Article

Exploring a Synchronous Hybrid Observation Approach for Supporting Student Teachers during School Placements

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Abstract: This article presents findings from an international study examining a synchronous hybrid approach for observing and supporting student teachers on their school placement. This novel approach emerged from previous studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and involves university tutors synchronously supervising student teachers from two locations: one tutor face-to-face in a school-based classroom and another virtually, from a remote setting such as a university campus. The qualitative case study adopts a focus group method to explore the views of participating school placement tutors from universities in Ireland and Australia about the benefits and challenges of this approach. Findings suggest that this new approach enhances supervisors' observation and feedback practices and enables enriched collaboration and professional dialogue between student teachers and their tutors. Future research directions are also shared to advance the field.

Keywords: synchronous hybrid observation; initial teacher education; school placements; technology-enhanced professional learning; technology-supported supervision of student teachers

1. Introduction

In initial teacher education, the school placement (also known as professional experience or practicum) has traditionally provided opportunities for student teachers (pre-service teachers) to practice skills, develop competencies, explore new ideas in real-world settings, and reflect on their emerging teacher identities [1,2]. The quality of mentoring and feedback from school placement tutors (also known as tertiary supervisors or placement mentors) representing higher education institutions providing recognised teacher education programs is critical in supporting student teachers to successfully transition into teaching [3–5]. Classroom observation is regarded as one of the most valued elements of the school placement experience [6,7], and developments in live-streaming technology have recently enabled virtual techniques that are reshaping this process [8–10].

This paper presents findings from a study exploring the benefits and challenges of using a synchronous hybrid approach to classroom observation from the perspectives of school placement tutors. Building on a previously established collaborative research relationship, teacher educators in both an Irish university and an Australian university developed this approach with the rationale of supporting flexibility and adaptability across a range of circumstances and locations. The hybrid approach combines real-time physical in-classroom observation by the placement tutor, undertaken simultaneously with virtual observations made by additional remote tutors using online technologies such as Zoom.

This study is set within a framework that conceptualises learning as a social process that takes place in communities of practice [11,12]. Communities can be local or global, meet face-to-face or mostly online, but primarily consist of practitioners whose collaboration around a shared concern or passion leads to the development of knowledge and

expertise [13]. In the context of teacher education, Patton and Parker [14] argue that participation in a community, network, or team offers one of the most powerful modes of ongoing professional growth and identity development.

The study addresses the following research question: What are school placement tutors' views of the benefits and challenges of a synchronous hybrid approach to supervising and supporting student teachers?

2. Background

2.1. Virtual Supervision of Student Teachers on School Placements

The use of a virtual alternative to in-person observations of student teachers' lessons on school placement has been shown to increase frequency and flexibility of observation, enable multiple tutors to compare their analyses and moderate feedback, and enable groups of tutors with different expertise to contribute [15–18]. The resulting multiple perspectives can facilitate professional discourse between tutors from varied disciplinary backgrounds and promote valuable in-depth discussion with student teachers about a range of content-specific issues arising from observed lessons [15,19].

Studies indicate that virtual supervision or observation mitigates the potential negative impact of numerous classroom-based observers on student teachers' confidence, reactivity, and classroom dynamics [20–22]. With fewer physical, classroom-based intrusions by external visitors to the classroom, virtual supervision can promote a more naturalistic teaching and learning context for student teachers [8,9,23]. The use of virtual technologies for supervision can help to create increased opportunities for developing student teachers' autonomy and to enhance critical discussions and reflective practices [9,21]. Virtual observation can have less impact on reactivity and boost confidence, particularly for student teachers who are struggling with their classroom practices or other aspects of the placement and are required to have additional tutor observations [21]. The strategy facilitates tutors to meet with student teachers and cooperating school teachers (also called mentor teachers or supervising teachers) more frequently and build collaborative, professional relationships, providing stronger support networks for the student teachers.

Virtual supervision has furthermore been shown to significantly support student teachers in rural or isolated locations, where frequent visits would have not otherwise been possible [9,24,25]. This approach reduces the costs and time associated with travel, enabling tutors to spend more time supporting the student teachers [17,18,25,26], providing a catalyst for change in addressing equity issues irrespective of placement location [17,27]. Additionally, the facilitation of valuable professional dialogue between experienced and novice tutors and school teachers has been recognised as conducive to ongoing professional learning and confidence [8,9,28]. Given the traditional solitary nature of tutors' classroom observation duties and other responsibilities supporting student teachers on school placements and the somewhat limited opportunities for new tutors' professional learning [15], our study is an area of great interest to the field.

2.2. Towards a Synchronous Hybrid Supervision Approach

Our study builds on the existing literature by exploring a synchronous hybrid approach to supervising student teachers on school placements. This novel approach combines simultaneous (rather than alternate or asynchronous) use of virtual lesson observations with traditional in-person school visits by supervising tutors from the university [9]. In this hybrid procedure, one tutor is situated in the classroom, and at least one additional remote tutor is connected in real time via an online technology such as Zoom. Up to two digital devices are placed in carefully chosen locations to enable an optimal view of the classroom and the student teacher for the virtual tutor. The tutors can communicate online with each other during the lesson to share perspectives. In the post-lesson debrief session, both tutors provide feedback to the student teacher from their collective observations. Our study explores tutors' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of this approach.

This synchronous hybrid strategy was collaboratively developed by the authors in response to ongoing discussions with student teachers and their tutors, who indicated a desire for greater flexibility and more focused support during school placements following their use of (asynchronous) virtual supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions [9]. Our study therefore investigates a synchronous, hybrid approach that could be implemented across a range of metropolitan, rural, regional, and remote locations.

3. Study Design

The qualitative case study design of this research allows for an exploration of the realities involved in using a synchronous hybrid supervision approach for supporting student teachers on school placement [29] and explored this phenomenon from the multiple perspectives of placement tutors in both Irish and Australian universities. The research emerged from our previous collaborative studies that also focused on technology-supported supervision of student teachers on school placements [8,9]. Congruence in themes emerging from this diverse data set supported findings that are more likely to be generalisable beyond national boundaries, demonstrating transferability across sectors and contexts, heightening the potential impact on policy makers and other stakeholders irrespective of jurisdiction.

Focus groups were used as a method to generate rich data through structured discussion. This enabled participants to contribute in-depth information about their feelings, attitudes, and perspectives regarding the phenomenon [30]. The participants ($n = 15$) were all volunteers for the study and worked as school placement tutors supporting student teachers. These participants were sampled through a purposive and convenience sampling approach [31] and recruited via an email invitation circulated by administration staff at each institution. They were divided into four online focus groups, two from each country, Australian (AU) Focus Group (FG) 1 and 2, and Irish (IE) Focus Group (FG) 1 and 2, each with approximately four group members. To assist objectivity and reduce bias, the focus groups with Australian participants were facilitated by Irish researchers, and the focus groups involving Irish participants were facilitated by Australian researchers.

Most participants had extensive experience as placement tutors and had recently implemented the synchronous hybrid approach for supervising student teachers in a variety of school settings. The focus group schedule had three sections that included exploring the affordances and possibilities of synchronous hybrid supervision, highlighting its limitations and challenges, and evaluating a number of specific scenarios for the approach.

After transcription, the data from the four focus groups were condensed and categorised according to emerging themes relevant to the research question [32]. The five researchers (authors of this paper) examined these themes individually and collaboratively throughout the data analysis to ensure intra-researcher consensus. The process for analysis included a series of iterations that comprised familiarisation with the responses, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. Each researcher contributed their own identified themes and supporting quotes from participants to an online table, then collaboratively reviewed the submissions, then cross-referenced and discussed key emergent themes to reach a consensus for those that best addressed the research question.

4. Findings

We identified the following themes from the data analysis: The synchronous hybrid approach for supervising student teachers during school placements was perceived by the study's participants as enabling enhanced observation practices (theme 1), enabling enriched feedback practices (theme 2), and facilitating rigorous assessment procedures (theme 3). Furthermore, the school placement tutors participating in the study viewed the approach as beneficial for supporting novice tutors' professional learning (theme 4); with the fifth theme, improved formal guidelines and policies for schools (theme 5) identified as required for supporting a more seamless implementation of the approach.

4.1. Theme 1: Enabling Enhanced Observation Practices

Participants viewed the synchronous hybrid approach as supporting comprehensive and nuanced observations during lessons taught by student teachers on placement. These benefits stem from two factors. Firstly, the approach made it easier to assemble tutors with multi-faceted expertise regardless of their access to the school location, supporting multiple perspectives of the lesson. Secondly, it provided technology-mediated opportunities for tutors to discretely collaborate and interact during observed lessons.

Given the synchronous hybrid approach requires at least two placement tutors, the availability of collective expertise across disciplines (e.g., science and creative arts) or stages (e.g., primary and secondary school education) was strengthened. The different disciplinary backgrounds, particularly for secondary placements, helped the tutors identify more varied and subtle aspects of student teachers' teaching practices and other lesson features that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. One Australian focus group participant mentioned: "Based on our own styles and past experience, we'd probably focus on slightly different things in some instances" (AU FG1). The importance of supplementary expertise from a range of school sector experience was also noted as significant by a participant in the same focus group:

"At times when I was [observing] student teachers in my job, I would think, I wish I could have somebody here who had a little bit more K–2 experience than what I've got . . . I've seen situations where I wish I [had] somebody, particularly in the younger years [of schooling], with strong experience in the teaching of reading" (AU FG1).

The synchronous hybrid approach also enabled tutors to utilise technology-mediated exchanges of messages and screenshots of school students' classwork examples (with permission) in real-time during the observed lesson to clarify events and forge collective views, enhancing the observation process and consolidating feedback. These online conversations were supported by digital messaging facilities (e.g., Zoom and WhatsApp) and were exclusive to the classroom-based and virtual tutors (student teachers did not have access to the specific chat threads at the time). Participants in both Irish focus groups mentioned these important discussions:

"There is this professional conversation [between tutors] as the class goes on. What can we see? What are we hearing? What is happening? What do you think of that? And we have that professional [text-based] conversation . . . It does give you a really good insight into the classroom" (IE FG1).

"The chat feature in Zoom is really good . . . There were three of us, two of us on Zoom and one in the class with the student [teacher]. So, it's like a private conversation sharing observations . . . we're saying: 'did you see that? What did you think was going on there?'. . . And the other tutor can say, well, I think this is what they meant" (IE FG2).

The in-person, classroom-based tutors were viewed as critical in supporting virtual observers also when challenges arose in relation to the limited perspective or ability of the camera to capture all events. Participants mentioned that the inter-tutor text messaging during lessons was used for such clarification purposes

"So, when our colleague was in the classroom and we were 'Zooming in' [virtual observation], we sent a chat, saying 'what's going on now?'; 'I don't understand what that is'; 'We can't see the blackboard' . . . And she would say 'she's put some slides on the whiteboard'; or 'she's written on the whiteboard'. . ." (IE FG2).

"I've had a few examples where the [in classroom observer] picks up on things that I certainly wouldn't have picked up on" (AU FG1).

This real-time communication between the synchronous hybrid tutors was mentioned by Irish focus group participants as reducing the potential issue of inadvertently missing a noteworthy event during the lesson:

"Somebody might notice something that someone else hasn't noticed" (IE FG2).

"I might be writing a note about something that I've observed and miss something else that's happening. [I can] ask the team what I missed" (IE FG2).

The in-person, classroom-based tutors provided critical context for the virtual tutors, and real-time communication between all tutors reduced the potential for missed events and provided the opportunity for professional dialogue between observers during the lesson. Australian tutors noted: "The possibility of hybrid [is] that one person is in the room while another one supports virtually. So, you have the best of both worlds" (AU FG1). Furthermore, participants noted that the synchronous hybrid approach provided additional flexibility in scheduling, providing greater levels of efficiency and support for all pre-service teachers, but particularly for those in regional or remote locations: "Certainly for me, it's been really good to be able to do it remotely... I've been able to supervise quite a number of [regionally isolated] students but doing it from home" (AU FG1).

4.2. Theme 2: Enabling Enriched Feedback Practices

For instance, one Irish participant shared:

"I love having the second person there all the time. I think it's very rich ... we could actually discuss what was happening in the classroom ourselves on the other side and start forming opinions and start refining our advice and feedback to students [teachers]" (IE FG2).

Participants thought that the depth of the feedback and professional conversations in the post-lesson debrief meeting with student teachers was enriched by the multiple perspectives shared by the tutors in the post-lesson feedback sessions. An Irish participant said, "They liked the fact that they're getting more than one opinion. ... And so, the more opinions they get, the better for them" (IE FG2).

Tutors acknowledged that at times, without additional support, their feedback was somewhat restricted by their own limited discipline content knowledge: "In terms of subject content, there is a disparity there in terms of the amount of assistance that I'm able to give" (AU FG1). At least two participants from the Irish focus group acknowledged that while they had extensive teaching experience, due to limited personal expertise in primary mathematics, they were unable to provide "accurate subject-specific knowledge" feedback that may have helped the student teacher to "teach in a more interactive way" (IE FG1). One Irish participant went on to espouse the value of an additional subject-specific tutor to provide specific content expertise:

"It would be really beneficial for a subject specific teacher [tutor] to be able to Zoom into this [post-lesson session]. If I had had somebody there virtually with me, that [post lesson] conversation could have really helped the student [teacher]" (IE FG1).

Throughout the lesson observations, tutors were able to use the online chat facilities to seamlessly prepare post-lesson feedback by validating collective opinions and formulating consensus.

"We would have a professional [online] conversation from start to finish [of the lesson]. So, by the time it came to us giving feedback to the student [teacher], we knew exactly what supportive feedback we were going to give, how we were going to give it, and how that was going to work" (IE FG1).

Participants emphasised that these benefits were amplified in the challenging, high-stakes scenario of evaluating lessons prepared and delivered by student teachers who were experiencing difficulties during their school placement. Participants from both countries espoused the benefits of multiple tutor perspectives when supporting these student teachers:

"It [synchronous hybrid approach] is a tool that can be used when we feel the student [teacher] is struggling and needs ... extra support and an extra bit of

advice" (IE FG2). Support for the tutor providing feedback for student teachers was also identified: "I think in difficult cases, there [are] advantages of having two people involved" (AU FG1) and "It is an extra level of support, especially if . . . [you] know it's going to be a difficult visit and the feedback is going to be tricky" (IE FG2).

4.3. Theme 3: Facilitating Rigorous Assessment Procedures

All participants stated that adoption of the synchronous hybrid approach contributed to more consistent, reliable evaluation of student teachers. Participants thought that the risk of tutor bias affecting student teachers' appraisal results was reduced by the enhanced expertise and improved 'real-time' communication between those observing. Triangulation and validation of tutors' views were emphasised by participants from both locations as mitigating the risk of bias.

> "It [synchronous hybrid approach] really helps us to standardise our practice. . . we've seen that when we do collaborative cross marking or corrections . . . we're on the same page" (IE FG2).

> "It's very validating for the tutor to know that another tutor has the same opinion. They've seen the same thing, and especially when you want to be critical. . . or there's something that wasn't great in the past, and it's great that somebody else has seen that, too. And it takes the whole personal bias out of it." (IE FG2).

> "It really is the validation of what you think and your own opinions as a tutor. I think that's really powerful for the tutor and very valuable to know that, because sometimes we do have personal bias one way or the other towards a student [teacher] . . ." (IE FG2).

> "I think from the student [teacher] point of view, it would also come across that they were being treated fairly so that there wasn't any bias as far as one tutor is concerned" (AU FG1).

> "I felt that maybe I was being a bit harsh on the student [teacher]. It was reassuring for me that I wasn't doing the student any injustice . . . because we [tutors] came to the same agreement" (IE FG1).

Participants across the focus groups specifically pointed to the risk of tutors' pedagogical bias affecting assessment of observation. For instance, tutors' disciplinary backgrounds may create varied expectations of favoured discipline-specific pedagogies. A tutor from Australia with a science education background commented: "Based on my background of teaching in [science] laboratories, there may be slight skewing of certain things that I'm looking at, based on my experience" (AU FG2). One of the Irish participants noted that some tutors may have a strong preference for peer collaboration, for example, and accidently penalise student teachers who chose not to adopt group work for pedagogically sound reasons:

> "The thing that I grapple with when I'm giving feedback to students [student teacher] is . . . their pedagogical approach. [For example, if] I'm trying to get them to move away from a chalk and talk kind of transmission of information [approach] to a more transactional, 'getting the [school] students involved' [approach]. And then I'm like, 'is this my bias? Is this something that I'm just interested in?' . . . It's your bias that you kind of focus on . . ." (IE FG2).

Participants also felt that having fewer in-person observers in the classroom helped student teachers feel more comfortable and less intimidated during the lesson, leading to a more natural performance. As a result, the synchronous hybrid approach contributed to a more consistent and reliable evaluation of student teachers by placement tutors. One contributor from an Irish focus group commented:

"Two people at the back of the classroom is very difficult for a student teacher and
for the [school] students because they can see that there's two adults here, there's
two adults watching . . . It changes the atmosphere within the classroom where
you take one of those people out . . . The atmosphere of the classroom is much
more natural [with a synchronous hybrid approach], and you see the student
teacher in a more realistic sense" (IE FG1).

Other participants in the Australian focus group expressed similar sentiments. They
reflected that student teachers were more comfortable with just one tutor observing in
person (preferably the tutor who has been communicating regularly with the student
teachers) and the other tutor observing virtually.

"It's a bit of pressure to have two people watching them. They seem to be far more
comfortable with the person who's contacted them and had a few conversations
on the phone . . . they feel comfortable with one person" (AU FG1). Tutors felt
that both the student teachers and their school students in the classroom quickly
became comfortable with the camera in the room, and "quickly forgot that the
camera was there" (AU FG1).

4.4. Theme 4: Supporting Novice Tutors' Professional Learning

The hybrid approach was viewed by participants as allowing novice tutors more op-
portunities to seamlessly participate in the supervision group, supporting their professional
growth. One participant from Ireland had recent experience with the approach as a new
tutor and emphasised the benefits of collaboration with more experienced tutors: "I think
[it's an opportunity] for us to be able to learn from each other and collaborate together. I'm
speaking from the context of someone who is fairly new in the role. I think all of us benefit
from collaborating on these kinds of school placement observations" (IE FG2).

The new tutor participants said they were initially anxious about the synchronous
hybrid approach but subsequently felt supported by the more experienced tutors in the
group, leading to a sense of affirmation, as indicated by the following participants from the
Irish focus groups:

"In terms of my own context starting out, . . . it ended up being a very affirming
process. . . there's learning for everyone. I think when you're doing it [supervi-
sion] collaboratively, it makes sense on so many different levels" (IE FG2).

"Initially for me, I was very nervous that I wouldn't have the same opinion as
the other tutor and that I'd be wrong. And as it turned out, I have found it only
helpful" (IE FG2).

"It's very encouraging that I might have the same opinion or that I can add to
somebody else's opinion. That really made me feel more competent in my own
opinion and more confident when I was learning how to do supervision" (IE FG1).

They emphasised the benefits of new tutors participating in the (hybrid) post-lesson
debrief conversation with the student teacher. In particular, they closely monitored and
learned from comments by more experienced tutors:

"So, for me it was really helpful as somebody who's starting out in my first
year working in initial teacher education and looking at preservice teachers . . . I
observed them online on Zoom and I was able to hear from more experienced
colleagues the feedback and the comments that they had" (IE FG2).

"Just to listen into the conversation after the class and the feedback session [was
beneficial]. And since then, this has just been building and building on that to give
me more experience and more confidence and feel more competent" (IE FG1).

The synchronous hybrid approach to student teacher observations was viewed by
participants as supporting informal opportunities for professional learning and validation.
Novice tutors, in particular, felt they were able to collaborate with more experienced tutors

that led to a sense of affirmation and professional growth, promoting reliability when undertaking their own observations.

4.5. Theme 5: Improved Formal Guidelines and Policies Needed

An urgent need was expressed by participants for more mature policies to facilitate seamless implementation of synchronous hybrid supervision of student teachers in schools. One participant from Ireland noted that more developed formal policies could help address a perceived lack of understanding, from schools and student teachers, of the synchronous hybrid supervision approach:

> "It's a pity that we don't have a very straightforward policy. . . so that we're not trying to manage the leadership community from school to school and be unsure as to how they may react when we suggest that we're going to have a Zoom streamed lesson happening. The lack of understanding of exactly what we're doing in some cases can be difficult" (IE FG1).

Participants from both countries were perturbed by the privacy concerns raised by teachers and school leadership in the virtual aspect of observed lessons due to predetermined perceptions of online observations. They believed that clear communication and policies approved by all schools and initial teacher education institutions could help alleviate such concerns.

> "I think sometimes schools still see . . . 'Zoom may equal video recording'. And sometimes our students [teachers] have sometimes said that as well. They're going: 'Are they going to film me?' We're going: 'no, we're not. We're going to Zoom in. . .'" (IE FG1).

> "The main issue I've seen is schools that have been pessimistic about. . . the children being filmed. No, they're not. All that's happening is I'm watching them [teachers] teach. Their parents are worried that their faces will be public. No, they won't" (AU FG2).

Finally, participants expressed the view that effective policies could mitigate the risk of hybrid supervision approaches simply acting as a conduit to cheaper, online-only virtual supervision. These sentiments were summed up by one member of an Irish focus group:

> "I would just fear that if we were openly allowed to do it [hybrid supervision] without really strict guidelines and policies, that a lot of the students' [teachers'] lessons would end up being observed via Zoom instead of it being used as a hybrid model, if that makes sense" (IE FG2).

In this way, participants were cautious of a possible reductionist scenario whereby initial teacher education institutions might exploit the hybrid approach as a conduit to cheaper, virtual-only (online) supervision. Stronger policies underpinning the ongoing in-person support of student teachers by tutors would help to mitigate this undesirable scenario.

Participants in this study recognised the need for more mature policies to facilitate the seamless implementation of synchronous hybrid supervision of student teachers in schools. They believed that formal policies could help address the perceived lack of understanding of the hybrid supervision approach by schools and student teachers. Suggestions called for clear communication and policies approved by all schools and initial teacher education institutions, advocating for strong guidelines to alleviate concerns and misunderstandings about the process. These policies could also mitigate the risk of hybrid approaches becoming a conduit to cheaper, online-only virtual observation during placements. This would reduce the potential for initial teacher education institutions exploiting the approach as a cheaper alternative to in-class support for student teachers.

5. Discussion

Building on published research [8–10,27], this study investigated tutors' views of the benefits and challenges of a synchronous hybrid supervision approach for student teachers on school placements. A novel finding was that tutors, whether classroom-based or remotely located, were evidently able to collaborate in real-time using online communication facilities during the student teachers' school-based lessons to clarify observations and to seamlessly prepare co-constructed post-lesson feedback. The exchange of text messages facilitated discourse between tutors to support or supplement observations otherwise not possible. The in-person placement tutor passed on nuanced observations from the classroom to the virtual tutor, thereby mitigating the challenges experienced when observing student teachers using virtual technologies only [8,20]. Opinions were easily discussed (via text messages), and consensus developed, validating tutors' collective views and promoting more vibrant, informed conversations and feedback for the student teacher. Tutors connected with each other as they shared perspectives and observations within this hybrid context, enabling in-time professional support and development.

Participants emphasised that these benefits were amplified in the challenging, high-stakes scenario of observing lessons prepared and delivered by student teachers who were struggling with their progress during their school placement. It is common practice for these student teachers to receive a supplementary visit by an additional tutor to corroborate the opinions and concerns generated from an initial observation. Tutors in this study reported that the synchronous hybrid approach allowed for less invasive and more seamless 'second opinions' of these student teachers' lessons. The approach enabled both tutors to observe the same lesson rather than the customary approach whereby additional visits are undertaken by a different tutor on alternative days or by multiple in-class tutors at the same time. The synchronicity of the hybrid approach enabled supporting tutors, student teachers, and the classroom teacher to discuss practices and observations from a collective viewpoint, enabling more comprehensive and aligned feedback. These positive outcomes associated with 'feedback' build on similar findings from other studies [9,19].

Participants were resolute that having fewer observers in the classroom reduced reactivity and helped student teachers feel more comfortable during the lesson. This in turn strengthened assessment reliability by allowing tutors to make observations and judgements in more authentic settings. Consistency and reliability in assessment were further supported by the ability of tutors to communicate in real time during lessons, thereby lessening the likelihood of tutor bias. Sharing reactions to observations allowed for triangulation and validation of tutors' views. The likelihood of bias was further reduced as a result of the different disciplinary backgrounds and multi-faceted expertise of tutors who could identify more varied and nuanced aspects of student teachers' practices that may otherwise have gone unnoticed by just one observer. Participants believed that lesson observations and post-lesson feedback were enriched as a result. These findings are similar to those from previous studies [9,15,16,18,19] that examined virtual (only) supervision of student teachers on school placements.

The hybrid approach examined in this study was viewed by participants as providing opportunities for tutors' professional growth. Novice tutors learned from enhanced professional dialogue and collaborative interactions with more experienced tutors during the observation sessions. For example, they developed suitable phrasing and the provision of quality, timely feedback. The findings add to those from another study [8], which found similar professional learning benefits for school placement tutors.

The synchronous hybrid supervision approach examined in this study could further evolve through future studies of cross-institutional virtual collaboration involving tutors from different initial teacher education providers co-observing student teachers on placement, providing novel opportunities for support and professional dialogue and addressing potential issues that arise during and post observations. Limitations of this study include its focus on two institutions and two jurisdictions, thereby a somewhat constrained context. Future research would expand to wider national and international contexts. A wider range

of participants is also recommended in further studies in this area to ascertain perspectives from other stakeholders, including student teachers, cooperating school teachers, and school leaders.

6. Conclusions

While challenges that may have emerged when using the synchronous hybrid approach were not specifically highlighted by participants, indirect references indicate that the fixed perspective of the camera could at times limit the view and capture of classroom events for the virtual observers. This echoes previous findings in the literature on shortcomings in the ability of cameras to capture the complexity of classroom dynamics [9,20]. However, the ability of classroom-based and virtual observers in this study to communicate and seek clarification or additional contextual information in real time was an effective means of overcoming these challenges. This combination provided them with the 'best of both worlds,' allowing them to enhance the overall observation and feedback process.

This new synchronous hybrid approach evidently offers the benefits of both in-class and virtual observation, contributing to more effective, consistent, and reliable procedures during supervision of student teachers undertaking school placements. There was a strong perception from participants that reactivity for student teachers was reduced, thereby providing an environment that supported developing teaching practices. The use of digital communication promotes discrete inter-tutor interactions and enhances collaboration, nuanced observations, and rich feedback. The approach helps mitigate tutor bias by enabling multiple perspectives and non-invasive real-time dialogue, leading to more reliable and comprehensive feedback to student teachers. While some challenges were identified by tutor participants, such as the need for more developed policies and guidelines in relation to real-time technology use—akin to the apprehension expressed by principals in Ó Gráidagh et al. [9], the approach examined in this study evidently contributes to best practices in initial teacher education.

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