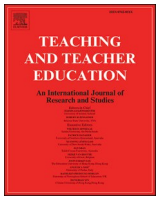
Teaching and Teacher Education 176 (2026) 105523



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate



Research paper

School-based teacher educators' professional identity and professional needs

Ann MacPhail [a,*], Eline Vanassche [b], Ainat Guberman [c], Gerry Czerniawski [d], Juliette Boks-Vlemmix [e]

[a] University of Limerick, Limerick, V94 T9PX, Ireland
[b] KU Leuven Kulak, Etienne Sabbelaan 51, 8500, Kortrijk, Belgium
[c] The MOFET Institute, Shoshana Persitz 13, 6937807, Tel Aviv, Israel
[d] The University of East London, E15 4LZ, UK
[e] Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Kalvskinnet Campus, 7491, Trondheim, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Professional identity
Professional learning
School-based teacher educators
Higher education-based teacher educators

ABSTRACT

This article explores who school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) are, including how they are recruited and prepared, the roles they perform, the nature of their professional identity and what professional learning needs and preferences they have. Fifty-two interviews were conducted with SBTEs across five jurisdictions: England, Flanders (Belgium), Ireland, Israel and Norway. Six themes were explored across the complement of countries and include the (i) predominant role and responsibility of SBTEs, (ii) necessity to be familiar with university policy and procedures, (iii) appreciation of, and involvement in, research-related activities, (iv) SBTEs as a heterogeneous group, (v) being identified as having a disposition to working with student teachers, and (vi) accessing continuing professional development activities. The results of this study challenge ideas present in the literature on the role and subsequent expected practices of SBTEs given that such roles and practices are not necessarily evident in reality. [145 words].

1. Introduction

In recent years, the core of teacher education has been shifting gradually from higher education institutions to schools. This process is called 'the practical turn in teacher education' (Zeichner, 2012). Given the critical role of teacher education among the factors that determine teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Mitani et al., 2022; Whalen et al., 2019), there is an urgent need to understand who school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) are (Livingston, 2014). The specific research question for this study is 'What can we learn about the complex realities of being and becoming a school-based teacher educator from a (qualitative) cross-country perspective?' That is, the paper does not focus on problems in the field of SBTE per se but rather on what can we learn about the complex realities of being and becoming a school-based teacher educator. While such a research question might appear overly broad in scope, it acknowledges the current dearth of literature, at an international level, in relation to this professional group and the need for exploratory research of this nature (White & Berry, 2023). This question is addressed through an inductive analysis of interviews conducted with SBTEs across five jurisdictions: England, Flanders (Belgium), Ireland, Israel and Norway. Before addressing the question, we present the framework of our study: teacher educators' professional identity focusing first on findings on higher education-based teacher educators (HEBTEs). Next, we describe prior and current conceptualizations of SBTEs' roles, alongside findings that are relevant for their professional identity: how they define their roles, in what kinds of professional development activities they participate and what their professional development preferences are. Finally, we outline the study context, the teacher education systems in the study's five jurisdictions, highlighting the specific positioning of SBTEs within each system. The reader may be interested to know that data from interviews with SBTEs from a specific jurisdiction is being considered for separate publication with data focusing specifically on one jurisdiction having already been published (Ó Gallchóir et al., 2024).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Ann.MacPhail@ul.ie (A. MacPhail), eline.vanassche@kuleuven.be (E. Vanassche), ainat@macam.ac.il (A. Guberman), g.czerniawski@uel.ac.uk (G. Czerniawski), juliette.boks@ntnu.no (J. Boks-Vlemmix).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2026.105523
Received 14 September 2025; Received in revised form 3 February 2026; Accepted 26 March 2026
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2. The professional identity of teacher educators

The conceptualization of professional identity adopted here regards it as a dynamic process through which professionals continuously interpret their daily experiences in relation to their professional goals, values, beliefs, knowledge, and skills. Over time, the unfolding of these multiple identity-forming interactions results either in a coherent and positive self-concept that motivates professionals to persevere, or in a sense of incompetence, low self-esteem, and burnout that may drive attrition (Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000).

Teacher educators were once described as an understudied occupational group (Goodwin et al., 2014) and have become more prominent in research in recent years (e.g., Czerniawski et al., 2017; Lunenberg et al., 2014; Meeus et al., 2018; Van der Klink et al., 2017). Most of the research that explicitly identifies itself as research on the professional identity of teacher educators has focused exclusively on HEBTEs. Studies on their professional identity have discovered they form a heterogeneous occupational group performing a multitude of roles that vary according to their professional background prior to assuming the role of a teacher educator, their position within their institution, and the contexts of their work (Kelchtermans et al., 2018). At the core of their identity is their dual role and understanding of themselves as teachers of teachers, which requires an intricate integration of content (what is taught) and pedagogy (how it is taught) (Czerniawski et al., 2017; Loughran, 2007). Among the other roles HEBTEs assume are content specialists, teachers, role models, gatekeepers, curriculum builders, brokers, and researchers (Lunenberg et al., 2014). Ideally, these roles complement and strengthen each other, forming a well-rounded professional identity. However, they often compete for HEBTEs' limited time resources (Griffiths et al., 2014; Guberman & Mcdossi, 2019; Meeus et al., 2018).

HEBTEs are required to acquire new professional skills and adapt to unfamiliar work contexts when entering their roles (Murray & Male, 2005; Swennen et al., 2010). However, in most countries, there are no specific formal qualifications required of HEBTEs nor formal preparation programs, and their induction is often insufficient (Goodwin et al., 2014; Guberman et al., 2021). HEBTEs' work and development is further influenced by insufficient opportunities for professional learning activities that address their specific needs (MacPhail et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2017). Furthermore, the contribution of HEBTEs is sometimes evaluated through unsuitable measures (Olsen & Buchanan, 2017), challenging, in some instances, HEBTEs' professional identities.

3. School based teacher educators

While the notion of 'teacher educators' is relatively well-established in the context of higher education, it has received far less attention regarding SBTEs. Traditionally, SBTEs have been viewed primarily as teachers, with 'add-on' mentoring responsibilities of supporting student teachers as well as their colleagues in schools. The growing recognition of their work and professional identity is explicitly reflected in the formalised term 'school-based teacher educators', rather than terms such as 'mentor' and 'cooperating teacher.' These previous terms carried limiting connotations: 'mentor' traditionally denotes an experienced colleague who provides social, emotional, and professional support to less experienced practitioners (Wang et al., 2025), while 'cooperating teacher' positions these professionals merely as assistants to HEBTEs. In contrast, the term 'school-based teacher educator' recognizes the more equal epistemic positioning between SBTEs and HEBTEs. Both groups are invested in the work of teaching about teaching, contributing distinct, yet complementary forms of expertise. That is, SBTEs are deeply embedded in the complex and often messy realities of classroom and school life and allow student teachers' learning and development to be grounded in these realities. HEBTEs, in turn, may contribute the conceptual lenses that support the analysis and sensemaking of these experiences. It is through the interaction between both forms of expertise that student teachers can develop their own understandings of teaching. While SBTEs exact roles and responsibilities are context dependent, at both the national and regional level, this terminological term serves to underscore the need to acknowledge SBTEs' crucial role in supporting the learning and development of teachers across all career stages as "fellow teacher educators but based in schools" (White & Berry, 2022, p. 3), and the professional knowledge and identity this work entails.

Interest in SBTEs' expertise intensified following research that demonstrated how field practice, when closely connected to theoretical studies, contributes to student teachers' professional competence and retention (Podolsky et al., 2016; Zeichner, 2010). A close(r) connection between SBTEs and HEBTEs was also deemed beneficial for the professional learning and development of both. Consequently, it was suggested that SBTEs should collaborate with HEBTEs in 'hybrid', non-hierarchical spaces where they can learn from each other and transform their practices for the benefit of all stakeholders involved (Daza et al., 2021; Rudder et al., 2025; Zeichner, 2010). This notion of a 'third space' contrasted sharply with previous conceptualizations of SBTEs' role, given its call for two-way transfer of knowledge and professional development challenging the traditional power relations between the academic institution and SBTEs (Daza et al., 2021; Rudder et al., 2025; Zeichner, 2010).

Currently, strong partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions are recognized as a maker of quality teacher education (CAEP, 2022), and different forms of partnerships proliferated (Daza et al., 2021; Rudder et al., 2025). However, it remains unclear whether SBTEs' experiences align with the non-hierarchical, democratic ideology that underlies the 'partnership' idea. Specifically, it is not clear how SBTEs' ideas and expertise are recognized by academic teacher education institutions, whether their professional roles in teacher education are defined accordingly, how their professional knowledge develops through practice, and whether their experiences foster the consolidation of a professional identity as SBTEs.

Studies that explored SBTEs' roles and professional identities typically focused on a single role, such as cooperating teachers' dilemmas concerning their responsibilities towards their student teachers vis-à-vis their commitments to their classroom students (Mellor et al., 2020), or the effects of mentor teachers' mentoring approach (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). The shared aspects of SBTEs' profession remain largely 'hidden' from both SBTEs and researchers (Livingston, 2014). In line with these findings, a large quantitative study that examined SBTEs' professional learning and development needs (Czerniawski et al., 2024) discovered that SBTEs rarely refer to themselves as SBTEs and refer either to the specific role they have, for example, 'a mentor teacher', or use metaphors such as 'a coach'. The shared qualities in the complex realities of being and becoming SBTEs remains unexplored.

As for their professional trajectories, SBTEs' recruitment is serendipitous, and formal accreditation is typically not required (Liao et al., 2023), as is the case for HEBTEs (Guberman et al., 2021). However, unlike HEBTEs, SBTEs often participate in some preparation activities for their roles (Czerniawski et al., 2024). For professional development, SBTEs prioritize learning activities that focus on their teaching as well as second-order teaching skills, while showing less interest in research compared to HEBTEs (Liao et al., 2023). SBTEs engage in various formal and informal learning activities, including coursework, professional learning communities, and ongoing dialogue with HEBTEs. Notably, academic teacher education institutions typically organize these learning activities for SBTEs rather than having SBTEs initiate them independently (Liao et al., 2023).

The goal of the current study was to explore how SBTEs' work contexts and experiences influence the complex processes of being and becoming SBTEs. Such information can, the authors hope, enhance professional development support that is more sensitive to SBTE's roles, identities, challenges and work contexts. SBTEs deserve such support, in recognition of the fact that being an SBTE involves more than 'simply' being a good classroom teacher.

4. The study context: school based teacher education in five jurisdictions

To maximise work contexts and role diversity, this study involved SBTEs from five jurisdictions that were included in (Author, 2024). This study was conducted by members of the International Forum for Teacher Educator Development (InFo-TED), which is a group of teacher educators from Europe and beyond who wish to support the professionalization of all teacher educators (Kelchtermans et al., 2018).

The researchers who undertook the interviews and the writing of this paper all reside within HBTE and occupy multiple roles that include teaching pre-service teachers, researching teacher education policies and practices, designing teacher education programmes and supervising pre-service teachers during school placement. As a group, their relationship with SBTE is more diverse given the differing jurisdiction policies that determine the extent to which SBTE are formally recognized as contributing to the pedagogical experience and expertise of pre-service teachers through observing sustained school classroom practice. Consequently, this affects the genuine partnership that forms between SBTE and HBTE, with instances for some of the researchers where they are involved with SBTE in co-constructing preparation for pre-service and beginning teachers, ensuring that professional learning is both intellectually rigorous and authentically rooted in the realities of schooling."

In the following, we describe the teacher education system in each of the jurisdictions and the roles SBTEs have within them.

4.1. England

The term 'teacher education' in England is often used to describe both initial teacher training (ITT) and ongoing professional development for teachers (Czerniawski, 2018). The identification of teacher educators encompasses both those based in higher education institutions (HEIs) and SBTEs, reflecting the dual role within a school-led system of teacher education (Carter, 2015). Policy documents from the Department for Education (DfE) emphasize concepts such as mentoring, coaching, and professional collaboration, underlining the importance of experienced teachers in supporting teacher development within schools (DfE, 2024).

The role of SBTEs in England is formally recognized, particularly within the framework of school-centred ITT and partnerships between HEIs and schools. The DfE's guidance on teacher training explicitly outlines the expectations for mentors, including their roles in observation, feedback, and facilitating professional growth (DfE, 2024). There is variability in the support and resources allocated to SBTEs within an increasingly impoverished HEI partnership system. While many teachers embrace mentoring roles as a natural extension of their professional expertise, the framework for developing and sustaining their professional identity as teacher educators is context dependent. Effective mentoring is, for example, often contingent on the structures provided by ITT providers and the culture of collaboration within schools. These have, since the introduction of an 'Early Career Framework' (DfE, 2019) for teachers, stretched resources for schools attempting to support both student teachers and teachers within the first two years of their careers.

School placements represent a key space in English education where the role of SBTEs is most prominent. These placements are governed by detailed agreements between schools and ITT providers including (but not solely limited to) HEIs, aiming to ensure a high-quality experience for student teachers. Despite these arrangements, challenges remain. The variability in mentor training and the demands of balancing mentoring with teaching responsibilities can lead to inconsistencies in the quality of support offered.

4.2. Flanders

In Flanders, teacher development is framed within a professional continuum perspective, emphasizing that "teacher education does not stand on its own" (Flemish Government, 2016, p. 10). Rather, it serves as the first entry into a career-long process of learning and professional growth. This perspective reflects a policy awareness of the importance of continuing professional development and, particularly, access to mentoring support throughout a teacher's career. However, actual policy decisions (e.g., the withdrawal of funding for mentoring support in schools) often contradict these stated priorities, creating a 'capricious' policy environment (Vanassche, 2024a).

The role of SBTE is not formally recognized in Flanders. While experienced teachers in schools often assume responsibilities associated with this role (e.g., observing lessons, providing feedback, modelling practice), they typically do so in informal ways. Structural support for these responsibilities, including dedicated time within school appointments or access to preparation and professional development opportunities, remains minimal (Vanassche, 2024a).

The situation reflects the broader positioning of schools' contributions to the initial stage of the professional continuum. Contrary to developments in other European countries, Flanders has avoided adopting school-based models of teacher education, even amidst pressing teacher shortages. Schools contribute by hosting extended student teacher placements and providing mentoring support, but there is a strong belief that the responsibility for initial teacher education (ITE) lies with higher education. As Vanassche (2024b) observes, "in all scenarios, Flemish teacher education remains firmly embedded within higher education colleges and universities, even though a significant overhaul is needed to meet evolving demands" (pp. 11-12).

While no formal profiles or appointment requirements exist for teacher educators, there is an implicit division of roles. The term 'teacher educator' is largely reserved for those employed by higher education institutions, where the focus is on deepening educational theory and principles during ITE. By contrast, those working in schools, commonly referred to as 'mentors', concentrate on offering hands-on guidance on 'what works' to student teachers and in-service teachers.

4.3. Ireland

In Ireland, the term 'teacher education' is only used in initial teacher education documentation and therefore confines the identification of teacher educators to the academy (Ó Gallchóir & McGarr, 2022). From language used by the Teaching Council (the teaching professional regulatory body in Ireland), such as 'mentoring,' 'coaching' and 'experienced colleagues', capacity building needs and education of teachers within the induction (*Droichead*) and in-service (*Cosán*) phases of the continuum are facilitated in-house by SBTEs. However, while the role of a SBTE is recognized in many international contexts (White et al., 2015), there is no formal recognition or policy governance of the role in Ireland.

To identify as a SBTE in Ireland is to occupy an identity which is largely imaginary, framed from the subject perception through which an individual constructs a framework of meaning making to support their self-identified role as a SBTE but lacks the contextual shaping and evaluation of the object of the identity, essential in sustaining and maintaining such a role (Ó Gallchóir et al., 2024).

Reinforcing the fact that school placement is based on a tradition of goodwill, the Teaching Council encourages teachers, in line with the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers (2016), to work with "student teachers in the interest of sharing, developing and supporting good practice" (p.7). As such, school placement is the most prominent space in Irish education where the role of SBTEs is considered. The lack of formalised structure for school placement results in SBTEs having a limited intentional/unintentional remit as it can be dictated by either higher education institutes (HEIs) or schools and teachers themselves. The ad hoc relationship between HEIs and schools (Teaching Council, 2011, p. 11) and the voluntary nature of cooperating teachers' participation (Young & MacPhail, 2015) has extended to the ad hoc recognition of SBTEs as guides and mentors.

4.4. Israel

In Israel, the 'practical turn' resulted in multiple and distinct roles that SBTEs fulfil corresponding to different stages of teacher professional development. For example, 'cooperating teachers' collaborate with HEBTEs to prepare student teachers; 'mentor teachers' guide first-year teaching interns; 'accompanying teachers' support second-year teaching interns; and 'leading teachers' facilitate professional learning communities for qualified teachers (Guberman & Mcdossi, 2023). Individual SBTEs may occupy multiple roles concurrently.

The extent of preparation and professional development opportunities SBTEs receive varies according to each role's specific requirements. Cooperating teachers receive support from their HEI based counterparts, though the nature and extent of this support varies across teacher education institutions and individual teacher educators (Hoffman et al., 2015). The Israeli Ministry of Education requires mentor and accompanying teachers to complete preparatory courses provided by academic institutions through a two-year, 60-h academic program (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024). Most courses take place on campus, but there are also contextualized, school or local authority-based courses in which additional stakeholders participate (Arviv Elyashiv & Levi-Keren, 2023). Recruiting mentors and accompanying teachers to these courses is difficult, largely due to the intermittent nature of their roles (and remuneration), which depend on their schools recruiting beginning teachers in their subject areas. Beyond the initial preparation, there are no ongoing professional development opportunities for mentors and accompanying teachers. Leading teachers must complete 30-60 academic hours of preparatory coursework and receive ongoing professional support throughout their tenure from Ministry of Education guides (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018).

Although these policies nurture SBTEs professionalism, at least in some of their capacities, this multifaceted system appears to impede rather than foster the development of a cohesive SBTE professional identity. This undesirable effect stems from the disparate role definitions, different preparation requirements, varying levels of professional support, and the diverse types of support providers.

4.5. Norway

Teacher education in Norway is acknowledged as impactful on the teacher profession and teacher quality in schools in several policy documents. This vision of long-term impact is strengthened given that both pre-service and in-service education of educational professional practitioners is undertaken in teacher education institutes (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). At the same time, teacher education is criticized for being too fragmented due to student teachers' different learning arenas, both at university and in schools (Sandvik et al., 2020). The qualification of SBTEs is also a teacher education institution's responsibility and although supervision qualification is seen as necessary and supported by the government, not all SBTEs undertake supervision training.

SBTE is perceived as a profession within a profession. A qualified STBE has "formal supervision competence, necessary professional competence and at least three years' experience as a teacher" (Ulvik et al., 2024, p. 112). This is supported by the Government through a detailed description on learning outcomes for supervision courses for SBTEs, which teacher education institutes are recommended to use as a frame for their courses (Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). Further development of supervision competency in Norway needs a context that is supportive. However, school leaders, who have a central position in being responsible for the quality and selection of supervisors, can have a limited understanding of supervision as a profession (Ulvik et al., 2024). To prevent this undermining the development and status of professionality of the supervisor, it is of importance for school leadership to be involved in professional development of SBTE.

Recently, it is over again emphasized that collaborative arenas for schools and universities are important to be developed and recognized (White Paper 19 (2023-2024)). SBTE and HEI collaborating and co-creating education for student teachers promises both support of SBTE status in schools and improved education for student teachers (Boks-Vlemmix & Karlstad, 2023).

5. This study

Building on prior research investigating the professional learning needs of SBTEs (Czerniawski et al., 2024), the present study explores, in depth, the professional work and identities of fifty SBTE participants who previously completed an international survey. That survey, hereafter referred to as 'Phase One', comprised responses from 1680 SBTEs across 12 countries affiliated with the InFo-TED network: Australia, Austria, Flanders (Belgium), England, France, Ireland, Israel, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Participants in Phase One included teachers who self-identified as SBTEs, as well as those engaged in mentoring student teachers, interns, and early-career educators, and those responsible for facilitating the professional development of their peers. Phase Two (the focus of this article) involved follow-up interviews with 52 of the initial survey respondents. The interview participants were distributed across five regions: Flanders (n = 12), England (n = 11), Ireland (n = 10), Norway (n = 9), and Israel (n = 10). In all but one country, participants had indicated a willingness to participate in further stages of the research during the Phase One survey. This sample reflects a diverse demographic profile, encompassing variations in age, gender, educational qualifications, teaching experience, years of involvement in teacher education, nature of expertise (early childhood, primary or secondary), current academic responsibilities, and aspirations related to their roles as teacher educators. Previous studies in teacher education support a qualitative cross-country analysis (Pineda-Báez et al., 2020; Rigney et al., 2021).

The research question for this study is 'What can we learn about the complex realities of being and becoming a school-based teacher educator from a (qualitative) cross-country perspective?' The research question is significant when considering that many SBTEs working in schools engage in activities supporting student teachers and more experienced colleagues as a secondary professional role in addition to their primary role as schoolteachers - a role that, understandably perhaps, is more likely to be prioritised in terms of their professional learning opportunities. We remain sensitive to, as highlighted in the literature reported earlier in the paper, the fragmented professional realities of SBTEs internationally.

6. Methodology

6.1. Interviews

The semi-structured interview protocol for Phase Two underwent a piloting process with SBTEs who were not included in the main study sample. This pilot aimed to verify that both the wording and intended meaning of the questions were effectively conveyed across diverse linguistic and geographic contexts. The individuals who carried out the pilot interviews were the same as those who later administered the Phase Two interviews, thereby supporting consistency in the implementation of the protocol across participating countries. The interview questions were designed to align closely with the structure of the previously completed (Phase One) survey. The interviews included questions on background and demographics (path to identifying as a SBTE), life as a teacher educator (involvement in SBTE activities, preparation as a professional learning activities they value as a SBTE), professional learning opportunities (what influences involvement, level of satisfaction, types valued most) and teacher educators and research (value of research, definition and types of research activity, practices informed by research). Interviews were conducted in participants' native languages

and took place in locations selected by the participants or online. Prior to participation, all participants provided informed consent. Interview durations ranged from 35 to 90 min, and each was transcribed in the original language of the interview.

6.2. Data analysis

As a first step, we undertook a case analysis with each case representing one of the five jurisdictions. We wrote extended case reports for each of our own jurisdiction, structured around a set of themes that we inductively worked up from our own data. We draw an important distinction between the structure of the interview guide (informed by the structure of the original survey), and the inductive analysis of the data generated from the interviews (see below). The reports had ample quotations from the interviews to preserve the richness of data. We also included a narrative description of the current, past, and future policy contexts in each jurisdiction to avoid decontextualisation of data in the further stages of the analysis (this subsequently informed the context descriptions shared earlier in the paper).

As a second step, we undertook a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2014). The interview data were analysed using a thematic approach. We inductively refined the themes across the jurisdictions, adding texture and nuance through multiple rounds of coding and communicative validation of patterns in dialogue with each other and the team. Initially, researchers within each of the five jurisdictions independently, and inductively, identified themes related to the realities of being and becoming a SBTE and aligned professional development opportunities that emerged from their respective national interviews. These included 'serendipitous nature of becoming a SBTE' (England), 'a heterogenous group lacking formal recognition' (Flanders) and 'multiple roles, one person' (Norway). To ensure consistency across all jurisdictions, a standardized coding process was employed. This involved identifying similar units of text, linking related segments, and retrieving coded excerpts, following the procedures outlined by Mason (1996). The coded data were organized under clearly defined themes, all of which related to the professional development of teacher educators. Themes included 'diversity of the SBTE', 'research as a means of informing SBTEs on practice' and 'inadequacy of professional learning opportunities'. As analysis progressed, new themes emerged, prompting a re-examination and re-coding of relevant data to ensure these insights were fully integrated. Themes that were found to be common, though not necessarily identical, across the five jurisdictions are presented in the 'Results' section. To illustrate these findings, quotations have been selected from SBTEs across the jurisdictions and with varying levels of experience. These quotations aim to foreground the voices of these participants and reinforce the research team's central observations. To deepen the cross-jurisdictional analysis, the authors independently reviewed the initial thematic findings from each country, identifying recurring threads and commonalities. They then collaboratively re-read and discussed the country-specific analyses, expanding on these thematic threads as they became apparent.

7. Results

Acknowledging the complex realities of all jurisdictions and participants, six themes from the data were evident to varying degrees across the complement of countries. We present these in turn, with a view to conveying the complex realities of being and becoming a SBTE.

7.1. The predominant role and responsibility of SBTEs

The most frequent activity that SBTEs across all five countries aligned to their role was that of supporting student teachers who were undertaking school placement, as a requirement of their teacher education programme, in their school. This resulted in all SBTEs being aligned to some extent with the higher education institutions/programmes from which student teachers were enrolled. Across all five countries, the SBTEs conveyed a sense of duty/intrinsic motivation in undertaking this role, appreciating that they were in turn supporting the future teaching profession. As is exemplified in the following quote, SBTEs consistently reported the return they valued in being involved in supporting student teachers:

> It [student teacher support] was one of the most exciting things I did as a teacher because I was learning from them [student teacher]. I was hearing about what was going on in college for them, about the new ways of doing things. (Ireland)

And "I am always ready to help every beginning teacher get settled because I was a beginning teacher and really needed help and support. When I see the interns feeling comfortable, that's my happiness and success." (Israel). The return SBTEs reported from their involvement with student teachers related to learning from them, appreciating that they had once occupied the role of student teacher themselves.

There was also evidence in Flanders, Israel and Norway of supporting the current teaching complement of the school with instances of SBTEs mentoring beginning and experienced teaching colleagues. SBTEs were commonly approached by school leadership to support student teachers, teaching colleagues and/or coordinate other SBTEs in the school due to the perception that they could afford the time and/or had the subject expertise required and/or had a positive disposition to the role. A level of complexity surrounding the involvement of SBTEs in supervising student teacher arose with respect to school leadership being reactive to hosting student teachers in the school rather than being proactive in hosting student teachers:

> (…) in terms of the [SBTE] role, we've had situations where sometimes you're simply told '(…) by the way, you've got a student on Monday' which isn't a good way of introducing yourself into that situation and a poor student arrives (…) you're not prepared for them. (England).

There were some instances (e.g., Norway) where SBTEs sought out the opportunity to be involved in supporting student teachers and/or teaching colleagues (Israel). There was evidence from Flanders and Ireland that the role of SBTE was considered an 'add on' to the duties and responsibilities as a schoolteacher, with minimal recognition for additional responsibilities aligned with being a SBTE. This again conveys the level of complexity SBTEs face as they look to invest in, and inhabit, the SBTE role, caught in a space where they are interested in, and expected to, undertake additional responsibilities but without any recognition.

7.2. The necessity to be familiar with university policy and procedures

A second complexity that our data revealed resided in the analysis of SBTEs' evaluation of their preparation and support, revealing two distinct dimensions. The first dimension concerned SBTE satisfaction with the support received (across all countries), encompassing both the professional quality of the support and its relevance to their needs in terms of content and accessibility. Aligned with this complexity, one SBTE expressed dissatisfaction with the expectation of their role:

> What do you want from me (…) I don't know what the expectation is. (…) I would never leave the room when there's a student teacher there (…) and I give feedback on every lesson (…) as well as the expectations for the students and what are the basics they are expected to do? (Ireland).

In several cases, this dissatisfaction stemmed from the perception that HEIs focus solely on student teachers' needs. It was evident in several countries (including England, Flanders and Ireland) that the expectation of completing a high volume of paperwork aligned with the student teachers' teaching performance focused solely on the needs of the student teacher and less on the SBTE. That is, there was no specific professional development in the role of a SBTE in working with the

student teacher (other than in Norway). Rather, there was a significant level of paperwork on how best to support assessing and improving the student teacher teaching performance. The lack of specific professional development was heightened in the Irish and Flemish contexts where there was rarely any formal training provided for SBTEs working with student teachers. In instances where preparation as well as 'on-the-job' support was evident, it was welcomed, An example from a SBTE in Israel noted;

> Those professional development activities always take place on vacation days… and that often raises grievances. But I view it as a privilege, because I think knowledge is power, and if I have an opportunity to sit and learn from the best, then why not? (Israel).

This context alludes to another complexity with respect to when it is best to offer professional development opportunities, conscious of scheduling such opportunities on vacation days rather than releasing teachers from teaching days to attend upskilling opportunities.

The second dimension revealed further complexity in relation to SBTEs' level of agency in pursuing professional learning opportunities. While some participants limited themselves to mandatory professional development activities, there was evidence of others actively seeking additional learning experiences to enhance their professional knowledge. This was evident in a quote from one SBTE:

> I take two courses every year. I renew myself and believe in innovation… I took many courses on computers, to be fit for the 21st century… The Arabic language… This year I participate in the mentor teachers' course, and a course on social emotional learning. (Israel).

In some contexts (Flanders), access to professional learning opportunities as SBTEs largely depended on the SBTE's agency. SBTEs were not proactively offered (nor requested to participate in) any specific type of support (e.g., as part of the induction into their role as SBTEs) although participants did mention that they could attend activities if they made the request to school leadership (Flanders).

It is important to note that these two dimensions operate independently. A SBTE's satisfaction with the professional quality of preparation and support does not necessarily correlate with their level of agency in selecting that learning activity. This conveys a level of complexity when considering who determines what professional development opportunities are most meaningful and worthwhile for SBTEs in the absence of SBTE agency in determining what is of most value to them.

7.3. The appreciation of, and involvement in, research-related activities

A third complexity that was evident across various contexts was that of SBTEs demonstrating a strong inclination toward research activities, viewing them in many cases as essential to their professional growth and effectiveness. In England and Ireland, many SBTEs pursued postgraduate research qualifications (e.g., Master's, Professional Doctorate or PhD) to deepen their knowledge and credentials. The motivation to engage in research often stemmed from personal and professional aspirations. However, this was not without a level of complexity given that in most instances SBTEs had to find the time to complete their studies over and above their teaching commitments. In some cases, SBTEs considered research as a stepping stone to transitioning from school-based roles to university-based employment, where advanced qualifications were highly valued. This highlighted a recognition of the dual benefits of research: advancing individual expertise and opening new career pathways:

> I read lots of research papers (…) This is one of the motivating factors that led me to doctoral studies, because if I read so much and use it in my work, then perhaps I should do something with it. I have aspirations to move up. Let's be honest, to advance in colleges and universities, a PhD is essential. I can't progress further with just a Master's degree. (Israel).

This specific instance conveys a level of complexity when considering research-related activity as a genuine opportunity to address research curiosity and/or as a means to obtain a further qualification that will allow teachers the opportunity to secure a job other than in a school setting.

In Flanders, Ireland, Israel and Norway, SBTEs valued research for its potential to inform and improve teaching practices, underscoring the practical significance of scholarly inquiry, "There's loads of things I've picked up from journals and reading things over the years I've used." (Ireland). However, as mentioned previously above, while the value of research was widely recognized by participants, there was a limited time that SBTEs could allocate to research-related endeavours:

> I do see value in the most up to date research (…) I don't think teachers are going to sit down and read journals because I don't. I don't think they have time (…) summarising what the most up to date data is [for SBTEs]. (Ireland).

This instance conveys the complexity that surrounds the teacher positioning themselves (or being positioned by school management) as a research consumer or research producer. A research consumer uses existing research to inform their understanding, decisions and/or practice while a research producer creates new knowledge through original research. A further complexity is the differing levels of kudos bestowed on either form of research by teachers, school leaders and policy makers.

In England, the enthusiasm for inhabiting the researcher as producer space among SBTEs was tempered by limited time and support from colleagues or school leadership teams, particularly for those pursuing doctoral studies:

> So for a mentor (…) somebody from universities [who have time for research] saying 'We'll have you [SBTE] read this piece of research'. [In response] 'Well, I'm glad you've got time to read that piece of research because I haven't because I'm teaching the children'. So, I think there were huge, huge tensions in that respect.

The context conveyed here captures the tensions that teachers have with university academics who, while keen to support teacher involvement in research activity, perhaps do not appreciate the time constraints that teachers are required to commit to such activities in addition to their teaching commitments.

A recurring theme across contexts was the disconnect between the demands of educational practice and the requirements of research. In Israel, for instance, while participants were positively disposed toward research that informed practice, there was a recognition that published research did not always align with the practical needs of SBTEs. This sentiment was echoed in Ireland, where participants advocated for more proactive measures to increase exposure to research that is directly relevant to their practice. This point again raises the complexity surrounding the type of research that teachers wish to invest in, not denying their desire to engage with research (in some cases as producers, in others as consumers) and acknowledging that there are challenges for them in pursuing research-related activity to their satisfaction.

7.4. SBTEs as a heterogeneous group

A fourth complexity that was evident from the data was the conceptualization and adoption, or lack thereof, of the term 'SBTE' that was deeply influenced by the structural and policy environments of teacher education. The term took on different meanings and served distinct functions across contexts, reflecting the specific roles schools played in shaping teacher education systems. The interviews revealed a heterogeneous group with diverse entry pathways, levels of experience, and target audiences, both within and across contexts. This heterogeneity was reflected in the varied terms used for self-identification during

the interviews, such as 'mentor', 'coach', 'induction facilitator', 'mentoring coordinator', or 'supporter', and, in some contexts, 'school-based teacher educator'.

A closer analysis of the data revealed that the choice of terminology was not solely a matter of national, regional, or institutional variation, nor merely a matter of personal preference. Instead, the extent to which the term 'SBTE' was used, and the degree to which it was considered appropriate to describe those responsible for supporting the professional learning of student teachers or in-service teachers as practicing teachers in schools, was closely tied to the involvement and positioning of schools in ITE.

In contexts with strong school-based or school-led models of teacher education, such as England, the term SBTE was far more established. While schools in these models may still collaborate with traditional ITE providers, they increasingly assumed end-to-end accountability for ITE. The term 'SBTE' served to underscore the expanded role and responsibilities of schools and teachers. Put differently, as responsibilities traditionally associated with institutes of higher education moved into schools, the notion of 'being a teacher educator' expanded to include those actively engaged in teacher education within school settings.

In countries that do not primarily operate from school-based systems of ITE and rely on strong partnerships between schools and higher education providers, the term SBTE (or equivalent) has been adopted rhetorically to highlight the critical and necessary contributions of teachers in schools to ITE. The SBTE terminology signalled an effort to recognize and formalize the role of teachers in schools as integral partners in teacher education. For example, in Ireland, the regulatory body for teachers had introduced the Irish word for 'guide' ('Treoraí') to reflect the nature of the role of a teacher who supports and guides the student teacher during his/her school placement experience:

> (…) teacher educator is nice because I see myself as (…) a teacher or a teacher of children. I feel I could be a teacher of student teachers, and I could be a teacher of my own colleagues. We can all teach, teach each other and I think that's the nice thing. (Ireland).

The quote captures the centrality of a teacher education philosophy that values learning from, and across, teachers and student teachers. A comment from a teacher in Norway aligned nicely with the Irish notion of 'guiding' student teachers:

> They're [SBTE] someone who's supposed to show the way and walk with the student. You should be available to give advice (…) you also have to see that each student has their own path (…) So, you have to kind of look at each candidate and try to figure out what's the right path for that person.

This quote reinforces how SBTEs' guiding of student teachers might be enacted through carefully considering the specific circumstances of each student teacher and advising them accordingly.

By contrast to countries who conveyed a working definition for SBTEs, in countries such as Flanders and Israel, where schools' and teachers' roles in ITE remain more peripheral, the term SBTE (or equivalent) was largely absent. Those engaged in mentoring or facilitating student teachers' learning in schools did not identify as teacher educators. Instead, their responsibilities were often seen as supplementary and fulfilled in informal, ad hoc ways rather than as part of a structured professional identity. Interestingly, in Flanders, a distinction was made between the role of 'mentor' and 'coach':

> A mentor is really someone who gives tips and tricks to beginners based on their experience, while with coaching, you're on equal footing and you gradually look for a solution, expecting, and actually hoping, that the solution comes from the person themselves.

Interestingly, the quote makes a useful distinction between the approach of the mentor (advice-driven, based on sharing personal experiences and offering suggestions) and the coach (question driven, to help the teacher find their own solutions). That is not to say that SBTEs use only one approach but rather introduces a level of complexity in knowing what approach is most suitable at a point in time, as well as identifying instances when both approaches can be used to complement each other.

7.5. Being identified as having a disposition to working with student teachers

A fifth complexity was that for most participants, their role as a SBTE was an 'add-on' role or secondary responsibility alongside their primary duties as teachers. In many contexts, it was not a formal position that one could apply for. Most participants found themselves in these positions due to seniority in their school, level of experience, having (or being perceived to have) spare capacity within their teaching assignment, connections with local providers of ITE who solicit them, or a general willingness to work with student teachers and in-service teachers. With respect to the latter, one SBTE commented:

> Our principal had noticed for some time that this [mentoring] was one of my talents apparently. At a certain point, the mentor hours were introduced, and he asked if it was something for me (…) I immediately said 'Yes'. It was something I had always dreamed of. A meaningful way to end my career. (Flanders).

Noteworthy, and reassuring, is the observation that, although SBTEs generally did not actively seek to become a SBTE but rather were selected by school leadership, once in the SBTE role, teachers were appreciative of the opportunities that arose for them. Participants across all contexts frequently mentioned that the role provided an opportunity to share their expertise for the benefit of their colleagues and the children in their classrooms, helping teachers stay in the profession, or contribute to team cohesion.

However, while SBTEs clearly recognized the intrinsic value of their role as a SBTE, this was not always how their responsibilities were perceived by other school actors, including school leaders. Many participants highlighted a lack of formal recognition from school leadership. Others described how colleagues perceived their role as capturing some privileges such as being partially released from regular teaching duties. Some mentioned the impact of being and becoming a SBTE on their collegial position in the school, with one Flemish participant stating:

> You also have colleagues who don't trust it [being a SBTE]. They think you're siding with the leadership, and they fear that. Usually, it's people who don't trust you, not just as a mentor, but as a person. And then there are those who think it's a luxury job, where you don't have to work with children and can just wander around the Flemish education landscape.

Only in the Israeli context did participants specifically describe a conscious decision to pursue the role of leading teachers (i.e., working with experienced colleagues and particularly in relation to guiding experienced colleagues), in some instances being motivated by long-term career goals, such as advancing to school leadership or pursuing a PhD.

7.6. Accessing continuing professional development activities

The final complexity related to SBTEs' sharing that they did not believe they had been exposed to dedicated professional learning opportunities, with limited school budgets being specifically mentioned as a potential reason (Flanders):

> (…) the professional development policy at our school is quite limited. This year they've allocated one hundred euros per person, and your training must fit within either classroom management or student motivation, because those are the school's two pedagogical focus areas this year.

This quote draws attention to the potential complexity that revolves around teachers undertaking professional development opportunities that are determined by the school as being worthwhile rather than SBTEs being encouraged to source upskilling opportunities that align with their self-determined interests and needs.

Regardless, SBTEs conveyed their interest and need for personal professional learning related to supervising student teachers. In England and Norway, while SBTEs attended professional development activities organized between schools and universities to access essential information required for supervision, they felt that the emphasis was far more about the bureaucratic needs associated with the evaluation of student teachers than the authentic professional learning needs of the SBTE. For example, one English SBTE shared their frustration at not previously being exposed to, and in some instances not understanding, some of the principles and associated language that they were to use to assess student teachers. This heightened the sensitivity of SBTEs believing that their roles were primarily to confirm the performance of student teachers in line with evaluation criteria rather than develop their own learning as SBTEs. In Norway, there was a formal opportunity to attend courses related to supervision, with SBTEs expected to gain 30 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) in courses on supervising and three years of experience as a teacher before they are considered qualified for supervising student teachers. Unfortunately, all SBTEs do not have the opportunity to meet this requirement and the demand from SBTEs to have this opportunity is not met due to a lack of time and school resources. Even with heightened support and resources from the Department of Education in Norway, not all got the possibility for personal professional development opportunities give the limited capacity of the provision:

> Yes, I applied for it. I did it through KFK (further education paid by the government). But I was rejected, there were twenty-four applicants at school. First I was given a too low priority by the principal, and then rejected by the municipality.

Both Irish and Flemish SBTEs reported a lack of personal professional learning support, with the former being clear about the need for professional learning opportunities to enhance their possible career path options.Norwegian and Flemish SBTEs indicated the need for more effective network opportunities with collaboration between SBTEs and schools through networking being emphasized. Israeli SBTEs articulated the need for better professional learning possibilities later in their career (even if remaining as a SBTEs). These two perspectives convey an appreciation for lifelong learning, something the Irish SBTEs noted as part of being involved with student teachers and teacher colleagues. In the Norwegian context, almost all appreciated learning from the student teachers they supervised:

> So, it is (…) useful to bring in a student who in a way sees things from the outside and sees things with different eyes. Then you can (…) look a little critically at your own practice and, and you can be updated. It's nice to ask the students what they are learning, what concepts are in fashion in pedagogy now.

8. Discussion

The results of this study challenge the literature shared at the start of the paper aligned with the intended positioning of SBTEs working alongside HEBTEs in the hybrid 'third space'. That is, ideas present in the literature on the role and subsequent expected practices of SBTEs are not necessarily evident in practice.

Two discussion points arise from the findings aligned with the study research question, 'What can we learn about the complex realities of being and becoming a school-based teacher educator from a (qualitative) cross-country perspective?'

8.1. Identity affected by individually negotiating and positioning as a SBTE

Even though the SBTE is strongly interested in the role they have with student teachers, different factors result in them not being supported to maximise the role. Such factors include insufficient opportunities for continuous professional development (MacPhail et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2017), insufficient time for upskilling and limited, if any, payment for the additional role.

In accepting responsibilities - formally or informally - for supporting the ongoing learning and development of teacher-colleagues within their schools, SBTEs can be understood as a particular form of teacher leader, especially for the part of their role where they work with colleagues. Recent literature on teacher leadership is therefore helpful in making sense of the tensions in collegial relationships that are inherent to such 'in-between' positions. SBTEs remain fellow teachers, while simultaneously being tasked with leading their colleagues' learning and development. This dual positioning presents them with challenges related to collegiality, limited time for supporting students and for their own professional development, as well as role ambiguity (see Savaş et al., 2025; for a more detailed exploration).

Within the HEI setting, it is evident that while the HEI determines the premise for the student teachers' education, they do not extend the same institutional resources to their SBTE partners, who must independently negotiate how best to support the intended student teacher learning experiences in the school. There is evidence of the power imbalance between HEIs and schools resulting in limiting the professional agency of SBTEs (Hall et al., 2018; Zeichner, 2010). We suggest that if there was a level of mutual respect and trust for the significance of the role of the SBTE and HEBTEs in the school and HEI respectively, that both sets of professionals could collectively be responsible as a community for meaningful and worthwhile student teacher learning, as well as learn from each other.

8.2. Enhancing SBTE identity through the enactment of a shared space

The identity development for SBTE is related to some extent to having support for clear career paths in schools, supervision of student teachers and opportunities to undertake research. Professional development opportunities for SBTE are positioned by, and within, the HEI sector at the detriment of acknowledging that the school is also a site of knowledge. This leads us to question how much progress has been made with respect to 'the practical turn in teacher education' (Zeichner, 2012). That is, if HEI/academic knowledge maintains a stronghold on what is determined as meaningful knowledge at the expense of acknowledging complementary but additional knowledge necessary to successfully (learn to) negotiate teaching in a school (what Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999)referred to as knowledge-for-practice (HEIs) and knowledge-in-practice (schools)). Moving more professional development opportunities into schools and encouraging HEBTEs to get nearer to the realities of teaching in schools, has the potential to change an identity fostered around the power relations of SBTE and HEBTEs to that of a shared space and participation in what it means to be and become a teacher educator. Such a development would enhance the viability of connecting professional development taking place in, and across, schools and HEIs.

Both discussion points above lead us to consider how best to alleviate the somewhat siloed practices and identities of SBTE and HEBTEs to maximise their respective expertise and experiences with a view to heightening the learning experiences of student teachers and for themselves. One consideration is the expectations HEBTEs have of SBTEs. The findings from the study hint that they perhaps expect SBTEs to take on a similar role and identity to that of HEBTEs. This diminishes the value of them being 'school based' teacher educators and, in turn, reduces the realisation of the possibilities of both sets of teacher educators being necessary for teacher education. This leads us to comment on the lack of

boundary crossing that is evident between two groups of professionals that do share elements of role, identity and responsibilities.

In a bid to have SBTEs and HEBTEs participate on an equal and complementary footing (where relevant) with respect to teacher education, we suggest that it is imperative that genuine partnerships are explored. This is not to imply that both groups of professionals are the same but rather to interrogate the differences between the two and consider how much more can be done to increase mutual benefit in partnership and synergy. This entails carefully considering what partnership entails and what makes it work supporting a hybrid 'third space' (Zeichner, 2010) where each group of professionals come together to deliver something different than remaining as two separate entities. There is a sense from the findings of a one-way relationship with HEBTEs directing SBTEs on their expected roles and responsibilities but limited interest in learning from SBTEs or in assisting in their professional learning needs. This can lead to a sense of power relations and dynamics between the two populations that stifle the notion of partnership.

9. Conclusion

As a reminder, the paper did not set out to focus on problems in the field of SBTE per se but rather on what can we learn about the complex realities of being and becoming a school-based teacher educator. We reiterate that this study has presented the perspectives of SBTEs which is less evident in the literature than the prevailing HEBTE perspective. This has led to challenging some of the assumptions that have previously been shared about the role and identity of SBTEs. It is therefore important that not only is more attention given to the realities of SBTEs' roles and identity, and their aligned professional learning needs, but also that this is done within the context of forming genuine and sustainable partnerships with HEBTEs. This entails exploring what effective partnerships look like from the perspectives of both SBTEs and HEBTEs, with a view to supporting cross-sector collaboration between school and the HEI (Sewell et al., 2018). This would contribute to some extent to a limitation of this study which is addressing the question of the 'third space' only from the SBTEs' perspective. A significant amount of literature that explores such partnerships has been produced by HEBTEs and HEI academics (Daza et al., 2021). There is a need to involve both SBTE and HEBTEs in determining what supports genuine and sustainable school-university partnerships.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ann MacPhail: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Eline Vanassche:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ainat Guberman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gerry Czerniawski:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Juliette Boks-Vlemmix:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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