Reconceptualising Practicum Supervision in Initial Teacher Education: Empirical Insights from Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

This study explores pre-service early childhood teachers' perceptions of supervision during the teaching practicum, focusing on the roles, practices, and organizational conditions that contribute to practical support in initial teacher education. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data from questionnaires (N = 221) and qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed to examine students' views on supervision, feedback, communication, and areas for improvement. Findings indicate that supervision is primarily perceived as a process of pedagogical guidance, advisory support, and structured feedback. At the same time, relational elements associated with mentoring are valued as complementary rather than dominant. Students emphasized the importance of supervisors' teaching experience, small-group, face-to-face feedback, frequent communication, and manageable supervisor–student ratios. The study concludes that a hybrid supervision model—supervision-led and mentoring-informed—offers a pedagogically sound and innovative framework for enhancing the quality of the teaching practicum in initial teacher education.

Keywords: teaching practicum, supervision, initial teacher education, mentoring, early childhood teachers

Introduction

The practicum is a central component of initial teacher education, as it enables pre-service teachers to participate in authentic educational contexts and gradually develop professional competencies and identity (Darling-Hammond, 2017). International research has consistently shown that the effectiveness of the practicum does not depend solely on its duration or formal structure, but primarily on the quality of the pedagogical support accompanying it, particularly in how supervision roles, responsibilities, and feedback processes are organized (Clarke et al., 2014).

Within this context, both supervision and mentoring have been highlighted in the literature as key mechanisms for supporting student teachers during the practicum. High-quality support relationships have been associated with enhanced engagement, professional confidence, and psychological safety among pre-service teachers (Ambrosetti, 2014; Hudson, 2016). At the same time, the need for systematic feedback and organizational coherence positions supervision as the dominant institutional framework in many initial teacher education programs, with mentoring often functioning as a complementary or integrated component within hybrid models of support (Glickman et al., 2024; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Recent developments, particularly following the expansion of digital and hybrid forms of observation and feedback, further indicate that supervision models are evolving in response to changing educational conditions while retaining their structural role (Agnew et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of international research, less attention has been paid to pre-service teachers' perspectives, especially regarding how they conceptualize the role, practices, and effectiveness of supervision during the practicum. This gap is particularly evident in early childhood education, where specific pedagogical and contextual factors shape practicum experiences.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining students' perceptions, expectations, and proposals regarding supervision during their practicum. By foregrounding student teachers' voices, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence to the ongoing discussion on effective and innovative supervision models in initial teacher education.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the present study is to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of supervision in practicum and to identify the characteristics of an effective supervision model in initial teacher education. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers in Early Childhood Education departments perceive the role and significance of supervision during the practicum?

2. Which characteristics, forms of collaboration, and supervisory practices do pre-service teachers consider essential for an effective supervision model in initial teacher education?

3. What improvements do pre-service teachers propose to enhance the quality and effectiveness of practicum supervision?

Theoretical Framework

Supervision in the Practicum: From Clinical Supervision to Learning-Oriented Support

Supervision in the practicum is commonly defined as a systematic pedagogical process that guides, supports, and provides feedback to pre-service teachers during their professional training (Glickman et al., 2024). Traditionally, supervision was closely associated with models of clinical supervision that focused on structured classroom observation and feedback to improve teaching performance. While such models contributed to the professionalization of teaching practice, they have been criticized for their predominantly evaluative and technocratic orientation.

Contemporary literature increasingly conceptualizes supervision as a learning-oriented process that extends beyond monitoring and assessment, emphasizing professional learning, collaboration, and the development of pedagogical judgment (Clarke et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2017). Within this perspective, supervision is understood as a mediating mechanism that supports the integration of theory and practice and facilitates the gradual construction of professional knowledge.

Reflective Practice and Supervision

Reflective practice constitutes a central theoretical foundation of contemporary models of supervision. Drawing on the work of Schön (1983, 1987), reflection is viewed as a process through which professionals examine their actions both during practice (reflection-in-action) and after practice (reflection-on-action), thereby reconstructing their professional understanding.

In initial teacher education, reflective practice is not considered an automatic competence but rather a process that requires systematic pedagogical support (Boud et al., 1985). Supervision provides a structured context for dialogue, critical inquiry, and guided reflection, enabling pre-service teachers to analyze their pedagogical choices, link theoretical concepts with practical experiences, and develop metacognitive awareness and professional judgment (Boud et al., 1985; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Miller, 2023).

Mentoring, Supervision, and Hybrid Models of Support

Alongside reflective supervision, mentoring has been widely discussed in the literature as a relational form of support characterized by trust, encouragement, and professional guidance. In practicum contexts, mentoring contributes to the emotional and social dimensions of learning and supports pre-service teachers' professional identity development (Ambrosetti, 2014; Hudson, 2016).

However, research has also identified structural and organizational limitations that constrain the effectiveness of mentoring when implemented as a standalone model in initial teacher education, including role ambiguity, uneven mentor preparation, time constraints, and tensions between support and assessment, which may undermine trust and learning within mentoring relationships (Clarke et al., 2014; Hobson et al., 2009). As a result, recent studies increasingly advocate for hybrid or integrative models in which supervision provides the organizational and pedagogical structure. At the same time, mentoring elements enrich the process by fostering supportive relationships and psychological safety.

The Greek Context of Practicum Supervision in Early Childhood Education

In the Greek context, the practicum in Early Childhood Education departments is recognized as a critical component of initial teacher education and a key mechanism for linking theoretical knowledge with educational practice. Greek research highlights the importance of systematic supervision and pedagogical support in fostering reflective practice, professional learning, and the gradual development of professional identity among pre-service teachers (Avgitidou, 2014; Avgitidou & Gourgiótou, 2016; Chrysafidis, 2013).

Furthermore, the work of the Greek Network of Practicum Programs in Early Childhood Education Departments (To Diktyo) has played a significant role in promoting collaborative and reflective supervision models and in emphasising the importance of student teachers' active participation and voice in the evaluation and improvement of practicum practices (Androusou & Tsafos, 2013; Gourgiótou et al., 2020; Sfyroera et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite extensive theoretical and research-based literature, the systematic documentation and analysis of pre-service teachers' perceptions and expectations regarding the role, practices, and effectiveness of supervision remain limited, particularly in early childhood education. Greek research has tended to focus either on specific dimensions of support, such as the mentoring relationship, or on more general student attitudes towards the practicum, rather than on supervision as a comprehensive pedagogical process (Kyridis, 2023; Papaioannou, 2025).

Based on this theoretical framework, the present study adopts a research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative data collected through a questionnaire to capture both patterns and trends in pre-service teachers' perceptions and expectations, as well as the meanings they attribute to their supervision experiences and to their proposals for improvement. The following section outlines the data collection procedure, the sample, the research instrument, and the analytical methods employed.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of pre-service teachers' perceptions and experiences of practicum supervision. The choice of a mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate, as it allows for the identification of general trends and patterns through quantitative analysis, while also enabling an in-depth exploration of meanings and experiences through qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The research design was descriptive and exploratory, as it sought to document pre-service teachers' perceptions, expectations, and proposals without implementing an experimental intervention or controlling for variables.

Participants

The sample consisted of N=221 pre-service teachers (N/n refers to the number of participants) enrolled in Early Childhood Education departments in Greece, representing all years of study.

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed, as access to participants was facilitated through academic structures associated with the practicum. This sampling approach is commonly considered appropriate for exploratory studies in educational research, where the primary aim is to capture the perspectives of specific reference populations rather than to achieve statistical generalization.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed voluntarily to students. The electronic format of the research tool facilitated participation from students across different years of study and geographical regions and ensured the anonymous recording of responses.

Research tool

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed around thematic axes directly aligned with the study's research questions and informed by the theoretical framework of practicum supervision as articulated in the international literature.

The closed-ended questions included Likert-type, multiple-choice, and ranking items, enabling quantitative measurement of attitudes and preferences. The open-ended questions aimed to elicit participants' experiences, reflections, and proposals in their own words, thereby enhancing the depth and interpretive dimension of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place within a defined time period, during which participants were clearly informed of the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of their participation. Completion of the questionnaire was considered to constitute informed consent.

Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were fully ensured, as no personal data that could lead to their identification was collected. All data were used exclusively for research purposes, in accordance with the fundamental principles of research ethics in the social sciences (Cohen et al., 2018).

Data Analysis

The dataset comprised both quantitative and qualitative data, which were analyzed using corresponding methodological approaches.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, thereby identifying general trends in participants' responses related to the research questions.

Qualitative data derived from the open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, and theme definition and naming. Through this process, key thematic categories emerged, capturing how pre-service teachers conceptualize practicum supervision and articulate proposals for its improvement.

To enhance transparency and credibility in the qualitative analysis, findings were illustrated with representative verbatim excerpts, attributed using participant codes (e.g., P12, P37), ensuring that no identifying information could be linked to individual respondents.

Results

Sample characteristics

A total of N = 221 responses were analyzed. The sample consisted predominantly of women (97.3%**,** n = 215), while men accounted for 2.7% (n = 6). Information on the semester of study was available for 217 participants. The most considerable proportions of respondents were enrolled in the 8th semester (n = 71) and the 2nd and 4th semesters (n = 59, n = 52) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 221)

Variable	Category	n	%
Semester (valid n=217)	1st	3	1.4
	2nd	59	27.2
	3rd	3	1.4
	4th	52	24.0
	6th	23	10.6
	7th	2	0.9
	8th	71	32.7
	10th	4	1.8

Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of the Role and Significance of Supervision in the Practicum

Regarding perceptions of the supervisory role, participants most frequently identified advisory support (n = 161, 72.9%) and pedagogical guidance (n = 141, 63.8%) as core functions of supervision. Dimensions related to material or other forms of support (n = 83, 37.6%) and emotional/psychological support (n = 76, 34.4%) were also considered important, though less central.

Qualitative data corroborated this pattern. Analysis of responses to the open-ended question on the importance of supervision revealed that the supervisor's role was primarily conceptualized as guidance and counselling, with an emphasis on supporting students throughout the practicum. Participants referred to the supervisor as someone who "guides the student appropriately" (P9) and "advises students and suggests solutions to possible problems" (P16).

Feedback and improvement also emerged as a salient theme, with supervision described as important "for the practicum as well as for feedback" (P47) and for the "correction of mistakes" (P93).

In addition, several responses linked the significance of supervision to the provision of emotional safety and support. Participants noted that they "feel a sense of security when under the supervision of a supervisor" (P13) and highlighted the importance of psychological and counselling support (P59). Finally, supervision was also described as a mechanism for linking theory to practice, with students stating that the supervisor "helps theoretical knowledge to be put into practice" (P22).

Characteristics, Forms of Collaboration, and Supervisory Practices of an Effective Supervision Model

Regarding supervisor characteristics, the highest mean importance rating was given to teaching experience in early childhood education. This was followed by relevance to the subject of study and scientific/academic training. Specialization in a specific subject area received a comparatively lower mean score (Table 2).

Table 2. Importance of supervisor characteristics (1–5 scale)

Characteristic	Valid n	M	SD
Teaching experience in preschool education	217	4.27	0.98
Relevance to the subject of study	169	4.09	0.89
Scientific/academic training	210	4.02	1.03
Specialization in a specific subject area	169	3.68	1.01

In terms of collaboration and communication, participants most frequently preferred scheduled appointments (n = 162, 73.3%) and e-mail communication (n = 140, 63.3%), while telephone communication was mentioned less often (n = 63, 28.5%). Regarding communication frequency, nearly half of the participants (n = 103, 46.6%) preferred once-weekly communication, whereas a substantial proportion (n = 57, 25.8%) preferred communication two to three times per week.

Concerning feedback formats, in-person small-group workshops were rated as the most effective setting (M = 4.29, SD = 0.79), compared with in-person plenary lectures (M = 3.68, SD = 0.97) and online/distance feedback (M = 3.51, SD = 0.96)

The supervisory roles most frequently expected during collaboration were advisory guidance (n = 178, 80.5%), followed by pedagogical guidance (n = 148, 67.0%), and feedback on implementation/teaching (n = 144, 65.2%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Expected supervisory roles (multiple responses allowed; N = 221)

Expected role	n	%
Advisory support	178	80.5
Pedagogical guidance	148	67.0
Feedback on implementation/teaching	144	65.2
Feedback on lesson plans/designs	131	59.3
Suggestions for teaching activities	118	53.4
Emotional/psychological support	90	40.7
Provision of teaching materials	81	36.7

Regarding the timing of the initiation of collaboration with the supervisor, responses were distributed almost evenly among an early start (semesters 1–4, n = 62), a mid-program start (semesters 5–6, n = 64), and a later start (semesters 7–8, n = 68). Qualitative rationales aligned with these groupings and were associated with the need for early familiarization and preparation, the acquisition of sufficient theoretical background and maturity, or the accumulation of experience prior to supervised practice.

At the organizational level, most participants expected the supervisor to have reviewed the submitted lesson plan/design (n = 188, 85.1%) and to be prepared to offer alternative suggestions for instructional planning (n = 157, 71.0%).

In addition, the ideal supervisor–student ratio was most commonly identified as 1:10 (79.2%).

Pre-service Teachers' Proposals for Improving Supervision

A total of 139 interpretable open-ended responses were coded. Analysis of students' proposals for improvement revealed several recurring themes. The most frequently mentioned suggestion concerned improving communication and supervisor availability, with participants calling for "more frequent communication" (P10) and "proper contact with students" (P9).

Participants also emphasized the need for a supportive interpersonal stance, highlighting "understanding", "politeness", and "patience" on the part of the supervisor (P15, P8). Particular emphasis was placed on the nature of feedback, with students requesting non-judgmental and supportive feedback. They noted that supervisors should "help without being critical" (P171) and "not condemn mistakes" (P18).

Furthermore, participants proposed strengthening in-person small-group meetings or workshops to allow more time for discussion and individualized support (P81, P88). Less frequently mentioned but still noteworthy were suggestions to provide teaching materials or

practical ideas (P48, P130) and to reduce the number of students per supervisor to enhance supervision effectiveness (P47, P115) (Table 4).

Table 4. Improvement suggestion clusters (coded; n = respondents mentioning the theme; non-exclusive; n=139)

Theme	n
More frequent/stable communication & availability	33
Supportive stance (understanding/politeness/patience)	20
Non-judgmental (not critical/derogatory) feedback	13
In-person small-group meetings/workshops	16
Provision of ideas/material/practical examples	8
Reduced load / smaller groups (ratio)	7

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study examined the perceptions, expectations, and proposals of students enrolled in the Pedagogical Departments of Early Childhood Education in Greece regarding practicum supervision to identify the parameters of a practical, pedagogically grounded support model in initial teacher education. The findings are discussed in relation to the international literature and lead to a synthetic interpretation of the predominance of supervision, as well as to the articulation of a hybrid supervision model incorporating mentoring elements. These findings resonate with broader international analyses showing that, despite ongoing reform efforts, practicum supervision remains marked by enduring challenges in coherence and role alignment (Heinz, 2024).

Regarding the role and significance of supervision, pre-service teachers primarily conceptualized the supervisor as an advisor and pedagogical guide, with meaningful feedback as a core function. This perception aligns with international literature that conceptualizes practicum supervision as a structured pedagogical process rather than a mechanism of control or evaluation (Glickman et al., 2024). At the same time, the emphasis on advisory and guiding functions confirms that pre-service teachers, particularly in the early stages of their professional development, expect support that helps them organize their teaching experiences and transform theoretical knowledge into practical action (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This conceptualization resonates with contemporary perspectives that frame the supervisor's role as facilitative and dialogical, emphasizing coaching-oriented interactions that support professional learning rather than directive control (Lofthouse, 2019).

The frequent reference to feedback as a central function of supervision reinforces the view that feedback constitutes a critical mechanism for professional learning, especially when it is structured and systematically organized (Asregid, 2025), targeted, dialogic, and oriented towards improving practice (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Empirical evidence further suggests that feedback and mentoring practices contribute most effectively to professional learning when embedded within structured, reflective supervisory frameworks rather than operating as isolated or informal forms of support (Kalsoom et al., 2019). The qualitative findings indicate that students do not perceive feedback as fragmented or incidental commentary, but rather as a process closely linked to feelings of safety, encouragement, and professional empowerment. This dimension is consistent with recent research highlighting the role of support and "high-quality relationships" in fostering psychological safety and engagement during the practicum (Dreer-Goethe, 2025). Moreover, supervised practicum experiences have been shown to play a critical role in the formation of pre-service teachers' professional identity, particularly when reflective dialogue and feedback are systematically integrated into supervisory practices (Toh et al., 2022).

Regarding the characteristics and practices of an effective supervision model, the findings reveal a clear preference for teaching experience in early childhood education and relevance to the field over narrow scientific specialization. This trend suggests that pre-service teachers place particular value on the supervisor's applied credibility and ability to understand the realities of classroom practice. This finding is consistent with international studies indicating that practical practicum guidance requires familiarity with the school context and the capacity to connect theory with everyday instructional decision-making (Clarke et al., 2014).

Particular significance is attached to the predominance of in-person small-group workshops as the preferred context for feedback. This preference supports the view that reflective and critical processes are facilitated in small, dialogic settings, where students can discuss concrete examples from their practice and receive individualized guidance. Recent studies examining mentoring and supervisory dialogue through collaborative observational tools highlight that mentoring and supervision conversations become more meaningful when structured around shared language, discussion protocols, and observational evidence—features that align closely with workshop-based, small-group formats (Goldshaft, 2024; Hunskaar et al., 2025). Although digital forms of support are recognized as applicable, they appear to function primarily as complementary rather than as substitutes for direct pedagogical interaction. This finding is consistent with recent research on hybrid supervision models, which indicates that, despite technological affordances, embodied, face-to-face communication remains critical to the quality of feedback (Agnew et al., 2024).

Students' expectations for weekly (or more frequent) communication, adequate supervisor preparation, and a low supervisor–student ratio (1:10) underscore the importance of the organizational conditions of supervision and converge with the conception of supervision as a systematic process (Glickman et al., 2024). Recent research further indicates that the quality of supervision is strongly shaped—and often constrained—by structural conditions such as workload, time pressure, and institutional demands, highlighting the need for clearly structured and sustainable supervisory arrangements (Bjørndal et al., 2024). These findings also illuminate practical constraints identified in the international literature regarding the implementation of mentoring as an exclusive support model, including time limitations, increased workload, role ambiguity, resource constraints, and the often unrecognized, "hidden labour" of mentors and practicum supporters (Byth, 2024; Letloenyane et al., 2025). From this perspective, students' preference for structured supervisory practices can be interpreted as a search for stability, consistency, and pedagogical clarity.

The nearly even distribution of responses regarding the appropriate timing for initiating collaboration with a supervisor (early, mid-program, or later stages) reflects different pedagogical rationales: (i) the need for early familiarization and a sense of safety, (ii) the need for a solid theoretical foundation and maturity, and (iii) the need for accumulated experience and readiness. This differentiation aligns with international findings suggesting that pre-service teachers experience the practicum as a dynamic learning context shaped by personal and situational factors and that they develop in non-linear ways (Li et al., 2023).

The students' improvement proposals form a coherent framework that does not reject mentoring but instead integrates it functionally into a hybrid model. Specifically, students call for structural features of supervision (stable communication, preparation, small-group work, and clearly defined roles), alongside qualitative mentoring elements (supportive and non-judgmental attitudes, encouragement, and psychological safety). This finding reinforces the theoretical position that, in initial teacher education, supervision constitutes the necessary organizational core, while mentoring functions complementarily by enriching the process with relational and emotional dimensions (Ambrosetti, 2014; Byth, 2024; Letloenyane et al., 2025).

Overall, the study concludes that the predominance of supervision in initial teacher education is not merely an institutional choice but a pedagogical necessity aligned with pre-service teachers' developmental stage. At the same time, the findings suggest that the most

effective supervision models are those that selectively integrate mentoring elements, forming an innovative hybrid approach that emphasizes structured feedback, small-scale interactions, and supportive relationships. The contribution of the present study lies in foregrounding pre-service teachers' voices as a key factor in the design and improvement of supervision, offering empirical evidence that can inform the enhancement of practicum practices and support pedagogical innovation in initial teacher education.

Implications for Educational Innovation

The findings of the present study highlight critical implications for the pedagogical and organizational redesign of the practicum in the initial preparation of early childhood educators. In this context, educational innovation is not understood as the introduction of fragmented technological interventions, but rather as the reconfiguration of the core of supervisory practice based on empirically grounded student needs.

First, the results support a shift from formal or predominantly evaluative supervision towards a structured, reflective supervision model in which feedback functions as a central mechanism for professional learning. Practices such as iterative feedback cycles, the use of reflective tools, and small-group workshop-based supervision are innovative approaches that reposition the practicum from a site of instructional compliance to a context for learning and professional development.

Second, the findings call for a redefinition of the supervisory role, framed less as control and more as a pedagogical coordinator and facilitator of learning. The emphasis on teaching experience in early childhood education and its relevance to the field suggests a pedagogical innovation that transforms traditional guidance relationships and reshapes learning dynamics within the practicum.

Third, the strong preference for small-group, face-to-face workshop supervision indicates the need for organizational innovations that enhance individualized feedback, reflective engagement, and students' psychological safety. Small-scale supervision emerges as a critical condition of quality, particularly in contexts where support is often provided through large-scale or fragmented arrangements.

Finally, the study provides empirical support for the value of a hybrid supervision model that maintains structure, consistency, and accountability. At the same time, mentoring is functionally integrated to contribute non-judgmental attitudes, encouragement, and emotional support. This approach represents a realistic, pedagogically grounded innovation in initial teacher education, as it responds to both pre-service teachers' learning needs and the organizational constraints of practicum programs.

Overall, foregrounding pre-service teachers' voices in the design and evaluation of supervision constitutes an important dimension of educational innovation. By strengthening participation and shared responsibility, such an approach can improve program quality and develop more flexible and effective models of initial teacher education.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contribution of the present study to understanding supervision in the teaching practicum from the perspective of pre-service early childhood educators, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias and reflect participants' subjective perceptions rather than observed practices. Second, the sample consisted exclusively of students from early childhood education departments, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other teacher education contexts or subject areas. In addition, the cross-sectional design captured perceptions at a single point in time and did not allow for examination of how students' views on supervision may evolve across different stages of their studies or practicum experiences.

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal and mixed-methods designs that follow pre-service teachers across multiple practicum placements,

enabling a deeper exploration of changes in perceptions, needs, and professional learning over time. Further studies could also incorporate the perspectives of supervisors, mentor teachers, and university staff in order to triangulate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of supervisory practices. Finally, experimental or design-based research approaches could examine the implementation and impact of structured or hybrid supervision models—combining elements of supervision and mentoring—on student teachers' professional development, thereby contributing empirical evidence to support innovative and sustainable practices in initial teacher education.

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