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Student Engagement in initial teacher education: a systematic review

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Abstract: Research on engagement in initial teacher education has examined mentoring, practicum experiences, peer relationships, and reflection, often as separate aspects of professional learning. This review examines their connections and considers what they mean for programme design. The search covered peer-reviewed articles in the Web of Science Core Collection, published in English between 2019 and 2025 and indexed in SSCI or ESCI. It returned 51 records. Removing duplicates and records that did not meet formal eligibility requirements left 42 for screening; 16 articles were included in the thematic synthesis. Inductive coding supported by NVivo 16 identified three connected dimensions: relational, experiential, and pedagogical. Engagement was associated with opportunities to discuss difficulties in supportive relationships, take part in school practice, and examine teaching through inquiry, feedback, and reflection. These experiences helped prospective teachers connect university learning with classroom work and reconsider their decisions. The review places engagement within the conditions of teacher education. It directs attention to how programmes support participation: the guidance available during the practicum, the responsibilities students can assume, and the opportunities they have to discuss and interpret their experiences. These conditions may contribute to professional learning and the gradual development of autonomy.

Keywords: student engagement; initial teacher education; professional learning.

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1. Introduction

Student engagement refers to the student's active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities and commitment to educational goals and learning. Engaged students find learning meaningful and are invested in their learning and future. It is a multidimensional construct that consists of behavioral (including academic), cognitive, and affective subtypes. Student engagement drives learning; requires energy and effort; is affected by multiple contextual influences; and can be achieved for all learners (Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

Teaching requires a range of competencies: cultural competencies related to disciplinary knowledge; pedagogical competencies concerning teaching methods; relational competencies involving relationships with pupils; and organisational competencies related to the management of learning environments (Baldacci, 2023). This complexity calls for a coherent and systematic programme of teacher education in which an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice supports professional development. Such a programme should help prospective teachers draw on their knowledge in concrete educational situations, analyse problems arising in practice, and reflect on their decisions.

Within this approach, expectations of meaningful participation need to be considered alongside the conditions that enable it. Prospective teachers need opportunities to discuss difficulties, reconsider their interpretations, and contribute to activities through questions and proposals. The support they receive and the opportunities they have to take initiative are therefore relevant to understanding their engagement.

The diversity of educational needs and the changing competencies required of teachers also call for closer connections between teacher education and professional experience (Rowan et al., 2021; Flores & Craig, 2023). This raises questions about the conditions that enable prospective teachers to participate purposefully in their own education. The quality of teacher education thus also depends on the support and opportunities provided to sustain this participation.

This review aims to identify the dimensions of initial teacher education that can support prospective teachers' engagement in their professional learning. By analysing international studies, it seeks to examine the aspects of the educational experience associated with such engagement and discuss their implications for the design of high-quality teacher education programmes.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Eligibility criteria and study selection

The review was conducted using the Web of Science Core Collection and covered English-language articles indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) or the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), published between 2019 and 2025. The following search string was used: "preservice teacher" OR "pre-service teacher" OR "student teacher" OR "future teacher" OR "teaching practice" AND "engagement" OR participation OR agency.

In line with the study's aims, the following inclusion criteria were applied: (a) research articles published in peer-reviewed journals; (b) publication between 2019 and 2025; (c) publication in English; (d) indexing in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) or the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI); (e) a focus on prospective teachers enrolled in initial teacher education programmes; and (f) relevance to engagement, participation, or professional learning, including studies addressing belonging and agency.

No restrictions were imposed on research design. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies were therefore eligible for inclusion, as was a theoretical and conceptual article on mentoring that was relevant to the analysis of the relational conditions supporting prospective teachers' learning.

Studies focusing exclusively on school pupils or university student populations outside teacher education were excluded. Studies concerning practising or early-career teachers were also excluded when initial teacher education was not a direct focus of the investigation. The same applied to studies limited to the perspectives of mentors or teacher educators without direct reference to prospective teachers' experiences. The search yielded 51 records. After four duplicates and five records that did not meet the formal eligibility requirements were removed, 42 records were screened. Screening of titles and abstracts led to the exclusion of 26 articles that were not relevant to the review. The remaining 16 articles were assessed through full-text reading and included in the final corpus for the thematic synthesis (Table

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1). The identification, screening, and eligibility assessment process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process.

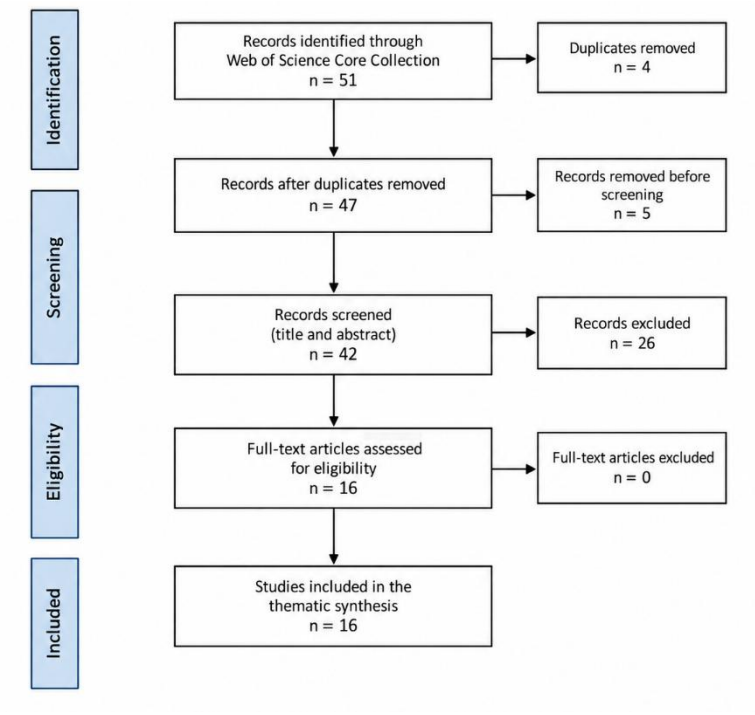


Table 1. Studies included in the review

Autore/i, anno	Titolo
Gravett & Jiyane, 2019	The practice learning experiences of student teachers at a rural campus of a South African university
Hu, Torres & Feng, 2019	Collaborative Action Research for Preparing Teachers as Reflective Practitioners
Skaniakos & Piirainen, 2019	*The meaning of peer group mentoring in the university context*
Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020	*Teaching Synchronous-Service Teachers: Traditional Teacher Education at a Crossroads*
Hood, 2020	*Two-way immersion teacher preparation*
Hendriwanto, 2021	*A reflective teaching practicum as a platform for stimulating pre-service teachers' professional development*
Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021	*Teacher Mentoring in Service of Preservice Teachers' Learning to Teach: Conceptual Bases,*

	Characteristics, and Challenges for Teacher Education Reform
Reinhardt, Robertson & Johnson, 2023	*Connecting inquiry and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to teacher candidates' emerging practice: development of a signature pedagogy*
Falter & Eagle, 2023	*"It Brought Me Back": Using Young Adult Book Clubs to Develop Preservice Teachers' Sympathetic Knowledge of Adolescents/ce*
Pattison-Meek, 2024	*The unsung heroes of practicum mentorship: Moving toward a triad model inclusive of student voice to support student teachers' professional learning*
Fan, Lu & Zhang, 2024	*The Impact of Teacher and Peer Support on Preservice EFL Teachers' Work Engagement in Their Teaching Practicum*
Dreer-Goethe, 2025	*The impact of mentor support and high-quality connections on student teachers' psychological safety and engagement during practicum*
Bendtsen & Forsman, 2025	*Exploring student engagement as a nexus for integrating theory and practice in language teacher education*
Contreras et al., 2025	*Examining the difficulties and support during an inquiry-based practicum: pre-service teachers and school mentors' experiences*
Ryan, Turner & Fogelgarn, 2025	*Stakeholder perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers' professional readiness: some implications for initial teacher education*
Shi et al., 2025	*Examining practicums within initial teacher education programs: Understanding the dimensions of professional development of pre-service teachers*

3. Results

3.1 Characteristics of the corpus and development of the thematic structure

The corpus comprises 16 studies that differ in context and research design and examine teacher education through lived experiences, reflection on practice, and the relationships that support professional learning. Across the studies, engagement tends to be more evident when prospective teachers receive support, find meaning in professional experiences, and have opportunities to reflect on their work. Comparison across coding nodes led to the identification of three dimensions: relational, experiential, and pedagogical. These dimensions emerged from the analysis of the material and were progressively refined through comparison across studies.

The teaching practicum is one of the most frequently represented contexts in the corpus. The studies examine what prospective teachers learn in schools (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019), how they reflect on their teaching practice (Hendriwanto, 2021),

and which aspects of professional development take shape during this experience (Shi et al., 2025).

Several contributions address the role of guidance and relationships. Mentoring is examined in terms of its conceptual foundations (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021) and through experiences of peer group dialogue in university settings (Skaniakos & Piirainen, 2019). Dreer-Goethe (2025) investigates the relationship between mentor support, relationship quality, psychological safety, and engagement during the practicum. Fan et al. (2024) examine the association between prospective English teachers' professional engagement and the support they receive from teachers and peers. In the triadic mentoring model analysed by Pattison-Meek (2024), pupils also contribute to student teachers' professional learning by sharing their perspectives.

Other studies focus on opportunities to investigate teaching practice. Hu et al. (2019) examine the contribution of collaborative action research to the development of reflective teachers, while Reinhardt et al. (2023) explore the relationship between inquiry, Universal Design for Learning, and emerging teaching practice. Contreras et al. (2025) consider the difficulties prospective teachers encounter in inquiry-based practicums and the forms of support available throughout these experiences.

Relationships with pupils are also considered for their educational value. Falter and Eagle (2023) explore shared reading activities as opportunities to develop an empathetic understanding of adolescent experience. Bendtsen and Forsman (2025) use pupil engagement as a lens through which to examine the connection between academic preparation and school experience in language teacher education.

The corpus thus encompasses teaching practicums, mentoring, action research, inquiry, collaborative activities, and narrative practices. This variety allows teacher education and professional engagement to be examined across different situations while retaining attention to the characteristics of each programme.

The texts were examined through coding supported by NVivo 16. Text segments expressing units of meaning relevant to the analysis were identified and progressively assigned to nodes. Comparison across studies informed revisions to the coding and the reorganisation of nodes according to the similarities and relationships identified. Broader conceptual groupings were then developed, allowing the findings of individual studies to be connected and the three dimensions to be defined.

3.1.1 Relational dimension: support, trust, and recognition

The relational dimension comprises codes relating to mentoring, support, reciprocity, belonging, feedback, psychological safety, peer relationships, and participation in professional communities. Comparison across these codes highlights the importance of being recognised within the educational setting: opportunities to participate in activities, express doubts, and engage in dialogue with others help prospective teachers make sense of their experiences and feel part of the professional community.

In the peer group mentoring examined by Skaniakos and Piirainen (2019), individual participation and professional development are fostered through shared experiences. The group provides a space for discussing experiences and learning together, extending mentoring beyond the relationship between two individuals. Similarly, in the collaborative action research described by Hu, Torres, and Feng (2019), lesson observation, discussion, and the reformulation of problems involve

prospective teachers, school-based mentors, and teacher educators. These exchanges allow participants to revisit their experiences, examine them from different perspectives, and reconsider their interpretations.

Pattison-Meek (2024) also considers pupils' contributions. In the practicum examined, their feedback helps prospective teachers reconsider their teaching. The triadic mentoring model thus gives pupils a role in student teachers' professional learning, although they usually have limited involvement in the formal mentoring relationship. For student teachers, this means learning to listen to pupils and take their observations into account when making teaching decisions.

Quantitative studies provide further insights into the relationship between social support and engagement. Fan, Lu, and Zhang (2024) identify an association between teacher support, peer support, and work engagement during the practicum. They also consider the contribution of personal and emotional resources, such as grit and enjoyment of teaching. Dreer-Goethe (2025) identifies mentor support as a predictor of engagement and psychological safety, while also highlighting the importance of the quality of relationships with other members of the school community. The relational context therefore encompasses the school environment as a whole.

Ryan, Turner, and Fogelgarn (2025) explore belonging and the behavioural aspects of participation. Engagement is also expressed through gradually coming to see oneself as a member of a professional community and adopting behaviours consistent with the role of a teacher.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that support has educational value when it enables prospective teachers to participate, seek help, and discuss difficulties without fear of being judged negatively. Being able to discuss mistakes and use feedback to revise teaching practice is part of this process.

3.1.2 Experiential dimension: from presence in practice to participation in practice

The experiential dimension concerns learning in professional settings, particularly during the teaching practicum. In the coded material, time spent in schools has educational value in relation to the opportunities available to prospective teachers: observing, teaching, taking on responsibilities, addressing problems, and discussing their experiences with those who support them. Opportunities to connect classroom experiences with knowledge acquired at university are also important.

Gravett and Jiyane (2019) show that learning through practice can support professional development, but that its value depends on the quality of the practicum setting, mentoring, and the availability of meaningful professional role models. The conditions in which the experience takes place therefore influence what prospective teachers can learn.

Hood (2020) examines field experiences that allow prospective teachers to engage with the complexity of teaching in two-way bilingual immersion programmes. In Hendriwanto (2021), the practicum includes peer observation, self-reflection, and discussions with the mentor. Despite differences between the two approaches, school experience provides opportunities to examine and reconsider

teaching decisions, contributing to the development of professional identity and the capacity to act as teachers.

Bendtsen and Forsman (2025) explore the connection between theory and experience. Throughout the semester, prospective teachers repeatedly use a theoretical framework on pupil engagement, applying it to different activities and contexts. Revisiting the same concepts allows them to deepen their understanding through practice. This repeated use appears to foster continuity between university preparation and school experience.

The inquiry-based practicum studied by Contreras, Liesa, Mayoral, and Alguacil (2025) highlights several difficulties: defining objectives, selecting relevant literature, and adjusting teaching practice. These tasks require prospective teachers to make decisions and assess their appropriateness throughout the process. Feedback and mentoring help them address these difficulties and understand their implications for teaching.

Shi et al. (2025) examine how professional development changes across the different stages of the practicum. Professional knowledge, practice, and engagement carry different weight as the experience progresses. The greater prominence of engagement in the later stages suggests a connection with gradual entry into the profession.

The codes grouped within this dimension therefore describe experience that becomes meaningful through participation. Opportunities to act, receive guidance, and discuss what happens help prospective teachers better understand work in schools and connect it with their teacher education.

3.1.3 Educational dimension: inquiry, reflection, and meaning-making

The educational dimension comprises codes relating to inquiry, action research, reflection, collaboration, analysis of practice, feedback, narrative work, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and structured professional tasks. These codes concern how prospective teachers examine their experiences: formulating questions, gathering evidence to understand them, comparing interpretations, and reconsidering their decisions. The focus is therefore on the activities provided and how they support professional learning.

In the study by Hu, Torres, and Feng (2019), prospective teachers address problems arising during the practicum, observe lessons, teach, keep reflective journals, and participate in a learning community. The activities are organised around concrete issues of practice and require participants to gather evidence, discuss interpretations, and re-examine their initial beliefs. Analysing experience is part of this collaborative work.

Reinhardt, Robertson, and Johnson (2023) connect inquiry with Universal Design for Learning through action research projects. Prospective teachers examine their own practice and articulate what they learn. This work encourages them to explain the reasoning behind their teaching decisions and consider revising them in light of the evidence gathered.

Falter and Eagle (2023) describe an approach based on narrative practices and discussion in reading groups. Personal storytelling, perspective-taking, and imagining future situations (future casting) help participants reconsider their understandings of

adolescence and the role of the teacher. Engaging with stories and others' interpretations prompts them to revisit the assumptions through which they understand pupils' experiences.

The studies by Contreras et al. (2025) and Bendtsen and Forsman (2025) highlight the role of support in this work. In the former, feedback helps prospective teachers formulate objectives, select sources, interpret their actions, and adjust the inquiry process. In the latter, repeated use of a theoretical framework across different activities supports the transition from understanding concepts to applying them in practice.

The educational dimension therefore concerns how learning activities are designed and supported. Across the studies examined, engagement develops through tasks that require prospective teachers to question their experiences, connect them with theoretical knowledge, and revise their decisions through dialogue and feedback.

4. Discussion

The review suggests that engagement should be understood in relation to the conditions in which teacher education takes place. The personal resources considered in some studies also matter in relation to opportunities to draw on them in professional activities and relationships. This interpretation is consistent with the concept of the educational interface proposed by Kahu and Nelson (2018), which locates engagement at the intersection of the individual and the educational context.

In initial teacher education, limited participation may have explanations other than low motivation. It may reflect difficulties in understanding the purpose of activities, finding a role within the programme, or connecting learning with the future profession. It is therefore necessary to examine the opportunities for participation that teacher education provides and what they mean to students.

The findings highlight the importance of the work that connects school experience with university-based teacher education. The gap between these contexts also concerns how prospective teachers are supported in understanding and discussing what happens in practice.

Inquiry, action research, and reflection enable prospective teachers to use concepts and theoretical frameworks to examine concrete situations. Experience can, in turn, raise questions that lead them to revise or deepen their interpretations. Theory and practice inform one another through this process: concepts help make sense of situations, while situations test existing knowledge and prompt new questions.

Continuity between university and school therefore requires opportunities to revisit experiences, discuss them, and connect them with professional knowledge. Moving between the two settings provides opportunities to establish these connections, but needs to be accompanied by activities that make them explicit.

Mentoring plays an important role in helping prospective teachers make sense of professional experience. Dialogue with a mentor allows them to discuss difficulties, understand what happens in the classroom, and receive feedback on their decisions.

Psychological safety helps explain the conditions that support this dialogue. Learning to teach involves mistakes, uncertainty, and exposure to judgement. If

student teachers fear that discussing difficulties will affect how their competence is assessed, they may avoid addressing them openly and miss opportunities to learn.

The educational value of mentoring also depends on opportunities to discuss these issues within a relationship that involves both support and assessment.

Engagement can change and become stronger during teacher education. Experiences, responsibilities, and the recognition prospective teachers receive contribute to this development.

Connections with agency and professional identity can also be understood within this process. Agency concerns opportunities to exercise judgement and make decisions; identity develops partly through participation in the work of schools. Engagement thus accompanies the transition from student to teacher as opportunities to contribute to practice and take responsibility for it increase.

5. Limitations of the review

The review has several limitations. The first concerns the use of a single database.

The search was conducted in a single database, the Web of Science Core Collection. This choice made the selection process traceable, but may have excluded studies available through other sources or published in journals not indexed in SSCI or ESCI.

The inclusion of only English-language articles published between 2019 and 2025 also limits the review's coverage of the development of the topic over time and of contributions from other linguistic contexts.

The corpus also varies in its conceptual focus. Some studies examine engagement as their primary focus, while others address mentoring, agency, belonging, or preparation for the profession. The latter were included when their connection with prospective teachers' participation was explicit, while maintaining distinctions between these constructs.

No formal assessment of the studies' methodological quality using critical appraisal tools was undertaken, nor was a quantitative synthesis of effects conducted. The proposed framework therefore offers an interpretative account of the corpus: it does not establish causal relationships or determine the relative weight of the three dimensions.

6. Conclusions

The review suggests that engagement in initial teacher education develops in relation to the opportunities for participation offered by the programme. Engagement appears to be supported by relationships that allow dialogue, professional experiences in which prospective teachers can participate, and activities that help them understand and reflect on their practice.

This perspective helps explain how students gradually enter the profession, learn to make decisions, and take on responsibilities. Attention to the conditions of participation can therefore inform the design of programmes that support this development. The review calls for opportunities that sustain engagement throughout teacher education.

One area concerns the connection between university activities and the teaching practicum. The analysis of classroom episodes, action research, and reflective writing can strengthen this connection when they address problems

encountered in schools and allow prospective teachers to examine them using the tools acquired during their studies.

Mentor preparation also deserves attention. Skills in facilitating reflection and providing feedback can help mentors discuss mistakes and uncertainties with student teachers while fulfilling the organisational and assessment responsibilities of their role.

University activities should include tasks that require students to interpret situations, justify their choices, and revise decisions in light of evidence and feedback. The contribution of teaching approaches should be considered in relation to the professional work they enable students to undertake.

Opportunities for participation should also develop progressively. Guided observation and close support may be needed initially; opportunities to make decisions and take on responsibilities can then increase. Autonomy can thus develop through experiences suited to each stage of the programme.

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