during the teaching practicum; 2) Ways in which the mentor could have better addressed their mentoring needs; 3) Beneficial aspects of mentoring provided by the university-mentor; 4) Challenges encountered in the mentoring received from the university-mentor; and 5) Balancing mentoring with the conventional focus on assessment and feedback alone.

Data analysis was conducted using an inductive approach, employing open coding and thematic analysis techniques as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The process followed their six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.

To ensure the rigour and quality of this study, trustworthiness was established through adherence to the four established criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, and the pilot-testing of the questionnaire to ensure clarity and relevance. The inclusion of participants' verbatim responses further strengthened authenticity. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research context, participant selection criteria, and data collection procedures. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail, including detailed records of methodological decisions and data analysis phases. Finally, confirmability was established by maintaining researcher reflexivity and ensuring findings were grounded in the participants' responses rather than researcher bias or assumptions.

Findings

We present a consolidated analysis of the three key themes that emerged from the data: (1) emotional support and guidance; (2) accessibility and approachability; and (3) meaningful feedback and constructive criticism. These themes offer insight into the university-based mentoring needs identified by final-year pre-service teachers during their first assessed teaching practicum.

Theme 1: Emotional support and guidance

Participants identified the need for emotional support as foundational to their well-being and resilience during their teaching practicum. Participants repeatedly described occasions where the university-mentor's compassion and understanding had a profound positive effect: "He would send me emails wishing me luck and was very supportive when I lost my mother during the TP." Others emphasised how university-mentors' flexibility and support during a personal crisis helped them manage the teaching practicum: "I experienced a personal problem during the TP period that made it very difficult for me to be at the school, but my mentor was supportive, understanding and flexible, which helped a lot." In some cases, the support explicitly addressed students' emotional and mental health needs as one participant described: "My overall psychosocial well-being improved due to Dr assisting me; she really helped me by supporting me through my TP. This, in turn, played a big role in maintaining good mental health." The data show that participants valued university mentors who demonstrated authentic care and emotional presence, indicating that emotional support was perceived as a central component of effective university-based mentoring. Participants also emphasised the value of mentors suggesting coping strategies and providing understanding in ways that went beyond professional support.

Theme 2: Accessibility and approachability (availability, communication, and interpersonal rapport)

Accessibility and approachability emerged as closely intertwined and crucial to meaningful mentoring. Participants valued mentors who were available, communicative, and easy to approach. The lack of mentor availability was a recurring frustration: a mentor "should be always available for discussion and give advice on how to tackle everyday experience in schools." Others echoed similar expectations, stressing availability for consultation, especially at the start of practicum, and "checking up on a weekly basis (even if it is through e-mail/WhatsApp)." Many participants emphasised that communication is central to their interactions. Participants expressed a strong desire for more consistent and meaningful communication, viewing it as essential to building trusting and supportive mentoring relationships.

Some participants recounted negative experiences where feedback was delivered in a demotivating and emotionally harmful manner, which adversely affected their confidence and sense of professional agency. While such accounts were less prevalent than were affirming mentoring experiences, they are analytically significant because they reveal tensions in university-based mentoring practices. Participants' descriptions of emotionally harmful or dismissive feedback suggest that the absence of emotional support can exacerbate stress, undermine confidence, and disrupt professional identity development during the practicum. Importantly, these experiences do not merely reflect individual mentor dispositions but point to broader contextual and systemic conditions that constrain the enactment of emotionally supportive mentoring. "I had a university-mentor who broke me down during the crit; I was openly crushed after our first meeting. There was no motivation from his side. . ." A participant expressed a need for more intentional relationship-building, emphasising that open

communication fosters mutual trust and emotional safety in the mentoring relationship: “I plead for better communication and for us to build stronger relationships with pre-service teachers so that we can be open with one another.”

Approachability was equally important in shaping the student-university-mentor relationship. University-mentors who fostered a sense of trust and openness provided environments in which participants felt safe to ask questions and share concerns. One participant highlighted the relational openness fostered by their mentor, stating that they always felt comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment: “There never was a moment when I felt I couldn’t say something to her.” Another described an inclusive atmosphere: “I didn’t feel judged and could be myself the entire time.” Negative experiences arose from university-mentors who maintained minimal contact, appeared unapproachable, or were only present for assessments, leaving students feeling unsupported.

My university-mentors never contributed to my teaching practical; they weren’t available when needed—contact was minimal (almost non-existent); it was the mentor teacher who filled that role. They weren’t approachable + never shared any ideas; they were not even understanding.

The importance of university-mentors being “friendly and approachable as well as confident in [their] field of profession” and willing to “build relationships with the student; to help the student beyond just practical e.g. guidance with looking for a job” was highlighted. Overall, students strongly desired mentors who were present, communicative, and relationally engaged throughout the practicum.

Theme 3: Meaningful feedback and constructive criticism

A dominant theme was the need for specific, constructive, and balanced feedback. Participants valued feedback that fostered their professional growth: “Constant feedback, advice and support should be given throughout the whole practical.” They appreciated feedback that was not just evaluative but developmental, as in, “The most positive thing was that after my university-mentor came to assess me, he would sit down with me for +- 20 minutes and go through my lesson with me. He would highlight both the good and bad things that I did. And he would advise me.” Participants also requested that feedback focus on improvement, not just criticism.

A university-mentor must focus not only on what the student is doing wrong but also on what he/she is doing well. They must provide constructive criticism, and when they identify areas of improvement, they must give an example of how the student could improve.

However, several participants described experiencing feedback that was harsh, demotivating, or overly judgemental: “I had a university-mentor who broke me down during the crit; I was openly crushed after our first meeting. There was no motivation from his side. He openly stated that I did not have the ‘fun vibe’ to teach.” Such experiences highlight the damage that poorly

delivered feedback can cause to student confidence and self-efficacy. In contrast, positive mentoring involves honest but supportive advice, balanced commentary, and a collaborative approach to professional development.

Participants' descriptions of emotionally harmful or dismissive feedback suggest that the absence of emotional support can exacerbate stress, undermine confidence, and disrupt professional identity development during the practicum.

Discussion

This discussion interprets how the three interrelated themes—emotional support, approachability and accessibility, meaningful feedback, and constructive criticism—illuminate the complex and underexplored holistic mentoring needs of final-year pre-service teachers. Interpreted from the point of view of relational pedagogy, the findings highlight that effective university-based mentoring is not defined solely by what mentors do, but by how mentoring relationships are enacted, experienced, and sustained over time. In doing so, the discussion not only addresses the central research question but also challenges current mentoring frameworks to move beyond assessment-driven supervision toward emotionally responsive, relationally grounded, and developmentally focused support.

The findings reveal that participants value holistic mentoring highly, identifying emotional support as a foundational need (see Goodwin et al., 2023). Conceptually, the addition of emotional support as a sixth factor extends Hudson's (2004) model from a primarily skills- and performance-oriented framework toward a relational-developmental mentoring model. Emotional support functions as an enabling condition that mediates how other mentoring factors are experienced and enacted. When emotional support is present, feedback is more likely to be interpreted as developmental rather than judgemental, modelling is experienced as aspirational rather than intimidating, and pedagogical guidance is received with greater confidence and openness. The revised six-factor model therefore offers an enhanced analytical and practical tool for understanding why mentoring that appears procedurally adequate may nevertheless fail to support student development when emotional support is absent.

A more nuanced reading of the findings suggests that while emotional support is highly valued by pre-service teachers, its provision is not always feasible within existing institutional conditions. Participants' negative or contradictory experiences indicate that mentors' ability to offer emotional support may be shaped by systemic constraints such as heavy workloads, limited time allocations for mentoring, assessment-driven practicum structures, and entrenched institutional norms that prioritise technical performance over relational care. These constraints complicate simplistic interpretations of mentoring effectiveness and highlight the relational labour involved in emotionally supportive mentoring.

Against this backdrop, Hudson's (2004) five-factor mentoring model outlines essential dimensions of effective mentoring but does not explicitly emphasise emotional support, an omission we highlight as significant. Participants stressed the importance of mentors who listen actively, validate their experiences, and help them navigate practicum-related challenges. The

contrast between nurturing and emotionally distant mentoring experiences reinforces the argument that emotional support is not an optional add-on but a core component of effective mentoring (Salter, 2015). This indicates a need to enhance Hudson's model to include emotional support as a distinct and vital element in university-based mentoring.

Similarly, approachability emerged as critical. Participants emphasised that mentors who are friendly, caring, and emotionally available foster a psychologically safe space for learning. Although Hudson's (2004) model includes personal attributes such as confidence-building and attentive listening, the present findings suggest a more nuanced understanding of approachability that incorporates the emotional and relational dimensions of mentoring (see Li et al., 2023; Mwangi & Otanga, 2015). The ability of mentors to build trust and form meaningful relationships was shown to be a key determinant of whether pre-service teachers felt supported in developing their professional identities.

In addition to emotional availability, accessibility was identified as an essential mentoring quality. Participants described needing mentors who are reliably available, particularly during stressful or pivotal practicum moments. While Hudson's (2004) model mentions the importance of providing feedback, it falls short as far as addressing the ongoing relational presence that defines accessibility is concerned. Students experienced mentor unavailability as demoralising, while accessible mentors bolstered confidence and reduced feelings of isolation (Toom et al., 2017). This finding suggests that mentoring models should include accessibility as a relational and temporal commitment, not merely an administrative or pedagogical function.

The importance of meaningful feedback further underscored the complex dual role of the university mentor—as both evaluator and developmental supporter. Participants valued feedback that was regular, specific, balanced, and growth-oriented (see Jones et al., 2018; Rusznyak & Bertram, 2021). While Hudson (2004) included feedback as a key mentoring factor, our findings indicate that feedback delivered within emotionally supportive relationships was more likely to be experienced as constructive and developmental. Here, emotional support shaped how feedback was received in relation to influencing students' confidence, willingness to reflect, and engagement in professional identity formation.

The three themes articulate a holistic understanding of effective university-based mentoring. Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions are deeply interconnected and shape collectively students' practicum experiences.

Emotional support underpinned both approachability and accessibility, creating relational conditions through which feedback was mediated and experienced as developmental rather than judgmental. When mentors were emotionally available and accessible, participants were more receptive to constructive feedback, which in turn supported confidence, resilience, and professional identity development. This interdependence highlights the importance of viewing mentoring as a relational and holistic process rather than a series of discrete supervisory practices.

These insights have important implications for ITE programmes. If mentoring is to address student teachers' holistic development, mentor preparation must extend beyond pedagogical training to include emotional and relational competencies. Mentors need to be equipped not only to supervise teaching practice but also to promote well-being, build trust, and foster safe spaces for learning and growth.

Limitations

This study was conducted at one university and focused on a specific cohort of final-year pre-service teachers. While this contextual focus limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional settings, it allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' lived mentoring experiences. The data was drawn exclusively from student perspectives; university mentor viewpoints and independent observations of mentoring practices were not included. This analytic focus reflects the study's intention to foreground pre-service teachers' voices rather than provide a comprehensive evaluation of mentoring from different stakeholder perspectives.

Future research could extend this work by involving many more institutions, incorporating university mentor perspectives, and employing observational or longitudinal designs to deepen understanding of mentoring dynamics over time. Broader implications for mentor training, institutional policy, and supervisor workload allocation fall beyond the scope of this article and are addressed in a subsequent complementary study.

Conclusion

We explored the holistic university-based mentoring needs of final-year pre-service teachers during their first assessed teaching practicum. The findings point to emotional support, approachability and accessibility, and meaningful feedback as core elements of effective mentoring. While Hudson's (2004) five-factor model offers a solid foundation, it does not fully reflect the emotional and relational dimensions that participants identified as essential to their development.

Emotional support and approachability contributed to the creation of a nurturing and trusting mentoring environment. Accessibility enabled timely support during critical periods, while meaningful feedback—when delivered in a constructive and growth-oriented manner—reinforced both academic development and personal confidence.

Together, these findings suggest the need for a more comprehensive and human-centred approach to mentoring—one that integrates emotional, relational, and pedagogical support. Revising and expanding Hudson's (2004) model to include a sixth factor focused on emotional support, which underpins and strengthens relational dimensions such as approachability and accessibility, could enhance its applicability to diverse teacher education contexts.

This study makes an original theoretical and practical contribution by extending Hudson's (2004) five-factor mentoring model through the explicit conceptualisation of emotional support as a distinct, relational, and enabling mentoring dimension. By positioning emotional support

alongside approachability and accessibility as relational essentials in mentoring, we advance a more holistic understanding of university-based mentoring. Practically, the findings offer clear direction for initial teacher education programmes to move beyond assessment-dominated supervision toward emotionally responsive, relationally grounded mentoring practices. By foregrounding students' voices, we present a compelling case for reimagining mentoring as a humanising process that fosters resilience, professional identity development, and well-being, with potential implications for teacher retention and the quality of teacher preparation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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