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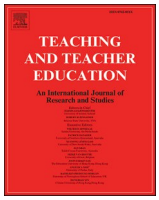
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Research paper

The role of mentoring expertise in school-based teacher educator recruitment

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ABSTRACT

In many countries, student teachers now spend more time in schools with school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) than in earlier decades. Recruitment of SBTEs, along with their professional learning, is therefore critical for teacher education quality, yet it has received little empirical attention. This study investigates the role of mentoring expertise in SBTE recruitment in Finnish teacher training schools. Two data sources were analysed: advertisements for SBTE positions and interviews with principals responsible for recruitment. The advertisements presented mentoring expertise and experience vaguely, while principals often described mentoring not as a specialised competence but as general professional qualities expected of any good teacher, or as something that could be learned on the job—thus not emphasised in recruitment. The findings reveal that the teacher educator role is often overshadowed by classroom teaching and pedagogical development, offering an employer-focused perspective that enriches and complements existing research primarily focused on teacher educators' self-perceptions.

1. Introduction

Teaching practicums provide student teachers with authentic opportunities to explore the nature of teaching, apply the knowledge gained through their studies, and evaluate their suitability for the profession before formally entering the workforce. Time spent in classrooms—partnering with school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) and receiving supported opportunities to reflect upon their teaching experiences—are consistently identified as among the most critical elements of teacher preparation (Andreassen et al., 2019; Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Caires et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2014; Ellis et al., 2020; Izadinia, 2015a). In many countries, student teachers now spend more time in schools during their training than in previous decades (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Vanassche, 2022). Within this shift, the role of SBTEs—who guide teacher candidates' learning through a balance of "showing and telling, asking and listening" (van Ginkel et al., 2016, p. 101)—has become even more critical.

Yet, despite their centrality in teacher education, the role of SBTEs—also referred to as cooperating, mentor, or collaborating teachers—remains conceptually ambiguous and often contested, marked by inherent tensions (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Clarke et al., 2014; Rakes, Powell, Blevins, & Giordano, 2022). SBTEs occupy a dual position, serving simultaneously as first-order practitioners, responsible for teaching their own pupils, and as second-order practitioners, responsible for educating future teachers (Murray & Male, 2005). This duality creates potential role conflicts and can hinder the development of a strong teacher educator identity, which is essential for effectiveness in the role (Andreassen et al., 2019; Czerniawski et al., 2019; Swennen et al., 2010). While research has examined how SBTEs are trained to navigate these challenges (e.g., Parker et al., 2021; Vähä et al., 2025), comparatively little attention has been paid to the processes through which they are recruited. This omission is notable, as the recruitment of SBTEs—alongside their targeted professional learning— has been identified as a critical lever for ensuring the quality of future teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Heikonen et al., 2017). One explanation for this research gap is that, even as more schools specialise in teacher training and receive substantial governmental funding, collaborations with universities often remain fragile (Andreassen, 2023; Zeichner, 2021). As a result, teachers who mentor student teachers are not consistently recruited into dedicated or formally recognised SBTE roles but instead assume mentoring responsibilities gradually over the course of their careers, which may contribute to the limited scope of previous research.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the role of mentoring

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expertise in the recruitment of SBTEs. In Finland, where this study is situated—a country internationally recognised for its high-performing education system and research-based initial teacher education—there is a strong and stable tradition of university-affiliated teacher training schools. In these schools, SBTEs are recruited specifically for this role and, in addition to their primary or secondary teaching responsibilities, they mentor student teachers during their supervised teaching practicums. Because mentoring is an integral part of the position from the outset, the study asks: *What role does mentoring expertise play in the recruitment of SBTEs in Finnish teacher training schools?*

To address this question, the study draws on two data sources: job advertisements for SBTE positions and interviews with the principals responsible for their recruitment. In doing so, this study contributes to two underdeveloped areas of scholarship: research on teacher recruitment, which remains limited (Klassen & Kim, 2019; Mankki et al., 2024), and literature on teacher educators, which has "focused primarily on how they perceive themselves as professionals" (Richter et al., 2021, p. 1). More specifically, it sheds light on institutional employer expectations for SBTEs, thereby deepening understanding of their work and offering implications for SBTE recruitment practices, which have been described as "haphazard" (Parker et al., 2021, p. 66).

2. SBTEs as mentors

Research on SBTEs has proposed multiple frameworks for conceptualising their roles. Butler and Cuenca (2012) identified three central functions: instructional coach, emotional support provider, and socialising agent. White et al. (2015) distinguished between (1) traditional mentoring roles, such as the daily supervision of a student teacher; (2) supervisory responsibilities at the school or network level, including the coordination of professional learning for both student and qualified teachers; and (3) functions more typically associated with institute-based teacher educators, such as engaging in research. Rakes et al. (2022) expanded the categorisation to six roles, including classroom host, tour guide to the profession, and encourager, while Clarke et al. (2014), in a comprehensive review, identified as many as eleven distinct roles.

Expectations for SBTEs vary across contexts. In some settings, the role is largely limited to modeling classroom practice, without an explicit emphasis on mentoring processes or the pedagogy of teacher education (Czerniawski et al., 2023; White, 2018). Yet, because learning to teach entails both experiential and reflective components, SBTEs are also expected to support student teachers in critically examining and making sense of their experiences (Grimmett et al., 2018). Student teachers, in turn, value SBTEs who provide both emotional and informational support through sustained, constructive dialogue (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Izadinia, 2015a). In Finland, SBTEs themselves stress the dual importance of serving as both role models and facilitators of professional growth (Vähä et al., 2025). Finnish student teachers consistently identify SBTEs as their primary source of pedagogical knowledge (Lavonen et al., 2023) and emotional support during practicum periods (Marjamaa et al., 2023). Supervisory discussions—especially those focused on reflecting upon challenging teaching situations—are regarded as the most valuable practicum activities (Loukomies et al., 2022).

The relationship between an SBTE and a student teacher is at the heart of the teaching practicum, with the capacity to transform both parties (Johnson, 2003). Positive mentoring relationships have been shown to enhance student teachers' confidence (Izadinia, 2015a) and increase their enthusiasm for teaching as well as their job satisfaction (Richter et al., 2013).

Izadina's (2015b) later study further found that SBTEs and student teachers generally shared similar views on the key components of a positive mentoring relationship, identifying encouragement, support, open communication, and constructive feedback as the most significant elements. However, student teachers perceived the mentoring relationship as an even more decisive factor in shaping their teacher identity than SBTEs did. In contrast, negative mentoring relationships reduced student teachers' confidence and left them feeling that they were not improving as teachers (Izadinia, 2015a), inhibited their professional voice (Patrick, 2013), and hindered their professional growth (Yuan, 2016). Such negative mentoring experiences can also have long-term consequences, influencing student teachers' willingness to enter the profession (Prabjandee, 2022).

The mentoring relationship between SBTEs and student teachers cannot, however, be framed solely as positive or negative; rather, it is dynamic, evolving both across the span of teacher education and within individual practicum periods. Soininen and Merisuo-Storm (2014) observed that expectations for and perceptions of the mentoring relationship shift from one practicum to the next. Tiainen and Lutovac (2022) found that early mentoring discussions in the first practicum typically focus on understanding pupils, grasping the teaching context, and developing self-awareness. As the practicum progresses, these discussions often evolve toward the collaborative construction of practical tools to support classroom decision-making and enhance pupil learning. Such findings suggest that the mentoring relationship need not be directive; rather, SBTEs can act as co-reflectors or co-learners alongside student teachers (Soininen & Merisuo-Storm, 2014; Tiainen & Lutovac, 2022). This perspective underscores the reciprocal nature of mentoring: while student teachers learn from SBTEs, SBTEs also develop professionally through shared experiences, reflective dialogue, and the co-construction of teaching practices (Hoffman et al., 2015).

Despite this, a common assumption persists that effective and experienced teachers naturally make effective SBTEs, and many teacher education programmes have recruited willing veteran teachers for these positions (Russell & Russell, 2011). However, teaching expertise and experience do not automatically translate into effective mentoring in teacher education, as the knowledge base and practical skills required for teaching differ from those required for mentoring (Bullock & Christou, 2009; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). This distinction is reflected in the considerable variation documented in SBTEs' capacity to support student teachers. Some create rich opportunities for authentic instructional engagement and active collaboration, while others restrict interaction to surface-level exchanges, positioning student teachers as passive observers (Rakes et al., 2022). In SBTE preparation, key areas in which teachers need expertise when transitioning to the SBTE role include strategies for working and communicating with adult learners, providing emotional support, engaging in feedback cycles, gradually releasing responsibility and control, and scaffolding reflection on teaching and learning (Hobson et al., 2009). Adequate theoretical grounding is also essential; without it, SBTEs often struggle to foster deeper reflection among student teachers (Körkkö, 2019).

These findings highlight the importance of examining SBTEs' mentoring expertise not only in the context of professional development but also, as in the present study, in the context of recruitment (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Heikonen et al., 2017).

3. Methods

3.1. Research context: SBTEs in Finnish teacher training schools

Finnish teacher education is research-based, with the explicit aim of preparing autonomous, responsible, and reflective professionals who can make informed pedagogical decisions grounded in theory, while also engaging in lifelong professional development (Lavonen et al., 2023). Unlike in many other countries—where partnerships between universities and schools often remain fragile despite long-term agreements (Andreassen, 2023; Zeichner, 2021)—Finland has maintained a strong and stable tradition of university-affiliated teacher training schools. These schools have two central responsibilities: in addition to providing primary or secondary education, they offer structured opportunities for student teachers to complete supervised teaching practicums. Consequently, supervising student teachers constitutes a

significant part of SBTEs' work: locally, observing and mentoring student teachers often occupies more of their time than their own classroom teaching. Beyond these core responsibilities, the schools and their staff also engage in research, experimentation, and development activities, and, to varying degrees, provide educational export services. To qualify as an SBTE, teachers must not only meet the formal requirements set out in theDecree on Qualification Requirements for Teaching Staff (1998) but also have at least two years of full-time teaching experience. The national network of teacher training schools (eNorssi) supports newly appointed SBTEs through a three-part training programme centred on mentoring, undertaken alongside their regular duties, enabling them to apply their learning directly in their professional practice and mentoring of student teachers.

Supervised teaching practicums conducted in teacher training schools constitute a mandatory and substantial element of the 60 ECTS pedagogical studies required in Finnish teacher education. Depending on the programme, some practicum periods are undertaken in cooperating field schools under the supervision of a qualified teacher. Although the concept of the practicum is contested (Lawson et al., 2015; Mankki et al., 2025), certain shared practices underpin its implementation in Finland. Typically organised in multi-week blocks, practicums begin with an observation phase during which student teachers follow the pedagogical work of their SBTE while preparing their own lessons. In the following weeks, they gradually assume greater instructional responsibility, either independently or through co-teaching. Student teachers are also expected to produce a written report or learning diary, critically reflecting on their experiences and linking them to practicum themes, relevant literature, and the broader goals of their professional development.

Teaching practicums are supported by feedback and regular supervisory discussions with SBTEs and university teacher educators. Like other Finnish teachers, SBTEs enjoy considerable professional autonomy, which also extends to their mentoring practices. While universities provide general expectations—for example, reviewing lesson plans, observing lessons, giving constructive feedback, supporting student teachers' professional growth, and ensuring alignment with the national core curriculum for primary and lower secondary education—SBTEs have discretion as to how these responsibilities are carried out. Although Finnish research has documented a range of supervisory methods, such as video-enhanced discussions (Körkkö, 2019) and the use of digital platforms like Microsoft Teams for sharing materials and lesson plans (Paksuniemi et al., 2021), strict guidelines for supervisory approaches are not prescribed. Instead, SBTEs are expected to make informed decisions based on their own mentoring expertise.

3.2. Job advertisement analysis

Job advertisements are written announcements of vacancies designed to attract suitable candidates (Harper, 2012). Typically, they specify employers' expectations regarding qualifications, experience, skills, and knowledge (Kim & Angnakoon, 2016). Analysing such advertisements is a well-established method for studying recruitment practices and labour market dynamics (Mahjoub & Kruyen, 2021). It can also highlight discrepancies between the competencies emphasised in academic literature and those prioritised by employers (Rios et al., 2020). The method is grounded in document analysis—a systematic approach to studying existing organisational and institutional documents that were not originally produced for research purposes (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). As with any document analysis the credibility of job advertisement analyses depends on a transparent and well-justified sampling strategy, with clearly defined criteria for selecting both sources and documents (Kim & Angnakoon, 2016).

To reduce the risk of sampling bias, this study collected job advertisements from the websites of all seven universities in Finland offering initial teacher education in Finnish. The collection covered three six-month periods (1 January to 30 June in 2021, 2022, and 2025), during which vacancies commencing at the start of the following academic year (August) were announced. New postings were screened weekly on the last working day (usually Friday). The final dataset comprised 158 advertisements for SBTE positions in university-affiliated teacher training schools: 53 from 2021, 42 from 2022, to 64 from 2025. The distribution across universities was as follows: University of Helsinki (43), University of Turku (30), University of Oulu (24), University of Eastern Finland (21), University of Lapland (17), Tampere University (12), and University of Jyväskylä (11).

The advertisements were analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), focusing on manifest content—remaining closely tied to what was explicitly stated rather than inferring underlying meanings (Bengtsson, 2016). The analysis began with thorough familiarisation with the material through multiple readings of all job advertisements to gain an overall understanding of their structure, tone, and recurring expressions. This was followed by the identification and coding of meaning units related to working with student teachers. Coding was intentionally broad and inclusive, allowing for the identification of expressions that were relevant even if they did not explicitly include specific terms such as "mentoring". Qualitative analysis software, ATLAS.ti 25 (for which the researcher's institution provides a licence), was used to manage and organise the data. The software facilitates systematic handling of qualitative datasets, enables transparent tracking of coding decisions, and supports efficient retrieval and comparison of coded segments across documents (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015). To enhance reliability and coding consistency, the process was repeated in a second round of identification and coding. During this phase, concise examples (anchor samples) from the first round were used to enhance the precision of identification. At the same time, the advertisements were re-examined with an open approach to ensure that relevant expressions differing from the established anchor samples were not overlooked.

3.3. Teacher training school principal interviews

The study included eight teacher training school principals representing six universities. All had been listed as recruitment contact persons in job advertisements for SBTE positions in 2025 and were approached via the email addresses provided. The aim was to secure participation from all seven universities offering teacher education in Finnish. At one institution, however, the principal identified as the contact person declined the invitation. The principals worked across different educational levels and held diverse titles, including executive principal, primary school principal, and upper secondary school principal.

Data collection took place between February and May 2025, with the timing largely shaped by the release of job advertisements, which determined when principals could be contacted. Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted via Zoom, a videoconferencing platform widely recognised as both a sustainable method for qualitative data collection and a tool that expands opportunities for research interviews (Archibald et al., 2019). To encourage participants to share nuanced perspectives, the interviews combined conversational openness with the use of an interview guide— a structured script listing the main questions in a generally consistent format (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This approach balanced flexibility with direction, enabling a relaxed, dialogic atmosphere while ensuring coverage of predefined topics (Patton, 2015). The guide was designed collaboratively with scholars, teacher educators, and principals, tested in pilot interviews, and refined based on feedback.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for generating codes and themes from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In thematic analysis, codes capture meaningful features of the data relevant to the research question and serve as the foundation for themes, which reflect patterns of meaning and shared ideas across the dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The analysis began with

repeated readings of the transcripts to ensure thorough familiarisation. Meaningful expressions were then identified and coded using ATLAS.ti 25. Relationships among codes were examined, and codes were clustered into potential themes. These themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to strengthen their internal coherence and distinctiveness, thereby capturing "the essence of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall)" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). An example of a coded expression, along with its corresponding code and overarching theme, is presented in Table 1.

3.4. Researcher positionality

Researcher identities, standpoints, and social locations inevitably shape assumptions and influence multiple stages of the research process—including study design, access to and interactions with participants, and interpretation of data (Patton, 2015). For this reason, positionality should be explicitly acknowledged, reflexively managed, and transparently reported (Goundar, 2025). Although positionality may stem from multiple characteristics, in this study the interplay between insider and outsider positions created a particularly interesting dynamic. Rather than adopting a simplistic dichotomy, contemporary scholarship suggests that insider–outsider positionality is fluid, situated along a continuum, and may shift across contexts and moments within the field (Yip, 2023).

The researcher has worked for an extended period in teacher education as both a researcher and a teacher educator. Through these roles, and through involvement in national research and development collaboration, the researcher has developed substantial knowledge of Finnish teacher education and of the role of teacher training schools within it. In this sense, the researcher may be considered an informed insider—familiar with the context, its culture, and its core practices. This familiarity may also have influenced participants' willingness to participate in the study and their comfort in sharing information.

At the same time, the researcher also occupied a clear outsider position. The researcher has never worked as a teacher in a teacher training school (apart from short substitute teaching placements during initial teacher education), nor as a principal, and has not personally participated in recruitment processes for teacher positions. These experiential gaps may have led some participants to perceive the researcher as lacking certain forms of practical knowledge, potentially creating moments of guardedness or hesitancy during interviews. It is possible that a researcher with more extensive school-level leadership or recruitment experience might have elicited different accounts. To mitigate these limitations, the researcher engaged in thorough preparation prior to data collection, including reviewing relevant literature and analysing the teacher training school's recent job advertisements to better understand the local recruitment context.

Table 1
Examples of coded expressions, assigned codes, and overarching themes.

Coded expression	Code	Theme
"Teaching skills and the ability to work as a teacher must be on solid ground, and on top of that, it's easy to build mentoring skills."	Good teaching skills as a foundation	Openness and dialogue valued – yet teaching proficiency takes priority
"We look for employees who have the readiness to absorb the content of mentor training. They don't have to be fully ready, but they must have sufficient capacity and motivation to develop."	Readiness to develop	Becoming a mentor is learned through practice
"What stands out are those with long-term mentoring experience, perhaps even as mentor trainers. That's often someone moving from another training school, and they naturally stand out."	Prior experience is an advantage	The ambivalent role of prior mentoring experience

To actively manage subjectivity during data analysis, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive practice. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the analysis of both datasets (job advertisements and interview data) to document initial impressions, emerging interpretations, and the rationale for analytic decisions. In addition, informal but critical conversations with colleagues about teacher training schools, SBTEs, and recruitment practices further supported reflexive engagement and enhanced awareness of the researcher's positional standpoint throughout the study.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2023). The job advertisements analysed were publicly available on university websites, which reduced certain ethical concerns related to data collection. As such, the advertisements were not anonymised, and institutional identifiers were retained when presenting direct excerpts. With regard to human participants, the study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019). All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, data excerpts were carefully selected to avoid disclosure of identifying details, and pseudonyms were assigned to all presented extracts. Participants were also notified that they would be informed of any publications arising from the study.

4. Findings

The following section presents findings on the role of mentoring expertise in SBTE recruitment. It first draws on evidence from job advertisements, followed by insights from interviews with teacher training school principals. Authentic excerpts from both datasets are provided to illustrate the findings and enhance their trustworthiness. All excerpts were originally in Finnish and have been translated into English by the author. Direct quotations from job advertisements are accompanied by codes indicating the respective university, while pseudonyms are used for interview excerpts.

4.1. Mentoring expertise in SBTE job advertisements

The job advertisements included explicit statements indicating that mentoring student teacher during their teaching practicum is part of the SBTE role: "The position includes mentoring student teachers' in their teaching practicum" (University of Oulu). From a recruitment perspective, the advertisements referred to mentoring capabilities: "Successful performance in the position requires strong and diverse capabilities for mentoring both class and subject student teachers in their teaching practicum" (University of Jyväskylä); prior experience in mentoring: "Experience in mentoring during teaching practicums will be taken into account when assessing applicants" (University of Turku); and relevant training: "The position involves close engagement with practicum mentoring, for which prior experience and appropriate training will support success in the position (Tampere University). One university explicitly encouraged applicants to elaborate on their mentoring experience in their application: "The duties of a class teacher include not only teaching but also mentoring student teachers during their practicum. Therefore, please describe your experience in this area in your application" (University of Helsinki).

Although mentoring was acknowledged in the advertisements as part of the SBTE's professional responsibilities, its presence was very limited—typically confined to a single sentence noting that mentoring forms part of the job or that relevant experience and training would be valued. Furthermore, these descriptions were not only brief but also vague, offering little detail about the specific skills, practices, or forms of

experience desired.

Consequently, practicum mentoring appeared to occupy a marginal position in SBTE recruitment compared to requirements related to teaching, or for instance, pedagogical development. This is somewhat unexpected, as providing structured opportunities for student teachers to complete supervised teaching practicums constitutes a core responsibility of teacher training schools and their staff, alongside their provision of primary or secondary education. In practice, observing and mentoring student teachers often occupies a substantial proportion of SBTEs' working time— sometimes exceeding that devoted to their own classroom teaching.

In document analysis, such as the examination of job advertisements, the absence or sparseness of a particular theme can itself be suggestive (Bowen, 2009). To gain a deeper understanding of such omissions or gaps, researchers are encouraged to consult additional sources of data that not only shed light on the issue under investigation but also clarify the nature or underlying causes of the observed gaps (Morgan, 2022). The marginal representation of mentoring expertise in the job advertisements therefore both necessitated and justified further exploration of its role in SBTE recruitment. In this study, this was pursued through interviews with principals of teacher training schools.

4.2. Principals' views on mentoring expertise in SBTE recruitment

To complement the insights drawn from job advertisements, interviews with teacher training school principals were conducted to examine more closely the role of mentoring expertise and experience in SBTE recruitment. The principals consistently emphasised mentoring as a central element of the SBTE role and as essential for supporting the professional development of future teachers. At the same time, the interviews revealed a tension between teaching and mentoring responsibilities, with mentoring described as secondary to classroom teaching duties in recruitment decisions. The findings are presented through three themes that capture how mentoring expertise and experience are understood and valued in recruitment.

4.2.1. Theme 1: openness and dialogue valued – yet teaching proficiency takes priority

The first theme reflects the principals' views on the kind of mentoring expertise considered valuable in the recruitment and selection of SBTEs. The most frequently emphasised competencies included openness and dialogical skills. As one principal explained:

> In the interview, we focus a lot on how the applicant would position themselves in the mentoring situation and how they would engage in a dialogical relationship with the student teacher—not as someone who dictates 'this is how it's done' but in a genuinely conversational way. […] They shouldn't impose their own strong views, which may have developed over the years, but rather allow the student teacher room and opportunities to hold very different perspectives than their own. […] You get a sense of whether the applicant's thinking is very fixed—like 'this is the way things must be done, this is the only right way'—or whether they can see that, hey, there might actually be seven or twenty good ways to do this (Principal 5).

This statement highlights expectation of a non-directive stance, openness to multiple pedagogical solutions, and commitment to supporting the student teacher's agency, collectively framing mentoring as a dialogical, learner-centred process rather than a transfer of predefined practices. However, another interviewee noted that many applicants for SBTE positions still approach mentoring through an "apprentice–-master" model, in which "the experienced teacher shows how things have always been done and how they should be done from now on […], when in reality there are many possible ways to solve problems" (Principal 3). While the principals acknowledged that imparting knowledge is part of the SBTE role, they placed particular emphasis on the ability to support a student teacher's personal reflection to foster professional growth:

> Our student teachers do benefit greatly from the tips given by experienced mentors, but above all, for a mentoring teacher, the ears are more important than the mouth. The goal is to offer that reflective surface – the wall you bounce ideas off […] We recognise that each student teacher has an individual situation and background, and we allow space for their own self-reflection (Principal 1).

The metaphor of "reflective surface" illustrates how principals conceptualise mentoring as facilitative rather than prescriptive. Listening skills, sensitivity to individual backgrounds, and the capacity to scaffold self-reflection emerge as key aspects of mentoring expertise.

Although some principals stressed that "not all great teachers are necessarily great mentors – it's a distinct professional skill" (Principal 7), many statements that prioritised recruiting good teachers over explicitly valuing mentoring skills suggested that the latter was seen as secondary in SBTE recruitment. This was evident in comments such as: "It's obvious that a teacher must be a skilled teacher in order to act as a mentor […]; you can't be a good mentor if you don't have teaching skills yourself" (Principal 2), and "Teaching skills and the ability to work as a teacher must be on solid ground, and on top of that, it's easy to build mentoring skills" (Principal 4). The principal who gave the first quotation also pointed out that limited teaching experience hinders the delivery of high-quality mentoring: "We even have a qualification requirement that you must have two years of work experience after graduation […] because it's difficult to guide others' learning and work if you're still at the very beginning yourself" (Principal 7). The distinctiveness of mentoring expertise was also diminished by its comparison to general employee skills:

> The most important thing is subject expertise and qualifications, of course, but in addition to that, there are these personal qualities related to mentoring – communication skills, collaboration skills, flexibility, respectful interaction – and those are universal qualities that you expect from any good employee. […] So, when we get a good person who wants to promote a sense of community and serve the whole, they also have the necessary readiness to take on the role of a mentor (Principal 1).

Overall, this discourse tended to normalise mentoring expertise as an extension of general professionalism rather than a specialised competence for SBTE.

4.2.2. Theme 2: becoming a mentor is learned through practice

In the previous theme, the focus was on recruiting good teachers, with mentoring skills discussed in the recruitment context primarily as potential—the ability to develop into a good SBTE. This second theme builds upon that discussion, further clarifying how mentoring competence was often seen as a skill that evolves and is learned on the job, as one principal put it: "I think mentoring is just like any other skill – it can be mastered, and it can be learned" (Principal 2). This framing positions mentoring as a professional capacity that can be cultivated, suggesting that greater emphasis be placed on potential than on current expertise.

Training schools support this development by providing mentor training to help SBTEs acquire and refine mentoring skills. In recruitment, candidates are assessed for their capacity to benefit from such training: "We look for employees who have the readiness to absorb the content of mentor training. They don't have to be fully ready, but they must have sufficient capacity and motivation to develop" (Principal 1). The ability to learn on the job was also considered important. One principal emphasised that even without prior experience, a teacher with sufficient capacity can become a competent mentor: "We see that if someone has the capacity for mentoring, then with mentor training and experience they will become a good mentor, even without previous experience" (Principal 5). However, the same principal also described the challenges of starting an SBTE career:

> You have to get into mentoring and competence development quite quickly, because if your employment starts in August, the first student teachers arrive in September. There's not a lot of time to prepare. A new mentor is taking training while simultaneously trying things out in practice. There's a lot to do, and that first autumn is almost nothing but learning." (Principal 5)

This reflection illustrates the substantial demands faced by early-career SBTEs recruited into the role, where formal training, on-the-job learning, and mentoring responsibilities overlap.

4.2.3. Theme 3: the ambivalent role of prior mentoring experience

The third theme addresses the ambivalent role of prior mentoring experience in SBTE recruitment. On one hand, such experience is clearly advantageous for applicants: "Of course, experience is always an asset. If you have mentoring experience, it is considered a plus. Any experience relevant to the position is beneficial" (Principal 1). Applicants with prior work as an SBTE in a training school were described as particularly distinctive within the applicant pool: "What stands out are those with long-term mentoring experience, perhaps even as mentor trainers. That's often someone moving from another training school, and they naturally stand out" (Principal 5). A major advantage of previous work in a training school was that applicants understood the nature of the SBTE role: "We recently recruited a teacher with almost ten years of training school experience. You can be sure they know what the job entails" (Principal 4). Such applicants were also perceived to have a more developed understanding of mentoring practices: "Those who have worked in a training school before naturally have a different perspective on mentoring than someone coming entirely from outside this world" (Principal 8). Mentoring experience gained in field schools was also valued, both for its own sake and as a stepping-stone towards a training school position: "Our field school network is strong, and it's valuable if you've done mentoring there. I often tell unsuccessful applicants to contact the faculty and get involved in field school mentoring to gain that experience" (Principal 3).

When evaluating the applications for SBTE position, principals considered not only duration of prior mentoring experience (e.g., "How many years of student teacher mentoring they've done" [Principal 6]) but also the quality and complexity of that experience:

> From the CV and other documents, we can see how the applicant presents their past experience. Mentoring sometimes involves difficult situations where you have to raise challenging issues. If they've had that kind of experience, it's a credit in their application (Principal 4).

Overall, these observations suggest that prior mentoring experience, as a signal of readiness for the SBTE role, provides principals with confidence in their recruitment decisions.

However, all principals expressed caution about overemphasising prior mentoring experience. While it is advantageous for applicants to understand the context and demands of training schools, strict experience requirements could unduly restrict the applicant pool. One principal noted: "The circles are quite small if we expect prior experience" (Principal 4). Another added: "If we highlighted mentoring skills and experience more, the number of applicants might drop and they'd come from an even narrower pool. It could mean that only people who already have training school mentoring experience could get hired" (Principal 6). As a result, overemphasis on experience could lead to insularity: "It could result in inward-looking recruitment, where people just move from one training school to another, and we'd lose the broader range of expertise and perspectives from other teaching contexts" (Principal 4).

To avoid narrowing the applicant pool, some training schools have replaced explicit requirements for mentoring experience with broader criteria:

> We already get far fewer applications than municipal schools. If the city gets 100, we might get 20 or 30. So when posting a vacancy, we might state that research, development, or innovation work is an asset, rather than making mentoring experience a requirement. That could include mentoring, but it could also be other things. It's just a way to broaden the applicant pool, because talent can come from beyond other training schools (Principal 5).

This approach reflects a deliberate effort to expand the applicant pool and maintain inclusivity. In line with this, principals also recognised the value of other experiences that can prepare individuals for mentoring, such as in-service teacher mentoring or coaching in sports: "Someone who turned out to be an excellent mentor without formal training had worked as a coach for young adults in sports. They had a good understanding of coaching-style mentoring, which worked well here" (Principal 8). Some principals went further, emphasising that varied professional and life experiences are valuable for mentoring student teachers from diverse backgrounds: "In training school teaching, a broad perspective and varied expertise are assets. A very narrow career path isn't necessarily ideal" (Principal 2). This perspective contrasts with the more narrowly defined approach that prioritises prior SBTE experience.

In summary, while previous mentoring experience undoubtedly offers an advantage in recruitment, principals generally preferred to keep the barrier to entry low, encouraging applications from teachers with diverse backgrounds. This was even stated explicitly in one job advertisement: "We encourage qualified applicants from all backgrounds to apply for our open positions" (University of Turku). Nonetheless, the reputation of training schools can itself deter potential applicants, who may perceive the role as requiring extraordinary expertise:

> What you often hear is that people think you have to be some kind of guru or demigod to get a job here, and so they don't even try. They think it's something you might do at the end of your career, after ten years of experience (Principal 5).

Overall, the theme illustrates the ambivalence between valuing prior mentoring experience and maintaining an open, inclusive recruitment approach, highlighting principals' efforts in SBTE recruitment to balance applicant readiness with accessibility.

5. Discussion

Finland has maintained a strong and stable tradition of university-affiliated teacher training schools, unlike many other countries, where partnerships between universities and schools often remain fragile (Andreassen, 2023; Zeichner, 2021). This study examined the role of mentoring expertise in the recruitment of SBTEs in these schools, where teachers are recruited specifically for this role and, from the outset, mentor student teachers during supervised teaching practicums in addition to their primary or secondary teaching responsibilities. The study draws on two sources of data: job advertisements for SBTE positions and interviews with teacher training school principals responsible for recruitment.

The findings revealed an ambivalent positioning of mentoring in this context. On the one hand, mentoring was acknowledged as a central responsibility: it was explicitly mentioned in job advertisements as part of the SBTEs professional duties, and principals consistently emphasised its significance in supporting the professional development of future teachers. On the other hand, from a recruitment perspective, mentoring expertise and experience were presented in vague and minimal terms. The job advertisements provided little detail or guidance regarding the specific skills or experience sought. Similarly, in interviews, principals often characterised mentoring not as a specialised competence but as a set of general professional qualities expected of any capable teacher, or as a skill that could be acquired on the job—thereby justifying its limited emphasis in recruitment decisions.

The findings suggest that the teacher educator role of SBTEs remains subordinate to their role as classroom teachers, as mentoring expertise

tended to occupy a secondary position in recruitment compared to requirements related to classroom teaching expertise or pedagogical development. Indeed, job advertisements for SBTEs closely resembled those for municipal teaching positions in Finland (Mankki et al., 2024). In light of earlier literature, alternative descriptions of the SBTE role—such as "teachers of children" (Clarke et al., 2014) or "hosts in the classroom" (Rakes et al., 2022)—appear more fitting than those emphasising the ability to support student teachers' reflection (Grimmett et al., 2018; Loukomies, Petersen, & Lavonen, 2018; Tiainen & Lutovac, 2022) or to provide sustained emotional and informational support through constructive dialogue (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Izadinia, 2015a; Lavonen et al., 2023; Marjamaa et al., 2023). Interestingly, this secondary positioning mirrors trends identified in the recruitment of university teacher educators: in Australia, such positions were primarily framed as generic academic positions, with teacher education responsibilities treated as secondary (Nuttall et al., 2013).

The subordination of mentoring to teaching is, to some extent, understandable. Schools—including teacher training schools—are complex and often hectic institutions historically designed to prioritise pupils' learning over the professional learning of teachers and teacher educators (Czerniawski et al., 2023). Several principals interviewed in this study highlighted the importance of keeping the entry threshold low: placing strong emphasis on mentoring expertise in recruitment was seen as a potential barrier to applicants and as a risk of further shrinking an already limited candidate pool compared to municipal teaching positions. However, this marginalisation of mentoring in recruitment does not reflect the actual nature of SBTE work in Finland. As one principal explained, given the heavy practicum load, as much as 90 % of an SBTE's classroom teaching may be delivered by others, leaving their core responsibility in supervision and mentoring rather than direct teaching.

These findings have clear implications for teacher education. While some principals argued that strong teaching competence, supplemented by minimal training, is sufficient to qualify someone as an SBTE, research consistently shows that teaching expertise alone does not guarantee effective mentoring, which requires a distinct knowledge base and skill set (Bullock & Christou, 2009; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). Although Finnish SBTEs have demonstrated success in supporting student teachers—serving as their primary source of pedagogical knowledge (Lavonen et al., 2023), providing emotional support (Marjamaa et al., 2023), and facilitating the experiences student teachers value most during practicums (Loukomies et al., 2022)—this study supports placing greater weight on mentoring expertise in recruitment practices. Such expertise could be operationalised in recruitment by highlighting the key elements of a positive mentoring relationship, as identified by student teachers and SBTEs (Izadinia, 2015b) and emphasised as areas for development in SBTE preparation (Hobson et al., 2009). These include communicating openly with adult learners, providing emotional support, engaging in constructive feedback cycles, and releasing control. These skills were absent from job advertisements, and although some were occasionally mentioned in principal interviews, their emphasis in selection decisions appeared minimal. More broadly, these results may contribute to developing mentoring-focused approaches to SBTE recruitment—not only in Finland but also internationally—at a time when many countries are expanding school-based teacher education models as part of the wider "practicum turn" (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Vanassche, 2022).

This study has several limitations. First, it focused on the specific context of Finnish teacher education and teacher training schools. Since the practices and experiences of SBTEs vary considerably across individuals and systems (Czerniawski et al., 2019), the generalisability of the findings is necessarily limited and should be approached with caution. Second, although job advertisements were collected across three separate six-month periods, providing a comprehensive sample, the number of principals interviewed could have been larger. Nonetheless, the sample covered all but one Finnish university offering teacher education. Third, both datasets were analysed by a single researcher, which may have influenced the interpretation and the resulting findings.

Future research on SBTEs should move beyond the strong emphasis on self-perceptions (Richter et al., 2021) by incorporating a wider range of data sources and perspectives.

Documentary evidence, such as job advertisements, work plans, and meeting minutes, along with the views of other stakeholders, could provide valuable insights to complement existing literature. For example, research has noted the near absence of children's and adolescents' perspectives in practicum studies (Lawson et al., 2015; Mankki et al., 2025), even though their views could illuminate SBTEs' dual role as teachers and mentors, as well as their mentoring activities during lessons. Greater attention to SBTE recruitment practices is warranted, and research could play a key role in supporting this effort. Ultimately, adopting a longitudinal perspective on SBTE recruitment would allow scholars to track whether mentoring expertise is gaining prominence in recruitment and whether, as a possible consequence, Finnish principals' concerns about declining applicant numbers are realised.

6. Conclusion

In many countries, student teachers now spend more time in schools with SBTEs than in previous decades. Consequently, the recruitment of SBTEs, alongside their professional development, is critical for maintaining teacher education quality, yet it has received limited empirical attention. Findings from this study, offering an employer perspective that complements existing research focused primarily on teacher educators' self-perceptions, indicate that the teacher educator role is often secondary to classroom teaching or pedagogical development in SBTE recruitment. As a result, the dual role of SBTEs as both teachers and mentors is insufficiently reflected, despite the fact that mentoring may constitute the majority of their actual work.

SBTE recruitment processes should explicitly recognise mentoring expertise alongside teaching experience, beginning with job advertisements and continuing throughout the selection process, to ensure candidates are aware of and prepared for this dual role. Future research should investigate SBTE recruitment longitudinally and across diverse contexts, incorporating perspectives from multiple stakeholders—including pupils—to better capture the evolving and multifaceted nature of mentoring. Increasing the emphasis on mentoring expertise in recruitment could strengthen teacher education quality amid the global expansion of school-based practicum models.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) in order to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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