

Bridging theory and practice: creation of a reflection and engagement guide to support school-based teacher educators

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Abstract

Purpose – The Reflection and Engagement Guide (REG) was developed to facilitate weekly conferences between school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) and teacher candidates. Influenced by cognitive apprenticeship theory, conversational frames (Long *et al.*, 2013), Danielson’s Framework for Teaching and the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), the REG is grounded in the concept of a third space (Zeichner, 2010). It bridges the gap between university coursework and clinical practice by offering structured, reflective prompts that connect theoretical concepts to practical teaching experiences. By positioning weekly conferences as hybrid spaces where academic and practitioner knowledge intersect, the REG fosters professional relationships, promotes open communication and supports meaningful reflection.

Design/methodology/approach – The development of the REG was influenced by various sources, including cognitive apprenticeship theory, conversational frames by Long *et al.* (2013), Danielson’s Framework for Teaching and the edTPA.

Findings – This article does not include research findings; rather, it describes the research that underpins the creation of the REG.

Practical implications – By sharing the process of the REG’s creation and implementation, this work offers valuable insights for teacher educators and educator preparation programs interested in developing or adopting similar tools. Ultimately, the REG aims to enhance the quality of clinical mentorship and strengthen the connection between theory and practice in teacher preparation.

Originality/value – The REG is unique in its integration of multiple frameworks into a single, coherent structure that has not been previously implemented in this format. It addresses topics central to teacher education while aligning with national performance expectations, providing both consistency and depth across diverse preparation contexts.

Keywords Teacher preparation, Preservice teachers, Mentorship, Clinical practice, Cooperating teachers, Clinical preparation, School-based teacher educator

Paper type Policy brief

Introduction

Clinical experiences, specifically student teaching experiences as addressed in this paper, provide teacher candidates with opportunities to learn from a school-based teacher educator (SBTE), apply theoretical knowledge to classroom settings, develop new instructional strategies, and engage in reflective practice (Flores, 2016; Korthagen, 2010; Schön, 1983). This formative experience significantly shapes their teaching practices and future careers, with the SBTE playing a crucial role in the quality of the experience (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Gareis & Grant, 2014; Weiss & Weiss, 2001; Glickman & Bey, 1990). The recognition of the SBTE’s influence aligns with Essential 2 of the Second Edition of the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) *Nine Essentials* which



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emphasizes that clinical practice is a central feature of educator preparation. It underscores the important role of school-university partnerships in creating “authentic educational preparation settings where coursework and clinical experiences are closely coupled ensuring that educators are profession ready” (NAPDS, 2021, p. 15).

A perennial issue within university-based teacher education programs highlighted by Zeichner (2010), is the disconnect between academic coursework and hands-on classroom experience. To address this, he introduced the concept of a “third space,” a hybrid space designed to integrate the academic preparation of teacher candidates with practical knowledge from experienced educators in school settings. The concept has been widely applied in studies of collaborative approaches to teacher education, especially in the context of school-university partnerships (Daza, Gudmundsdottir, & Lund, 2021), where it is often used to describe a reflective space situated between educational, epistemological, and professional domains (Christophersen, Holdhus, & Kenny, 2024). This closely aligns with Essential 8 which states that the third spaces in a school-university partnership “are conceived as places of discovery and experimentation, governed by ideas and ideals. . . designed to renew a culture of teaching, learning, leading, and schooling” (NAPDS, 2021, p. 16). This emphasizes the idea of working within a third space not only to manage daily work, but as a way to generate new norms and shared ideals that extend beyond the goals of the individual partners (Cosenza *et al.*, 2023).

These hybrid spaces are inherently collaborative and can take multiple forms, including professional development schools (PDS), school–university partnerships (SUP), and other site-based training models. These partnerships are a vital element of teacher education and aim to bridge the gap between university courses and clinical experiences (Korthagen, 2010; Ma & Green, 2023; Trepper, Levine, Lomeli, & Garcia, 2023; Zeichner, 2010). Furthermore, these partnerships are essential because they provide authentic contexts and firsthand experiences that are essential for preparing preservice teachers for the classroom (Burns, Yendol-Hoppey, & Jacobs, 2015).

While such partnerships can take many different forms across institutions, an application of a hybrid space can be seen in a part of the student teaching experience at a large Midwestern public university, where structured weekly conferences between the student teacher and SBTE take place. Guided by a set of questions, these conferences function as a third space that integrates key topics from the university with the professional expertise of the SBTE.

The Reflection and Engagement Guide (REG) was developed by the author, in collaboration with the university student teaching coordinator, to intentionally bridge the gap between university coursework and clinical practice. Drawing on our previous experiences as both SBTEs and university supervisors, as well as existing research, it was evident that open communication between SBTEs and student teachers was an essential component for bridging the gap between university and school settings (Jones, Kelsey, & Brown, 2014; Stanulis & Russell, 2000). The REG was designed to strengthen school–university partnerships by serving as a structured tool to initiate and facilitate meaningful conversations. By offering carefully designed guiding questions, it not only provides space for open communication but also directs attention to essential issues of teaching and learning, helping participants bridge the gap between university-based knowledge and classroom practice.

An earlier set of weekly discussion questions provided the initial foundation for the development of the REG. Building on this base, insights drawn from a range of research theories and conceptual frameworks were integrated to further refine and strengthen the guide. This paper examines the primary factors that influenced the creation of the REG and explores its role in enhancing the student teaching experience.

Reflection and engagement guide

To promote ongoing communication and reflection, the REG includes 14 sets of structured questions designed to facilitate weekly discussions between the SBTE and student teacher. In

addition, it provides supportive points of reference each week throughout the student teaching experience (see [Appendix A](#)). The questions in the REG were designed to guide intentional and meaningful weekly conferences on topics that may not occur organically during the week. Such discussions are essential, as sharing practices and beliefs plays a crucial role in developing teaching skills and confidence ([Sheridan & Young, 2017](#)). Additionally, research emphasizes that while reflection and feedback are essential, interactive engagement is the most impactful aspect of the experience, and SBTEs are best positioned to provide this critical interaction ([Trites, 2020](#)).

These weekly conferences not only facilitate reflection on classroom experiences but provide the needed time for collaboration and open communication. As noted in Essential 9, trust, respect, and collaboration are built through working side by side and engaging in joint inquiry, reflection, and decision-making ([NAPDS, 2021](#)). This work requires dedicated time for stakeholders to collaborate, and the REG provides that space and time.

Additionally, the REG seeks to foster a reciprocal relationship between the SBTE and the student teacher, promoting a two-way exchange of knowledge and skills ([Allen, 2007](#)). Through collaborative questioning and discussion, both parties share their expertise, enabling an open exchange of ideas and continuous growth throughout the student teaching experience ([Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010](#)). Although SBTEs are commonly regarded as the main source of expertise, teacher candidates also contribute important perspectives and resources ([NAPDS, 2021](#); [Badiali et al., 2023](#)). Their recent coursework and engagement with current educational research and technology provide fresh insights. Furthermore, the questions and guidelines in the REG support the SBTE by incorporating key concepts and terminology from teacher education.

The REG serves as a tool to ensure that weekly conferences are not one-sided; it creates structured opportunities for teacher candidates to share university-based knowledge, question assumptions, and connect theory to practice. In doing so, the REG promotes a reciprocal partnership where both SBTEs and teacher candidates learn from one another. As noted in Essential 3, reciprocal professional learning encourages sustained learning on the part of all participants and fosters a richer school-university partnership ([NAPDS, 2021](#), [Polly et al., 2023](#)).

Grounded in research and theory, these topics help bridge the gap between university coursework and classroom practice. Overall, the REG facilitates structured conferencing and reflection while offering mentoring support for SBTEs. Its development was informed by various sources, including cognitive apprenticeship theory, conversational frames by [Long, van Es, and Black \(2013\)](#), Danielson's Framework for Teaching, and the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA). The following sections provide a detailed discussion of these components.

Relevant concepts and literature

Cognitive apprenticeship

The development of the REG was grounded in social constructivism, specifically within the framework of cognitive apprenticeship. Social constructivism asserts that knowledge and learning are constructed through social interaction ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)). Cognitive apprenticeship emphasizes authentic tasks, real-world contexts, and the interactions between more and less-skilled individuals ([Garner, 2012](#)). Through active participation and social engagement, cognitive apprenticeship methods integrate students into authentic professional practices ([Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989](#)). A central goal of this approach is to make cognitive and metacognitive processes explicit during complex tasks, enabling learners to develop a deeper understanding ([Garner, 2012](#)). This is achieved through mentorship, with the SBTE modeling and articulating their thought processes to guide the student teacher.

Additionally, [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) highlighted the importance of practicing in real-life settings to develop relevant and transferable knowledge. [Dennen and Burner \(2008\)](#) suggest

that the most effective and productive relationships between SBTEs and student teachers align with cognitive apprenticeship principles.

While the literature on this topic is primarily older, [Deng \(2025\)](#) noted more recent studies that emphasize knowledge construction as an active process grounded in experience and reflection, while also recognizing the critical role of social interaction in learning ([Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2020](#); [Smith, Johnson, & Zhao, 2020](#)). These studies indicate that social interaction serves a dual purpose in learning. It not only facilitates the exchange and integration of ideas among learners but also enhances learning outcomes by engaging individuals in collaborative problem-solving and the joint development of shared understanding. Through this process, learners build deeper connections between concepts and strengthen their ability to apply knowledge in meaningful ways ([Deng, 2025](#)).

Social constructivism and cognitive apprenticeship served as the theoretical foundation of the REG, with questions intentionally designed to foster meaningful engagement between student teachers and SBTEs. The practical application of this theoretical foundation is achieved throughout the student teaching experience, a real-world context where the SBTE not only models effective teaching practices but also explains the reasoning behind their decisions. By making their thought processes visible, the SBTE helps the student teacher connect theory to practice, develop problem-solving skills, and gain confidence in navigating the complexities of the classroom.

Conversational frames

The framework of the REG is informed by the conversational frames identified by [Long et al. \(2013\)](#). Their study examined the discourse in student teacher supervision, focusing on how the conversational frames of both SBTEs and student teachers shaped discussions about teaching practice. Through an analysis of four post-observation meeting transcripts, [Long et al. \(2013\)](#) identified three key conversational frame types that influenced the effectiveness of these interactions: educative, supportive, and evaluative. These frames highlight the need for intentional guidance from SBTEs, underscoring that effective mentoring requires more than observation alone. For student teachers to develop their skills effectively, SBTEs must go beyond modeling; they must provide feedback, explanations, suggestions for improvement, and emotional support. [Tannen \(1993\)](#) argued that using a structured protocol helps clarify expectations for conversations between student teachers and SBTEs, ensuring that both parties work toward the same goal.

Conversational frames represent the expectations individuals use to interpret interactions, conversations, and people ([Tannen, 1993](#)). Establishing common frames is essential for facilitating smooth discussions and effectively managing tensions ([Long et al., 2013](#)). Conversely, when individuals operate under different frames, conversational conflicts can arise, potentially disrupting communication ([Long et al., 2013](#)). By integrating these frames, exchanges between student teachers and SBTEs are structured to balance assessment, professional learning, and emotional support. While this research is somewhat dated, it remains relevant because it provides a useful lens for understanding supervisory conversations today. Its insights were instrumental in guiding the design of the REG, which was created to promote productive, shared understandings between SBTEs and student teachers. Next, each conversational frame will be examined to highlight their distinct roles in supporting supervisory interactions.

The educative frame focuses on fostering the student teacher's development of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and dispositions to enhance teaching practices ([Long et al., 2013](#)). These questions encourage learning by creating opportunities for feedback, suggestions, and explanations of instructional decisions ([Long et al., 2013](#)). Examples of educative questions that guide supervisory conversations include: "How did your knowledge of your students inform your planning this week?" and "What do you consider when deciding the type of assessment to use?"

SBTEs can use educative questions to provide specific feedback and offer guidance for improvement, while teacher candidates can use them to articulate their decision-making and analyze their classroom practices. Ideally, incorporating the educative frame promotes meaningful discussions where student teacher learning is actively supported through dialogue and reflection (Long *et al.*, 2013, p. 184).

The supportive frame centers on providing emotional support and fostering a comfortable, nonthreatening environment, steering conversations away from overly critical remarks (Long *et al.*, 2013). This frame allows student teachers to navigate the emotional challenges inherent in the demanding student teaching experience. Supportive questions are designed to encourage reflection and provide emotional guidance. For example, an SBTE might ask what concerns a student teacher has regarding their experience, or what they or university supervisor can do to better support them emotionally. Supportive questions serve to balance the more analytical discussions within the educative and evaluative frames, while also strengthening the relationship between the SBTE and student teacher.

The evaluative frame focuses on assessing the student teacher's ability to teach effectively rather than solely providing feedback (Long *et al.*, 2013). Discussions within this frame address the overall quality of the student teacher's performance. Questions in the evaluative frame are used sparingly and introduced later in the semester, once the student teacher has gained more experience. Examples of evaluative questions include: "How does the teacher candidate involve students in developing assessments or assessing their own work?" and "How does the teacher candidate involve students in assessments?" These questions were designed with teacher evaluation principles in mind, ensuring that assessment remains a constructive component of the student teaching experience.

In developing the REG, these three conversational frames were used to categorize questions and ensure a balanced approach to the types of discussions that occur during weekly conferences. By integrating conversational frames, the exchanges between student teachers and SBTEs were structured to maintain a balance between evaluative and educative discussions while incorporating a necessary supportive component for preservice teachers. The use of these conversational frames supports SBTEs and ensures that teaching practices are explicitly communicated, as emphasized in cognitive apprenticeship. By incorporating the educative, supportive, and evaluative frames, the REG fosters productive and meaningful discussions that enhance the student teaching experience.

Danielson's framework for teaching

Danielson's Framework for Teaching (FFT) is a widely recognized model for assessing teacher performance and defining essential teaching competencies. Grounded in constructivist theory, this framework consists of research-based instructional components designed to support effective teaching. It aligns with the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Model Core Teaching Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). The FFT consists of 76 elements of effective teaching practice, organized into 22 components across four domains:

- (1) Planning and Preparation (Domain 1)
- (2) Learning Environments (Domain 2)
- (3) Learning Experiences (Domain 3)
- (4) Principled Teaching (Domain 4) (Danielson Group, 2022).

By deconstructing effective teaching strategies, the FFT acknowledges the complexity of teaching and provides a structured framework that supports professional growth through detailed descriptions of performance attributes (Evans, Wills, & Moretti, 2015).

The FFT is one of the most widely used observational systems for evaluating teacher effectiveness (Danielson, 2015) and serves as a key evaluation tool for teacher candidates at

the university where it is being used. The FFT provides a foundational structure for conversations by establishing a common language among educators (Danielson, 2015).

This framework is widely used due to its research-based foundation and detailed performance characteristics, which align with the evaluation criteria student teachers will encounter during their student teaching experience and future professional careers. To support meaningful discussions, each week of the REG includes references to specific FFT components. Additionally, most SBTEs have extensive experience with the FFT and are familiar with its elements of effective teaching practice, further enhancing the relevance and applicability of these conversations.

EdTPA

The Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) provides a foundation for the REG because its prompts require candidates to engage in a comprehensive cycle of teaching and reflection that aligns closely with the goals of the REG. The edTPA asks teacher candidates to explain their teaching context, including student demographics and learning needs, which encourages awareness of how diverse learners shape instructional decisions (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity [SCALE], 2025). Importantly, it requires candidates to justify their pedagogical choices by grounding them in knowledge of students and content. Teacher candidates must also describe their planning, detailing how lessons, materials, and assessments are designed to meet learning goals and accommodate varied learners (SCALE, 2025). In addition, the edTPA emphasizes analyzing instruction, evaluating student learning, and reflecting on the entire process to identify patterns that inform future teaching (SCALE, 2025). Together, these components reflect evidence-based practices of effective teaching, which the REG applies to structure supervisory conversations and support ongoing professional growth.

Although the edTPA is no longer as widely used, the REG builds on its components to reflect enduring, research-based principles of effective teaching. The reflective questions it poses encourage deep thinking and justification of teaching practices, and the REG similarly fosters critical thinking in a low-stakes environment, enabling student teachers to engage in meaningful discussions that support their professional growth. By guiding SBTEs' questions and reflections during weekly conferences, the REG continues to foster deliberate, reflective practice even as performance based assessment practices evolve. By drawing on these foundations, the REG adapts the strengths of the edTPA into a tool that structures supervisory conversations and supports reflective practice.

Putting it all together

Grounded in cognitive apprenticeship and conversational frames and informed by Danielson's Framework for Teaching (FFT) and the edTPA, the REG was designed to foster meaningful dialogue and reflection between SBTEs and student teachers. This is consistent with Essential 4 which underscores the importance of a shared commitment to reflective practice that values both practical and theoretical professional knowledge (NAPDS, 2021; Stoicovy et al., 2023). The REG helps bridge the gap between teacher preparation, classroom practice, and performance-based assessments, ensuring that student teachers engage in meaningful discussions aligned with established teaching standards. Additionally, it provides SBTEs with guidance on how to effectively support their student teachers.

Each week, the REG introduces a key topic related to teaching practices. The weekly page structure includes:

- (1) A title and an essential question at the top to frame the discussion.
- (2) Weekly discussion questions categorized into the three conversational frames: educative, supportive, and evaluative (Long et al., 2013).

- (3) A supportive section with brief guidelines to help school-based teacher educators understand the week's focus and how best to support their student teacher.
- (4) A reference to the relevant section of Danielson's FFT at the bottom, connecting the discussion to established teaching standards.

By integrating these elements, the REG ensures that weekly conferences are structured, purposeful, and aligned with research-based best practices in teacher preparation.

The weekly questions in the REG are structured to gradually increase in complexity. Early in the semester, the focus is on educative and supportive questions, fostering relationship-building and discussions about classroom community. As the semester progresses, evaluative questions are introduced, guiding deeper reflection on more advanced topics such as feedback, assessment, and inquiry. The progression of questions is intentional, beginning with foundational topics and evolving into higher-level educational discussions. This design ensures that student teachers develop their understanding and teaching skills in a scaffolded manner.

The REG is made readily accessible to all participants—it is included in the student teaching handbook and syllabus and is also emailed to SBTEs at the start of the student teaching experience. This ensures that both student teachers and their mentors have clear, structured guidance to facilitate meaningful weekly discussions.

Using the REG

The Reflection and Engagement Guide (REG) was designed to be used weekly for 14 weeks of a 16-week student teaching experience. To maximize its effectiveness, student teachers and SBTEs should review the questions at the beginning of each week to establish a clear focus for the week. Then, at the end of the week, the student teacher should initiate a conference with the SBTE to discuss the questions. A 15 to 30-minute conversation is suggested, with the goal of addressing at least three of the questions provided. A unique feature of the REG is that its questions are designed for both the student teacher and SBTE to ask and answer, ensuring the discussion involves not only the SBTE's expertise but also the student teacher's reflections and insights on their teaching practices. This structure encourages shared reflection and knowledge exchange, directly connecting to Essential 9, which emphasizes that teacher candidates are valuable assets whose motivation, enthusiasm, and contributions enrich the student teaching experience for both children and SBTEs (NAPDS, 2021; Badiali *et al.*, 2023).

Currently, there is no formal assessment tied to the REG. The primary goal is to facilitate weekly discussions that promote deeper reflection and engagement while supporting SBTEs in their mentoring role. While University Supervisors may require their teacher candidates to complete a written reflection based on their weekly discussion, such reflections are optional and not a formal requirement. Because the REG is designed to foster reflective dialogue rather than evaluate performance, there is no standardized grading or assessment framework associated with it. Instead, the focus remains on creating a collaborative space where teacher candidates can examine their teaching practices, share insights, and receive guidance in a low-stakes, supportive environment.

Future considerations include developing a semester-long portfolio assessment that aligns with the REG's questions. This portfolio could provide a structured way for teacher candidates to document and reflect on their learning and growth throughout the student teaching experience. It could include artifacts such as lesson plans, student work samples, self-reflections, and feedback from SBTEs and University Supervisors. By linking portfolio entries to the REG's weekly reflective questions, teacher candidates would be able to demonstrate how they have applied insights from weekly discussions to their classroom practice, showing evidence of professional growth over time. Additionally, this approach could serve as a formative assessment tool, helping both teacher candidates and supervisors identify strengths,

areas for improvement, and patterns in reflective thinking, while maintaining the REG's focus on collaborative dialogue and reflective practice rather than high-stakes evaluation.

The ideas presented in this paper, along with the REG ([Appendix A](#)), offer a practical starting point for educator preparation programs seeking to foster reflective and supportive supervisory conversations. By offering a structured framework for dialogue, the REG encourages teacher candidates to engage critically with their teaching practices while allowing SBTEs to guide, mentor, and co-reflect alongside them. Programs can adapt or develop their own sets of questions to suit their specific contexts, student populations, and instructional priorities, ensuring the framework remains flexible and relevant. Moreover, by embedding these reflective conversations into weekly supervision, programs can promote sustained professional growth, deepen the quality of mentorship, and reinforce a culture of intentional, reflective practice. Looking ahead, such approaches have the potential to strengthen the connection between theory and practice in teacher preparation, support more meaningful school-university partnerships, and ultimately contribute to the development of educators who are thoughtful, adaptable, and committed to continuous learning throughout their careers.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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