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Student teachers' responses to critical mentor feedback: A study of face-saving strategies in teaching placements

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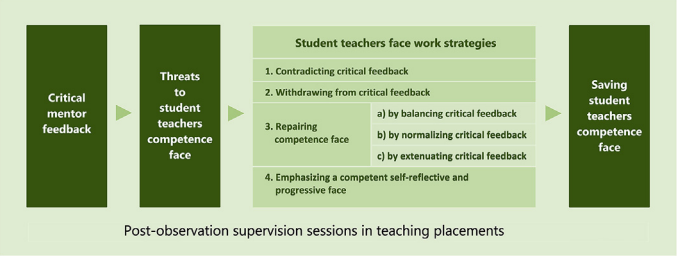
HIGHLIGHTS

- When student teachers receive critical mentor feedback in practicum their competence face are threatened.
- Student teachers save their competence face by several face work strategies.
- Most common strategies are "repairing competence face" and "emphasising a competent self-reflective and progressive face".

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

Despite much research on feedback in teaching placement, there is a limited number of interaction studies. Moreover, how student teachers respond to critical mentor feedback remains quite unmapped. This article aims to explore this interactional aspect through the analysis of 12 post-observation sessions.

Critical feedback sequences are analysed by face-work theory (Goffman, 1967). Findings suggest that student teachers are deeply concerned about saving face when receiving critical feedback. Their strategies include "contradicting", "withdrawing", and "repairing" face, in addition to "emphasising a self-reflective and progressive face". This article offers insights that may be helpful for communicating critical mentor feedback.

1. Introduction

The aim of the present study is to gain insight into how student teachers react to critical feedback in teaching placement supervision. Critical mentor feedback is understood as information that asserts or asks whether there is a need to change aspects of one's performance or understanding, and which is provided by a mentor in post-observation supervision sessions during the teaching placement (cf. section 1.3.1). Student teachers' reactions are investigated through an analysis of 12 post-observation sessions. Face-work theory (Goffman, 1967) is used as a framework to analyse the strategies student teachers use to save face when they receive critical feedback; that is, *the positive self-image* they *seek to establish in social interactions* (p. 5). More specifically, this article focuses on how student teachers work on their *competence face*, which is their wish to have their abilities respected (Lim & Bowers, 1991). Insight into these face-saving strategies is particularly relevant for the local mentor teachers (hereafter referred to as "mentors"), who have the task of delivering critical mentor feedback to

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the student teachers.

This research-based introduction starts by arguing that student teachers encounter a particularly self-threatening context when they embark on their teaching placement. The importance of mentor feedback in this context is subsequently emphasised, and it is argued that critical mentor feedback is both a main challenge and a necessity in supervision sessions, which underlines the need for more interaction research on critical feedback. Following this, the analytic concepts from face-work theory (Goffman, 1967) used in the analysis are presented, and the few studies done on face-work in supervision of teaching in schools are described.

1.1. Mentor feedback – a crucial element in the process of becoming a competent teacher

There is no one set universal route to becoming a qualified teacher. However, in western countries, student teachers typically undertake university- or college-led teacher education programmes wherein they often spend most of their time on campus, and a shorter time on a practical placement at a school. In these cases, it is commonly claimed that practical classroom experience in school contexts is the single most important step towards becoming a competent teacher (Collinson et al., 2009; Ezer, Gilat, & Sagee, 2010; Graham, 2006). Practical experience not only allows student teachers to acquire the necessary expertise in terms of knowledge, attitudes, practical skills and the ability to reflect on their practice, but also engenders a more profound process through which they construct a sense of themselves as teachers (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008; Rots, Kelchtermans, & Aelterman, 2012).

Learning while on a teaching placement in a very hectic and complex school context is very challenging (Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010). It is therefore no surprise that student teachers typically describe their learning processes as highly emotional and giving rise to positive, negative and mixed emotions (Caires, Almeida, & Martins, 2009; Caires, Almeida, & Vieira, 2012; Hobson et al., 2008). Much of the emotional experiences are problematic ones (Caires et al., 2012), such as doubts concerning one's own competence (Hobson et al., 2008; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) or feelings of failure as teachers (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Hobson et al., 2008; Scherff, 2008).

Student teachers need support through this challenging learning process, and the placement supervision by local mentors is of fundamental importance; mentor feedback is often considered the most significant part of placement supervision (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Le & Vasquez, 2011; Ottesen, 2007), and it has even been claimed that providing feedback largely defines the mentors' work (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). However, delivering mentor feedback is a complicated phenomenon involving significant challenges that will be elaborated on later in this introduction.

In recent years, several research studies focusing on mentor feedback in teaching placements have been carried out. Most of these studies investigate how student teachers and mentors perceive mentor feedback, while fewer have investigated feedback interaction (Le & Vasquez, 2011). Some studies have examined the nature of oral feedback or strategies employed by mentors when delivering feedback (e.g. Anderson & Radencich, 2001; Vasquez, 2004; Wajnryb, 1998), but no interaction studies focusing strictly on student teachers' response to critical mentor feedback have been found when searching for studies of mentor feedback in teaching placements.

1.2. Communicating critical feedback – a major challenge in teaching placement supervision

Research has shown that the quality of mentor feedback varies, and that student teachers are often dissatisfied with the feedback they receive (Brandt, 2008; Clarke et al., 2014; Grainger & Adie, 2014; Le & Vasquez, 2011). Both mentors and student teachers consider the challenges related to feedback to be most severe when the feedback is negative or critical (Le & Vasquez, 2011).

1.2.1. A definition of "critical mentor feedback"

The expression "critical feedback" is often used without being precisely defined. Sometimes it is used instead of "corrective feedback" (Komiskey & Hulse-Killacky, 2004), a term that clearly indicates a desire for a specific change in the student teachers' practice. Feedback may also concern the need to modify the student teacher's understanding of practice. This aspect of critical feedback is often mentioned in connection with the goal of developing critical thinking or critical reflection (e.g. Crutcher & Naseem, 2016). In post-observation supervision sessions, mentor feedback may encompass both of these aspects. Critical feedback delivered in an assertive manner indicates that the mentor subscribes to a particular understanding or desired change of practice, while critical feedback delivered in a questioning manner encourages the student teacher to reflect on or think about their perception of a crucial aspect of practice. In reality, the boundaries between assertive and questioning critical feedback are not always clear-cut and may involve interpretation challenges. For example, a question may be interpreted as leading, which may then prompt a desired answer.

This article bases its understanding of 'feedback' on an expansion of Hattie and Timperley's (2007) definition, which corresponds with the discussion provided above. Thus, "critical mentor feedback" is in this article defined as "*information provided by a mentor that is asserting or asking about a need to change aspects of one's performance or understanding*". This definition is presented visually in Fig. 1.

1.2.2. Challenging aspects of critical mentor feedback

So why is critical mentor feedback found to be so challenging? The problem must be understood in the context of the teacher training placement, which is deeply asymmetric with high stakes for the student teachers, who are heavily dependent on the mentor's feedback and assessment (Brandt, 2008; Le & Vasquez, 2011). The fact that, in many teacher education contexts, the mentor who provides feedback in the development process (formative feedback) is also responsible for the final evaluation of the teaching placement (summative feedback), may be considered to be particularly challenging for both the student teachers and mentors (Copland, 2010; James, 2007; Tang & Chow, 2007). Another challenge is vague evaluation criteria (Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2008), which may be interpreted differently by the student teachers and mentors (Tillema & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, it should be noted that different mentors may judge observed teaching in different and sometimes conflicting ways (Hudson, 2014, 2016). In addition, critical feedback may engender negative emotional reactions (Kopec, Wimsatt, de la Cruz, Kopec, & Wimsatt, 2015; Otienoh, 2010), threaten the student teachers' self-image (Johnston, 2010; Vasquez, 2004; Wajnryb, 1998) and contribute to tensions or conflicts in the teacher student–mentor relationship (Brandt, 2008; Copland, 2010). Studies have also discovered that a significant number of student teachers may experience callous feedback delivery and even feel bullied by their mentor (Maguire, 2001; Sewell, Cain, Woodgate-Jones, & Srokosz, 2009).

Moreover, research shows that student teachers may respond to the feedback in ways that may impact the quality of the mentoring. They may become less verbally active (Brandt, 2008), withhold information and, in particular, refrain from sharing problems with their mentor in order to avoid negative evaluations (Rots et al.,

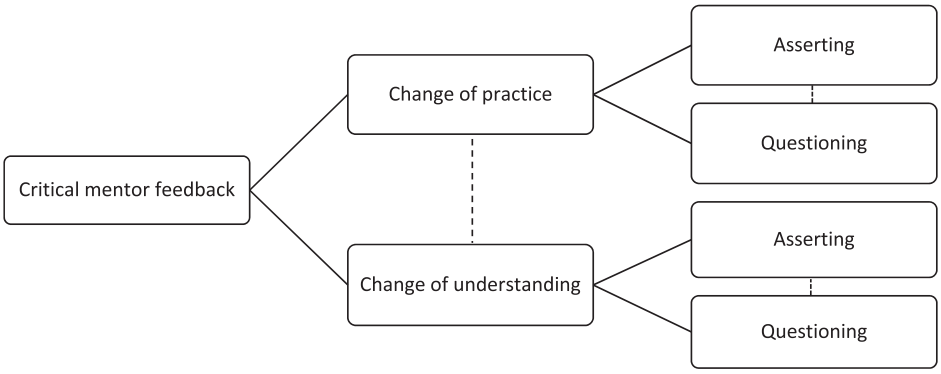

Fig. 1. Visual representation of critical mentor feedback.

2012). Student teachers might also hide any disagreement with their mentors (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Farr, 2010), and feel obliged to conform to the feedback without actually agreeing with it (Bonilla Medina & Mendez, 2008). They may also deflect or ignore their mentor's feedback (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Yoon, Kim, Kim, Joung, & Park, 2013).

1.2.3. The necessity of critical mentor feedback in teaching placements

Despite being challenging, critical feedback remains a crucial part of mentoring in teaching placements (Crutcher & Naseem, 2016; Ottesen, 2007). Several studies highlight an absence of critical feedback throughout placements from mentors, and that this absence may contribute to mentoring becoming more affirmative than explorative, or lacking in depth and alternative perspectives, and thus limiting the opportunities for learning (Carver & Katz, 2004; Clarke et al., 2014; Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011; Douglas, 2011).

Shulman and Shulman (2004) have identified reflection as one of the four main dimensions in which competent teachers develop. The reflective dimension (a cluster of attributes including capacity of evaluating, reviewing, self-criticising, and learning from experience) is claimed to be the most important one (Brantley-Dias, 2008; Posner, 2005; Schön, 1983), and critical feedback is a fundamental part of cultivating development through reflection (Amobi, 2005; Crasborn et al., 2011; Crutcher & Naseem, 2016). However, some studies express concern over student teachers' ability to achieve the reflective ideal. For example, it has been pointed out that reflection in placement supervision can be subjective, instrumental, superficial, or even lacking (Chalies, Bruno-Meard, Meard, & Bertone, 2010; Douglas, 2011; Farr, 2010; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2003; Moody, 2009). Consequently, encouraging the student teachers to reflect on their practice is a key task for the mentor. How mentors can communicate to promote student teachers' reflection has long been a fundamental question in mentoring literature (e.g. Handal & Lauvås, 1987). Nonetheless, it has been argued that the literature's ideals do not build enough on empirical research on how reflection develops in complex communication (Bjørndal, 2017). Moreover, there is arguably still a lack of such research (Waring, 2014).

1.2.4. How to communicate critical feedback

One strategy for managing discomfort and problems associated with providing critical feedback is to withhold it. The extent of this in teaching placements has not been investigated but the tendency to withhold negative feedback is generally a well-documented practice in face-to-face interaction (Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012), and has been found in other work placement contexts (e.g.Komiskey & Hulse-Killacky, 2004).

Insofar as withholding important feedback is unfortunate, mentors need to adopt constructive means for communicating critical feedback. Research on feedback in different contexts may provide important perspectives on what constitutes good feedback practice (e.g. J. Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and research on mentoring student teachers and teachers in school contexts indicates that immediate, specific, positive and corrective feedback can be important to create lasting changes (Scheeler, Ruhl, & McAfee, 2004). Other research emphasises how important it is for feedback to be delivered as part of a dialogue (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018) and in a way that contributes to metacognitive thinking (Sturtz & Hessberg, 2012). The value of developing student teachers' independent critical thinking about their practice through dialogue is also found in constructivist conceptions of the mentoring relationship (e.g. Wang & Odell, 2007).

Several studies emphasise that the communication of critical feedback is dependent on the mentor's capacity for care, finely tuned communication skills and ability to build a good relationship. For example, it has been argued that there should be a balance between positive and negative feedback (e.g. Beck & Kosnik, 2002), and that it is crucial that the mentor relationship is perceived as positive by the parties and that the student teachers feel supported by the mentor giving the criticism (Farrell, 2007; Le & Vasquez, 2011; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Certain ways mentors communicate feedback may make it more likely to be accepted by student teachers (Le & Vasquez, 2011), and particularly, it may be advisable to use so-called politeness strategies, such as combining criticism with praise, which can make the feedback feel less threatening (Vasquez, 2004; Wajnryb, 1998). Yet, doing so may also pose a dilemma, insofar as these strategies might make the feedback less clear (Wajnryb, 1998). Different student teachers also respond differently to feedback, and the quality of the feedback will thus depend on the extent it is adapted to the student teacher in question (Grainger & Adie, 2014). Together, these concerns imply that care is needed when postulating overly simplistic or absolutist claims about how critical feedback ought to be communicated, and it is at least reasonable to argue that it is vital for the mentor to be able to understand critical feedback as a complex social phenomenon. *Face-work theory*, which will be discussed in the next section, is a very useful perspective for understanding this phenomenon, and is also the principal concept in this article's research question (presented in 1.5).

1.3. Face-work as a perspective for studying student teachers' responses to critical feedback

This section will discuss face-work theory, including key concepts as *face*, *competence face*, *face-threatening acts* and *face-work*. The analysis is based on a dramaturgic perspective and emphasises people's self-expressive tendency: i.e. in social interactions, we are constantly expressing who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to be perceived by others (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2012). One of Erving Goffman's dramaturgic ideas is the concept of *face*, the "positive self-image you seek to establish in social interactions, or the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (1967, p. 5).

1.3.1. Student teachers' competence face

Goffman's ideas about face have been adopted in several disciplines (Sueda, 2014). At one point, Lim and Bowers (1991) reconstructed an established conceptual framework (Brown & Levinson, 1978), arguing that *face* reflects three *wants*: Fellowship face (want to be included), autonomy face (want to not be imposed on) and competence face (want to have one's abilities respected). The latter face reflects, in other words, a human need to be respected or appreciated for one's abilities in a given context. In their experimental study, Lim and Bowers (1991) demonstrate that people who are about to criticise someone have a tendency to acknowledge the recipient's competency face, or need for respect, through communicating different degrees of approbation. However, their research does not investigate the face-work performed by recipients of criticism in order to maintain a positive competence face, which is the aim of this article.

More recent research has shown that the significance of Lim and Bowers' three faces varies with context (Sueda, 2014). It is reasonable to consider the competence face to be particularly significant to the teaching placement, since the goal is precisely for student teachers to develop their teaching competence and be able to convincingly demonstrate their competence. The role of the mentor is to evaluate this competence and provide feedback throughout the process. Furthermore, in Norway, as in many Western teacher-educational contexts, mentors also evaluate whether students have passed their teaching placement. The mentor's evaluative role might obviously strengthen the experience of critical feedback as a threat to the student teachers' competence face.

1.3.2. Critical mentor feedback as face-threatening acts

Goffman (1967) was concerned with situations in which people struggle to present their desired face. Such face-threatening situations occur when people's faces are challenged by others, such as through criticism, that can cause emotional reactions as shame, humiliation, confusion or frustration.

Several factors determine how severely face threats are experienced in a context: power differentials, degrees of dependence, and the perceived importance of maintaining a particular face (Redmond, 2015). All these factors suggest that the placement context must be viewed as especially challenging, and it is reasonable to view the student teachers' experiences of threats to face as an almost unavoidable element of the placement (Copland, 2011; Vasquez, 2004; Wajnryb, 1998). This claim can be further elaborated upon by looking at the emphasis on reflection in teacher education in recent decades (cf. 1.3.3). Promoting professional reflection is a fundamental goal of mentoring in teacher education (Handal & Lauvås, 1987; Sundli, 2007). It is important to notice that this potentially involves a tension between the human need to protect one's competence face and the ideal of putting the student teachers' practice and competence under a reflective lens. Professional reflection presupposes a certain openness to questioning one's practice and ways of thinking. This becomes evident through a well-established conceptualisation of what "supervisee reflectivity" involves (Neufeldt, Karno, & Nelson, 1996). For instance, a reflective process requires a trigger event involving uncertainty about the right course of action. Moreover, professional reflectivity is characterised by assuming a reflective stance, including a willingness to examine one's practice, an openness to others' alternative understandings of their practices, and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable and be open to new ideas as well as other features. In other words, professional reflective processes by definition challenge the competence face, and this is particularly the case with regard to critical feedback.

1.3.3. Using face-work strategies to save face

Working on one's self-image or self-identity as a project has been described as a common feature of contemporary Western society (Giddens, 1991). In social psychology, for example, it is almost regarded as an axiom that people in Western cultures use strategies to maintain, enhance and protect their self-image (Crocker & Park, 2012; Tesser, Martin, & Cornell, 1996).

Face-work can be understood as "the communication strategies used to protect, maintain, and enhance face to satisfy face needs and to mitigate face threats" (Spiers, 1998, p. 30). Goffman (1967, p. 12) defined "face-work" similarly as "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face". Goffman's foundational claims were: 1) that people normally value their own and others' faces; 2) that one normally attempts to save their own and the other party's face; 3) that when one loses face, one tries to restore or repair it; 4) that when one party loses face, the other party often tries to help them restore or repair it (Goffman, 1967; Sueda, 2014).

Different contexts are characterised by different repertoires of face-work practices (Sueda, 2014). In the school context, Goffman's claim that people are normally concerned about maintaining other people's faces (claim 4) has been investigated in two studies on mentoring: Vásquez's (2004) study of feedback in mentoring teaching assistants, and Wajnryb's (1998) study of supervision of teachers. Both studies show that mentors employ politeness-related strategies when they communicate negative feedback, and that doing so makes a positive contribution by helping to save the receiver's face. At the same time, the studies indicate that the strategies also risk the feedback being unclear and misunderstood.

One study of post-observation sessions in teaching placements (Copland, 2011) found similar traits in the mentor's communication of feedback, but this study also partly focused on the recipients' reactions to face-threatening feedback. Copland claims that threatening feedback is typically followed by a face-negotiation process in which the recipient sometimes accepts the face-threat, while at other times contests it.

Whereas the previous two studies focus on mentors' strategies for helping student teachers save face (claim 4), Copland's (2011) study also gives examples of ways in which the student teachers handle face threats (claim 3). However, unlike Copland's work, this article maintains a strict focus on the strategies student teachers use to save their own faces. There is a shortage of this sort of studies in research on mentoring in schools, as well as in other contexts (Sueda, 2014).

1.4. The aim and research question

The aim of this article is to better understand how student teachers respond to critical mentor feedback in supervision sessions during the teacher training placement part of teaching education, and the research question to be answered is: *What face-*

work strategies do student teachers employ when their competence face is threatened by critical mentor feedback?

2. Context, material and method

2.1. Context and collection of material

This qualitative face-work analysis is based on 12 post-observation sessions involving 12 pairs consisting of one mentor and one student teacher. The student teachers were enrolled on a one-year program in educational theory and practice at a Norwegian university, which requires its students to have completed a bachelor's or master's degree. The recording was made during the student teachers' first (of two), period of practical training in primary and secondary schools (7–8 weeks long), where they taught various common subjects. The students would teach for 8–10 h a week and receive at least one supervision session for every four teaching hours. At the beginning of the teaching placement, the students were normally able to observe their mentor's teaching for the first few days, after which they taught and were observed by the mentor.

The mentors in the data material were working as teachers in the schools in question, had 3–27 years of teaching experience. They had also supervised student teachers at least once before, and most of them had supervised students for many years. They observed and supervised the student teachers throughout their entire placement, and were responsible for evaluating (pass/fail) the student teachers at the end of their placement.

The mentors also attended a postgraduate course in mentoring (three cohorts of students), which the author of this article was involved in teaching. As part of their obligatory personal development project, they recorded their sessions with the student teachers. The first recording happened at the start of the mentoring course. The requirements were for it to be a post-observation session, conducted in a private room. The recording start date varied somewhat for various reasons but the majority were completed in the first half of the placement period, and the length varied between 36 and 118 min.

After completing their postgraduate exam, the 14 participants on the postgraduate course who worked as mentors in the program in educational theory and practice received a request to use the first recording from their course in a research study, and 12 of them accepted. The first recording was chosen to minimize any influence the long-term course might have on the mentors' communication of feedback. Neither the mentors' development projects nor the recordings were in any way influenced by this research project, insofar as the mentors and the student teachers involved were first informed about the research project after the course had ended. At this point, the mentors had no formal connection to the researcher. The topics that the mentors chose to work with in the development project varied and were not in any way influenced by the topic of the research investigation.

2.2. Analytical approach

Face-work studies are found in various qualitive research tradition that use varying analysis procedures, such as in case studies (e.g. Vedder-Weiss, Segal, & Lefstein, 2019), ethnography (e.g. Scarborough, 2012) narrative research (e.g. Vasquez, 2009), thematic analysis (e.g. Cunningham, Simmons, & Mascarenhas, 2018), discourse analyses (e.g. Schnurr & Chan, 2011) combinations of such approaches (e.g. Copland, 2011) or are sometimes not explicitly positioned within a brand name qualitative approach (e.g. Wajnryb, 1998).

This analysis falls within thematic analysis approaches (Pistrang & Barker, 2012): a family of different systematic approaches that are used to identify central themes or categories occurring in the data. Such approaches include framework analyses, grounded theory, and the more generic version of thematic analysis (hereafter referred to as "TA") demarked by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), which this analysis builds on. The approach is often used in research on interview data but is also utilised in studies on various types of discursive interactions (e.g. Shah-Beckley, Clarke, & Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, TA is most often used in specific data-driven studies, but Braun and Clarke's approach also accommodates the so-called "theoretic TA" or "theory informed TA", which builds on a particular theoretical foundation (e.g. Shah-Beckley et al., 2018; Willcox, Moller, & Clarke, 2019). TA fits the aims of this analysis as it provides a systematic yet flexible procedure for investigating the specific face-work strategies student teachers employ when they encounter face-threatening acts in their feedback sessions. In other words, this analysis uses a combination of a deductive and inductive approach, in that it builds on face-work as its theoretical frame, and simultaneously involves developing categories of face-work grounded in data.

Qualitative research has long been criticised for a lack of transparency in its analysis procedures (Silverman & Molle, 2007). Erving Goffmans ethnographic approach, for example, was criticised for being unsystematic to the point of chaos (Psathas, 1980). The criticism has contributed to more attention being paid to qualitative procedures for analysis. To illustrate the process of this analysis, it is described below according to Clarkes six-stage procedure of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The main features of the process are illustrated in Table 1, which are then used to elaborate on the specific features.

The first step in the analysis process was in line with Braun and Clark's phase of data familiarisation. In the first part of the familiarisation phase (1a), the aim was to gain insight into feedback interactions in mentoring during the teaching placement. The act of transcription initiated familiarisation with the feedback interaction in the entire data set, and was followed up by repeated playbacks of the recording and readings of the transcripts.

During the first part of the familiarising phase, the sequences containing critical feedback turned out to be of particular interest, and the focus and material for the second phase was delineated accordingly (1b). The candidate sequences were read repeatedly in order to establish that they corresponded with the aforementioned definition of critical mentor feedback as "information provided by a mentor that is asserting or asking about a need to change aspects of one's performance or understanding". (1.3.1). Finally, a total of 65 sequences from the 12 supervision sessions were selected (3–16 per session).

In the final part of the familiarisation phase (1c), further attention was paid to the student teachers' reactions to critical feedback, as it appeared to be a particularly interesting and important phenomenon that has not been investigated in previous studies.

The search for relevant theory is also not particularly mentioned in the face-work studies that are cited in this article, and the analysis process is typically described as jumping straight into face-work as a theoretical perspective. In this study a number of concepts, were tested on sample sequences. Ultimately, "face-work strategies" and related analytic concepts proved to be most fruitful and were subsequently used in the analysis. The *face-work* concept was found to be applicable at an overall level, while Goffman's original categories of face-work did not fit the material.

In the second phase, the selected feedback sequences were initial coded (Braun & Clarke, 2012), within the framework of face-work strategy as an overall concept. First, the rudiments of face-work were interpreted, coded in the form of a few words, and

Table 1
The analytic process, described as six TA-phases.

Phases of TA	Familiarisation activities in this analysis	Analytical focus	Driving theoretical concepts	Selected material	Tools
1. Familiarisation with data (and search for relevant theory)	a) Transcription and familiarisation with data within overall focus	Feedback interactions	Feedback	12 video-recorded and transcribed post-observation supervision sessions (36–118 min)	Memo writing
	b) Further familiarisation with data within delimited focus	Critical feedback interactions	Critical mentor feedback	Transcriptions of critical mentor feedback sequences (65)	Memo writing
	b) Further familiarisation with data within more delimited focus, through unsystematic analytical testing on sequences, supported by theories	Student teachers' responses to critical mentor feedback	Critical mentor feedback and a variety of symbolic interaction concepts, especially from a dramaturgical perspective	Transcriptions of critical mentor feedback sequences (65), especially student teachers' responses	Memo writing
2. Generating initial codes		Student teachers' face-work strategies while receiving critical mentor feedback	Critical mentor feedback (understood as face-threatening acts), competence face, face-work strategies	Critical mentor feedback sequences, especially student teachers' responses. Extended length of many sequences compared to phase 1b (65)	Initial coding (within theoretical frame) Memo writing
3. Searching for themes					Clustering codes through textual and visual representations Memo writing
4. Reviewing themes					Checking themes against collated sequences Reviewing the themes in relation to the entire data set Memo writing
5. Defining and naming themes					Minor revisions of themes Memo writing
6. Producing the report					Selection of extracts

recorded with reference to the transcript and line numbers (e.g. "Improving self-image 11,89"). Codes in TA do not necessarily need to be linked to each individual line in the text, but line-by-line coding was used as much as possible, which was suggested by Charmaz (2006) to ensure that the code is grounded in data to the greatest extent possible. This process involved continuously revising the codes until all codes were finally collected together in a text document.

Subsequently, categories for strategies were generated through the stage of "search for themes" (3), wherein the codes were clustered by using textual and visual representations (Braun & Clarke, 2012). First, all the codes in the material were listed on a large poster and lines were drawn to link them with common characteristics. Then, all the codes that were visibly connected were sorted (cut and pasted) into larger or smaller clusters, which were given a provisional title in a text document. The remaining codes was then listed on a new poster and either grouped into new clusters or added to the existing clusters in the first document. Visual representations, such as mind maps, were also used to gain an overview of the clusters and develop potential categories/themes, as suggested by several TA approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tattersall, Powell, Stroud, Pringle, & Tattersall, 2011).

In the next stage (4), the potential categories were reviewed by regularly viewing them in relation to the selected critical feedback sequences and a more comprehensive reading of the transcripts. Through this process, the codes were also revised, and some were adjusted.

There turned out to be a partial overlap between stage 4 and Braun and Clarke's phase 5 (Defining and naming themes), wherein the themes were revised through the process of giving the categories final names and definitions (c.f. Table 3). Minor revisions of the categories were even made in the last phase of writing the analyses (6).

In all phases, a number of unsystematic notes or memos were recorded that contained items of potential interest. This was used as a reflection tool throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). Table 2 presents an example of the connection between transcribed sequences, initial coding and final interpretations of categories for face-work strategies in the analysis.

The final face-work categories are summarised in Table 3. The occurrence rate of the strategies is indicated by numbers, and one critical feedback sequence might involve more than one strategy.

2.3. Ethics and generalisation

Ethical approval was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, which set requirements that included informed consent and the anonymisation of participants in the data material and publications, etc. (in accordance with those set out in the EU General Data Protection Regulation).

One should be careful when generalising findings from a limited qualitative study in this particular teaching education context, but the findings can be naturistically generalised (Stake, 1994), i.e. the readers, such as mentors or student teachers, can gain insight by reflecting on the details of qualitative findings in relation to contexts they have experienced themselves.

Table 2
Example of transcript, coding and generated categories.

Part of transcribed sequence of critical mentor feedback	*Initial coding of face-work* (transcript no., line no.)	Generated categories of face-work strategies
Mentor T: I notice that you may not have expressed the same commitment during this lesson as you have during other lessons lately?	(Critical feedback instance) 8,136	MAIN STRATEGY III: REPAIRING COMPETENCE FACE WHILE ACCEPTING CRITICAL FEEDBACK
	(Accepting critical feedback) 8,139 Describing self, + sacrificing 8,140	a. Repairing competence face by balancing critical feedback
Student T: Yes, this is my last lesson, and I have given a lot of myself over the course of the day and the week. There have been some rather demanding incidents between students that I have had to deal with that I was not really prepared for. You know, the problems regarding … I was probably a bit worn out.	Explaining incidents, demanding 8,141 Explaining incidents, sudden demands 8,142 Explaining incidents, not prepared 8,143 Appealing, shared understand. problem 8,144 Explaining, worn out 8,145	c. Repairing competence face by extenuating critical feedback

3. Analysis: student teachers' face-saving strategies when receiving critical feedback

The aim of this study is to better understand how student teachers respond to critical mentor feedback in post-observation supervision sessions, and contribute to this by analysing student teachers face-work strategies in such interactions. A common characteristic of the 12 post-observation supervision sessions is that student teachers seemed very concerned about defending, building or repairing their competence face when they received face-threatening critical feedback. This is clearly expressed through the student teachers' face-work (or face-saving) strategies: (I) *withdrawing* (II) *contradicting* (III) *repairing* (balancing, normalising, or extenuating) and (IV) *emphasising a competent self-reflective and progressive face*. These will be described below, following a discussion of the central elements in the mentors' critical feedback, that the strategies can be understood as responses *to*.

3.1. Characteristics of the mentors' critical feedback

The critical mentor feedback that the student teachers respond to falls within the definition provided in 1.3.1.: "Information provided by a mentor that is asserting or asking about a need to change aspects of one's performance or understanding". The feedback is occasionally assertive but mostly questioning, and concerns both a change of practice and a modification of associated understanding, as illustrated by the numerous examples cited in parts 3.2–3.5.

Large parts of the interaction sequences that involve critical mentor feedback are simple to interpret, while others are more complex. There are three characteristics that are particularly complex: the first is when part of the critical aspects is initiated by the student teacher, which typically happens when the mentor encourages the student teachers to evaluate his or her own teaching. In these cases, the mentor will sometimes merely confirm the student teachers' critical self-evaluation, or, in contrast, clearly initiate critical mentor feedback by adding critical nuances to the student teachers' self-evaluation or contradicting it. The second complex characteristic is that the mentor's contribution often starts out as a neutral exploration or positive evaluation of aspects of the student teacher's practice, only for it to become clear later in the conversation that they have a critical agenda related to the topic. The interaction often follows this sequence:

> MENTOR T10: How did the dialogue with the students work?
>
> (Student T10 talks for a long time about positive aspects of the dialogue with the students)
>
> MENTOR T10: I just have one comment: you really only talked to 2–3 of the students? … In this specific part of the class, I mean?

The mentor's statement in the quote above, as well as statements later in the session, indicate that the mentor does indeed have critical concerns specifically about the dialogue with the students. Some of these sequences can be reasonably interpreted as the mentor gradually disclosing the critical feedback by providing the student teachers with hints about a critical topic (most often a question). Their agenda becomes apparent when the student teachers fail to provide self-critical comments in relation to this topic.

The third characteristic is the mentor's tendency to interweave critical feedback with copious positive and supportive feedback as well as familiar communication patterns involving politeness strategies (Vasquez, 2004; Wajnryb, 1998). Individual cases are so strongly characterised by this that it can even be fuzzy to determine whether the critical feedback has been communicated:

> MENTOR T6: This really is a complicated topic and he (student) was having problems keeping up …. You noticed that pretty early on yourself. So … how have you adapted or selected the texts for him to read?
>
> (Student T6 talks about the texts the student received as an alternative).
>
> MENTOR T6: That sounds really good – but I was also wondering a little about how, if the learning material worked for him (student) ….
>
> (Student T6 talks about how difficult it was to find good reading texts for the student)

Table 3
Face-work strategies and number of occurrences in mentoring session sequences.

Face-work (face-saving) strategies		*Number of occurring strategies* (119, in 65 selected sequences)
I Contradicting critical feedback (not accepting critical feedback)		8 occurrences
II Withdrawing from critical feedback (possibly not accepting critical feedback)		11 occurrences
III Repairing competence face (while accepting critical feedback)	a) by balancing critical feedback	20 occurrences
	b) by normalising critical feedback	12 occurrences
	c) by extenuating critical feedback	40 occurrences
IV Emphasising a competent self-reflective and progressive face (while accepting critical feedback)		28 occurrences

MENTOR T6: I understand! Then Hilde (another teacher) mentioned that maybe, that we maybe could also use other resources, particularly internet-based ones … what do you think about that?

It is reasonable to interpret the example above as critical mentor feedback in the form of questioning the need to change practice. Other areas of doubt have been omitted as it is difficult to interpret with any certainty whether the feedback was actually delivered, for example, due to unclear communication or common references in the communication that are problematic to interpret without interviewing the participants.

3.2. Strategy I: contradicting critical feedback

The first face-saving strategy is to directly contradict the mentor's critical feedback. This strategy was employed in only three of the sessions. The most significant contradiction occurred in a distinctly face-threatening session:

MENTOR T8: … I think you have to gain the students' respect, to get them to follow …

STUDENT T8: … I think that the students give me respect; some of the students have said that they are happy that I'm here, that they think I'm nice … I *do* think they give me respect.

As illustrated by this example, a student teacher may contradict the mentor's critique by questioning its validity. Student teachers could for instance claim that the mentor had not fully understood the situation being discussed:

MENTOR T3: Did you notice that a large portion of the class … you did not quite manage to make them very active during the lesson?

STUDENT T3: The way I see it a number of them were actually quite active ….

In one case, a student teacher even suggested that the lack of success with a lesson was partly the result of earlier feedback from the mentor that contradicted the mentor's current feedback. In another case, contradictions revolved around what ought to be expected of the student teacher. The mentor clearly conveyed that the quality of the teaching was rather low, and the student teacher countered by claiming that it is legitimate to fail as a student teacher:

MENTOR T8: Yes, what I mean is that it's your task to maintain control and teach in a way that keeps them occupied. … How do you think you've mastered this? …

STUDENT T8: Yes, of course it requires a lot of me as a teacher, and that is what I hope to learn to master …

3.3. Strategy II: withdrawing from critical feedback

Another face-work strategy consists of different actions that may be interpreted as withdrawing from critical feedback. Such withdrawal may assume two different forms: withdrawal through attempts to shift the focus of the dialogue, or by responding passively to the criticism.

The first form of withdrawal, focus shifting, manifested in different ways. One was for the students to attempt to talk their way out of critical feedback, as in the example below, where the student teacher tells a long story that draws the focus away from a critical question:

MENTOR T5: So, considering that his activity during the lesson is *poor* – but, what I would like you to think about is how you rate him or other students, what criteria do you assume?

STUDENT T5: … He's not so easy to understand …. He was struggling a lot. For example, he was telling me that … (tells a long story about the student's problems).

Similar ways of shifting focus away from critical feedback could involve obfuscating or talking vaguely about a challenge expressed by the mentor. For example, the student teachers could focus on something peripheral and less challenging in the mentor's feedback.

The second type of withdrawal, responding passively to criticism, is often harder to recognise. Some of the student teachers were significantly briefer in their responses to critical feedback compared to their verbal activity in other parts of the session, and they contributed very minimally to the dialogue:

MENTOR T9: So, do you think Ann and Sven could always benefit from the exact same teaching activities?

STUDENT T9: Well … no, maybe not quite the same, but some of it may be used?

MENTOR T9: … Well, they're quite different, at different levels?

STUDENT T9: Yes, they are at different levels.

MENTOR T9: So?

STUDENT T9: Yes, you can always adapt the teaching more, of course …

MENTOR T9: So, if you can imagine, what could you have done specifically to better adapt the teaching, …

STUDENT T9: Something … can certainly be done. Maybe explaining the activity better.

As previously stated, the withdrawal strategy is challenging to interpret. It may be reasonable to interpret a passive response as a strategy for withdrawing from mentor feedback. Another plausible interpretation is that students who are unused to critical thinking are unable to actively respond. However, this interpretation is undermined in many of the cases by the student teachers displaying far greater critical reflexion abilities when they have introduced the criticism themselves.

3.4. Strategy III: repairing competence face while accepting critical feedback

Repairing one's competence face was by far the most common face-work strategy in the sessions, and three sub strategies can be identified: balancing, normalising and extenuating critical feedback. These strategies allow the student teacher to accept and discuss critical mentor feedback, while at the same time reducing the face threat by repairing their competence face.

3.4.1. Strategy III a): repairing competence face by balancing critical feedback

The first variant of the face-repair strategy, balancing critical feedback, involves accepting the feedback while simultaneously balancing it by expressing a positive face by mentioning positive

skills, acts, personality traits or achievements. Quite often, student teachers balanced critical feedback with statements such as: "My greatest strength is not to …, but rather …", or "at the same time I managed pretty well to …", or as in this example:

> STUDENT T11: The more I think about it, the more I see that I am too vague in my way of giving messages in this lesson. I'm trying to say too much at once, too fast …. By the way … I've become better at seeing these things now, at noticing when things aren't working well.

Another example is from one session where a student teacher and her mentor agreed that she could improve the way she introduced a new subject in a challenging class. The student teacher balanced the critical feedback by highlighting two previous examples of when she had done it better. In one of those examples, the mentor teacher had not observed the teaching and the student teacher elaborated on how she had introduced the topic for a lesson with the same class far more successfully. A final example involves balancing competence face when a student teacher receives critical feedback on the allocation of time:

> STUDENT T2: Yes, I devoted far too little time to the last part. At the same time, … part of the reason for that was that the students were so engaged and wanted to discuss …. It would have been worse if I had not been able to engage them. …

3.4.2. Strategy III b): repairing competence face by normalising critical feedback

Another repair strategy involves accepting the critical feedback but simultaneously expressing it as being *normal* to face such a challenge, for example as a first-year student teacher (*this is my first internship*), as a human being (*it's only human to make some mistakes*), or as a teacher:

> MENTOR T1: What about your blue group? There was less activity in this group.
>
> STUDENT T1: Yes, it was perhaps a little up and down in the blue group: varying levels of motivation.
>
> MENTOR T1: Ok, how could you try to change this?
>
> STUDENT T1: I should have talked more with them …, given priority to this group …. but it is of course difficult … some will always be less motivated.

It is also interesting to note that a difference can be seen in the use of pronouns. Many student teachers had a tendency to use the impersonal form when talking about their challenges (one, you, none, all, many, any). This can be interpreted as implying that such challenges are normal. Conversely, they used personal pronouns (I, me) more frequently when talking about positive aspects of themselves and their practice, particularly when expressing how they master or cope with a challenge:

> STUDENT T12: I would say that YOU must always deal with these problems – students who disrupt others ….YOU really get yourself tested when meeting this kind of student. … I think that YOU can always do things better. At least that's MY way of thinking, … I have gotten better at asserting who the boss is. I've gotten better at speaking loudly and clearly, … YOU will meet this; it is part of the package YOU have to take as a teacher.

3.4.3. Strategy III c): repairing competence face by extenuating critical feedback

The most common face-repair strategy by far involves the student teachers apparently accepting critical feedback, while also pointing to the extenuating circumstances that make the challenge less face-threatening. This strategy typically involves conveying additional information about a situation. Explanations could include not having faced a particular type of challenge earlier in the teaching placement, not having learned about a particular challenge during their education, or that a situation or student was extraordinarily challenging to manage:

> MENTOR T10: I notice that you may not have expressed the same commitment during this lesson as you have during other lessons lately?
>
> STUDENT T10: … I have given a lot of myself over the course of the day and the week. There have been some rather demanding incidents …. I was probably a bit worn out.

3.5. Strategy IV: emphasising a competent self-reflective and progressive face while accepting critical feedback

A final common type of face-work strategy involves accepting critical mentor feedback while at the same time distancing themselves from their former teaching practice. The student teachers would emphasise what might be called *a self-reflective and progressive competence face*, which involves observing, reflecting on, or evaluating past practice at some distance, and expressing a willingness to develop accordingly:

> STUDENT T4: It has occurred to me that I was perhaps not so open to the opinions you … expressed to me (last week), … I thought, and became more aware of just that – that it's easy to overlook some of the students …. I see that I am getting practice at being more aware of these things ….
>
> MENTOR T4: So that's a change you've experienced, you, uh, yes?STUDENT T4: Yes, well, I have become aware that being a good teacher consists of more than being just someone who delivers teaching …. I feel that I've gotten better.

Student teachers used different expressions that can be interpreted as emphasising an alternative self-reflective and progressive face. For example, they could be interpreted as presenting themselves as observers (*I notice that I'm losing some students' interest*), or development-oriented student teachers (*a goal I have set for myself is that I will be able to deliver more exciting teaching*). One student teacher may even be interpreted to be presenting himself as a researcher by examining his own teaching from a critical distance in a way that seemed to tone down the threat to his competence face:

> STUDENT T11: I want to find out, study, how this (teaching plan) works. I am actually quite curious about it ….
>
> MENTOR T11: What you're saying is interesting – it seems important for you to evaluate your performance quite systematically?
>
> Student T11: It's one of the most important things for me, even when I'm a teacher, in a way I want to be inclined to try out new things and curious about what works and what doesn't.

However, there is considerable variation in how clearly student

teachers presented a self-reflective and progressive face while receiving critical feedback. The student teachers who presented this face most actively also participated in some of the longest sessions, especially session 11 cited above and 7 cited below, with the most in-depth discussions with mentors, and some of them encouraged or even demanded critical mentor feedback:

> STUDENT T7: I just want to have the most direct feedback on what you think; I will not get offended or anything … so that I have the opportunity to … improve.

3.6. Summary

Through this study of post-observation supervision sessions, several distinctive strategies student teachers use when they receive critical mentor feedback have been identified: I Contradicting critical feedback; II Withdrawing from critical feedback; III Repairing competence face; and IV Emphasising a competent self-reflective and progressive face (c.f. Table 3). Repairing competence face (III) is the most widespread strategy and includes face-saving approaches such as a) balancing, b) normalising and c) extenuating critical feedback. This strategy is similar to that of emphasising a competent self-reflective and progressive face (IV) as it implies that the student teacher accepts the critical feedback but is concerned with putting on a positive competence face. However, the contradicting (I) and withdrawal (II) strategies indicate that the student teacher is working to maintain their competence face without necessarily accepting the critical feedback. These two strategies are far less prevalent than the others. Collectively, the findings on the strategies show that the student teachers are constantly very preoccupied with preserving their competence face when they receive critical mentor feedback.

4. Discussion

Critical mentor feedback is essential to learning how to become a competent teacher during a teaching placement (cf. section 1.2.3) but communicating such feedback might be the most serious challenge mentors face (cf. section 1.2.2). The aim of this article has been to gain insight into how student teachers respond to critical mentor feedback in supervision sessions.

By studying supervision sequences through the lenses of face-work theory, several key face-work (or face saving) strategies that student teachers use to respond to critical mentor feedback have been identified, which have been summarised in section 3.6.

The strategies can be seen as expressions of the student teachers' need to defend, build or repair their competence face, which can be understood in light of factors highlighted in this article. First, the very challenging and complex situation student teachers encounter in their teaching placement, where much is at stake, emotional reactions are unavoidable, and the relationship with the mentor is deeply asymmetric (cf. 1.1). Second, related to the particular challenges critical mentor feedback involves in this context (cf. 1.3.2), the findings may also be connected to research showing that face-work is a very relevant perspective for understanding interpersonal joint efforts in contexts characterised by face threats (Lim & Bowers, 1991; Redmond, 2015; Sueda, 2014; Wajnryb, 1998, c.f. 1.4), of which the teaching placement is a striking example (Copland, 2011; Vasquez, 2004).

The importance of understanding student teachers' needs to save competence face does not imply that their strategies are always constructive with regard to their development toward becoming competent teachers. Withdrawing from critical feedback (the withdrawal strategy), which was demonstrated in some sessions in the data material, does not produce conditions conducive to real and profound reflection on a student's practice. The fact that student teachers can contradict their mentor's critical feedback (the contradiction strategy) may, on the one hand, be considered indicative of healthy independence, and the lack of use of this strategy may even be considered to be worrisome in an asymmetric context. This may apply to this study where only three out of twelve used this strategy. On the other hand, contradiction strategies may also indicate an unfortunate relationship, one in which the student teachers are more concerned with protecting their self-image than cooperating in open dialogue. Furthermore, different repair strategies may largely be seen as constructive ways to deal with challenges to the student teachers' competence face.

Expressing a self-reflective and progressive face is a particularly promising way to handle critical mentor feedback constructively, as the student teachers make being competent at viewing their practice from a critical distance part of their identity. Sessions where this kind of face-work was particularly prominent were also characterised by a more in-depth reflective dialogue than in the other sessions. Student teachers who were clearly emphasising this positive face also appeared to be less vulnerable when they reflected on the imperfect aspects of their practice. This face-work strategy does of course correlate to some extent with the student teachers' *ability* to reflect, and this ability is not equally distributed among student teachers. Given that nurturing the student teachers' ability to reflect on their own practice is seen as a main objective in placement supervision, supporting a readiness to identify with a self-reflective and progressive competence face must be a major goal for the mentor.

There are good reasons to conclude that communicating critical feedback is not easy, but nevertheless an integral part of complex interactions that require a competent, reflective mentor, who acts in accordance with Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner (Handal & Lauvås, 1987; Schön, 1983). A central part of this mentor expertise must be the ability to reflect on "what is going on", which Erving Goffman (1959) claimed is the fundamental question to ask in order to understand social interaction. In this article, it has been argued that competence face-work is a lens that can contribute significantly to understanding "what is going on" when critical feedback is delivered in supervision sessions.

It is crucial that mentors understand both student teachers' basic need to work on their competence face, and not least understand and recognise how this need may be expressed in supervision sessions. For example, there is a danger that mentors interpret some strategies as failing to accomplish the reflective and development-oriented purpose of mentoring, or even consider such strategies to be morally reprehensible, even though it is, in fact, reasonable to understand such face-work as reflecting a normal need to express some form of a positive competence face. Professional reflection involves challenging the competence face, and mentoring may therefore involve treading the line between what is constructive and what is destructive for the student teacher's motivation and development. This places great demands on the mentor's skills to understand feedback as a complex interactive phenomenon, and it is particularly important that mentor education emphasises a more research-based knowledge on this topic (Aspfors and Fransson, 2015). This article is an important demonstration of this complexity.

4.1. Conclusion

This article's findings of the diverse face-work strategies that student teachers use when their competence face is threatened by critical mentor feedback represent an important contribution to understanding how students may react to this feedback.

More generally, this article has argued that there is a need for a stronger research focus on critical mentor feedback interaction in teaching placements. This is especially as the mentor's feedback is so crucial for the student teachers' development, and because delivering critical feedback is both necessary and the mentor's greatest challenge. Not least, it would be desirable to have comparative qualitative studies of face-work in different contexts and countries. For example, these studies could provide a deeper insight into connections between student teachers' face-work and other features of the interaction, such as mentor moves og mentor face-work, as well as the general context, such as the relationship between the student and the mentor. Studies combining interaction data with interview data that include the participants' own interpretations of the sessions and their context could also be valuable contributions to the understanding of face-work.

The face-work perspective and research using this perspective can contribute to valuable knowledge for mentors, who aim to support student teachers' competence development. The mentor's ability to recognise, understand and act competently in relation to student teachers' expression of their competence face must be regarded as an important part of their expertise. This expertise – or lack of expertise – is likely to have significant implications for the quality of teaching placement learning in teacher education. For this reason, findings from this study and other studies on face-work in placement supervision may be highly relevant content for mentor education and related teaching materials.

The current perspective and findings are also relevant to student teachers' understanding of themselves and their feedback interaction in the placement. Such understanding is especially important given that student teachers will face similar challenges associated with understanding critical feedback interaction, not the least when they themselves communicate critical feedback to future pupils or students, or to any student teacher they might supervise in their future careers.

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