Research

Supervisory Praxis in Special Education Clinical Practice: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Scholars have called for empirical work examining how field experiences mitigate or reproduce opportunity gaps for marginalized P–12 students in clinical practice (Diacopoulos et al., 2024; Hood, 2023; Lynch et al., 2024). This article extends that conversation into special education university supervision. Drawing on interviews with 15 university supervisors in a special education teacher preparation program at a large Midwestern university, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was used to understand how supervisors made meaning of their work and navigated the institutional positions in which it unfolded. Four findings emerged: supervisors (a) held the institutional role as evaluative while many additionally developed mentorship as a chosen practice; (b) centered candidate development as the primary goal, with intermittent attention to P–12 students; (c) drew on program-provided tools, previous teaching experiences, and self-designed practices; and (d) developed equity approaches individually rather than through shared programmatic resources. Discussed using third space theory, these findings highlight the significance of supervisors' boundary-crossing work, which expanded the evaluative role yet remained dependent on individual disposition rather than systemic support. The equity-relevant dimensions of supervisory practice in particular were held individually and varied across supervisors, pointing to the need for collaborative, programmatic support to sustain this work for P–12 students with disabilities.

Keywords

special education field experiences; university supervisor; Cultural Historical Activity Theory; supervision

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Introduction

The university supervisor has been positioned primarily as an evaluator across the past several decades of teacher education and special education teacher preparation. From the early United States tradition of inspecting teachers for moral and instructional conformity, through the mid-twentieth-century emergence of clinical supervision organized around the practicum triad, to the value-added evaluation practices that followed the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, the dominant institutional framing of supervisory work has remained evaluation (Glanz, 2018; Gordon, 2019; Jewell, 2017; White & Winstanley, 2014). Developmental traditions have long offered an alternative that reframes the work as support for teacher growth rather than judgment (Glickman, 1981; Zepeda & Ponticell, 2019), yet Cochran-Smith (2021) argues that intensifying accountability has narrowed how teacher preparation understands its own purposes. Even as special education expanded the role to encompass specialized knowledge of disability, evidence-based practices, and high-leverage practices (HLPs), programs and policies have continued to organize supervision around evaluation rather than developmental partnership (Brownell et al., 2019; McIntyre & McIntyre, 2021; McLeskey et al., 2017).

Alongside this evaluative framing, scholars including Darling-Hammond (2006) have documented an evolution in supervisory work that reaches beyond evaluation toward mentoring, culturally responsive practice, and the development of candidate identity (Bates et al., 2009, 2011; Hood, 2023; Lee, 2011; Lynch, 2021). In special education, where attention to intervention, disability, and the lives of P–12 students is central, dimensions such as mentoring, equity, and identity nonetheless surface less consistently in the empirical literature than the evaluative one (Brownell et al., 2019; Burns & Badiali, 2015; Leko et al., 2015). How supervisors make sense of their roles alongside their evaluative responsibilities, particularly in special education, is comparatively underexplored. The purpose of this study was to understand how special education university supervisors made meaning of the goals and practices of their praxis (i.e., work) within the institutional positions they held. Centering supervisor voice through qualitative inquiry, the study contributes empirical grounding to scholarship calling for closer attention to the situated complexity of supervisory practice (Brownell et al., 2019; Bussey & Lay, 2023; Leko et al., 2015).

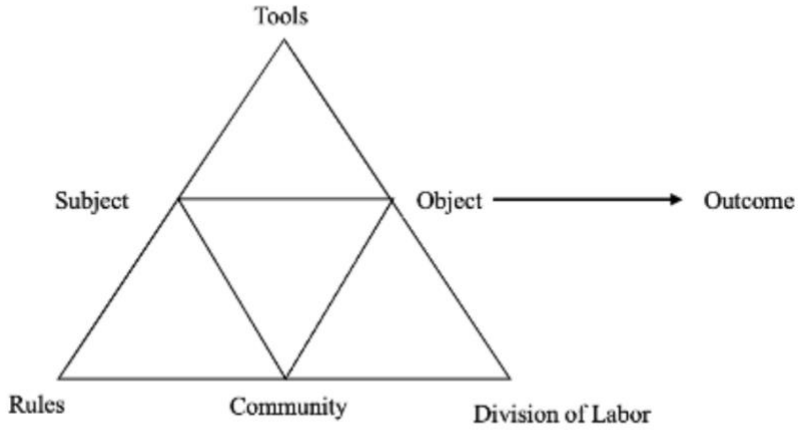
Theoretical Framework

Two frameworks anchored the analysis of supervisory work. Through Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), supervision was examined as historically and institutionally mediated work; through third space theory, as boundary work spanning the university, the school, and the other settings supervisors occupied. This study follows Bernstein (1971) in understanding praxis through Aristotle's distinction between doing and knowing: where *theoria* is knowledge sought for its own sake, praxis is the doing central to socio-political life, the application of knowledge with wisdom toward meaningful ends. A supervisor's daily activity, in this sense, is inseparable from praxis.

Scholars working in the CHAT tradition analyze collective, mediated activity through a shared model of what an activity is (Cole, 1998; Engeström, 1987; Engeström & Sannino, 2021). Within that model, a subject (the doer of the activity) acts toward an object, the enduring aim that gives

an activity its direction, and tools, rules, community, and the division of labor mediate that action (see Figure 1). Central to this analysis is the distinction between the object and the objective, which comes from Leont'ev's (1978) account of activity as layered. At the level of the collective activity, the object is the enduring aim toward which the whole activity is directed and that gives it meaning. At the level of individual action, goals are the situated aims a person pursues in a particular moment, and they make sense only in relation to the object of the larger activity. This paper calls those action-level goals objectives, to hold them analytically apart from the object (Engeström & Sannino, 2021; Foot, 2014). Figure 1 represents this structure and adds the outcome, what the transformation of the object produces (Engeström, 1987). Because the data here are supervisors' accounts, the outcome this study can speak to is the transformation of the supervisors' own praxis, which they described directly; outcomes for teacher candidates and P–12 students lie outside what these data can support.

Figure 1. *The Structure of a Cultural-Historical Activity System*



Note. Adapted from the second-generation activity system model (Engeström, 1987). The subject pursues an object, mediated by tools at the top and by the rules, community, and division of labor at the base, to produce an outcome. The object belongs to the level of the collective activity; the situated goals a subject pursues in particular actions, called objectives in this paper, are nested within it rather than placed on the arrow to the outcome (Leont'ev, 1978).

The activity system these supervisors described operated largely as a single system rather than as the network of interacting systems that third-generation CHAT takes as its unit (Engeström, 2001). In theory, clinical practice is a three-part network (i.e., teacher candidate, university supervisor, cooperating teacher); in this study, however, the work primarily brought together the supervisor and the candidate. The second-generation model therefore fit the data, and third space theory was used to understand the boundary work supervisors did at the edges of that single system, work that, with institutional support, points toward the field's goal of a unified, collaborative triad. Where scholars use CHAT to analyze what happens within an activity

system, third space can be used to examine what happens at its boundaries. Scholars trace third space to Bhabha's (1994) account of hybridity, the generative space that opens when distinct cultural traditions meet; additionally, third space is used in education to name the hybrid sites where knowledge of the university and school come together and produce something neither holds alone (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Klein et al., 2013; Zeichner, 2010). Edwards (2010) describes how practitioners build common knowledge across the boundaries of professional practice through relational agency and expertise. In teacher preparation, scholars have used these ideas to reposition the university supervisor from an outsider who carries university expectations into the school to a bridge who brokers between settings and creates space for new practice (Cuenca et al., 2011; Gardiner & Lorch, 2015; Laughlin, 2021).

Literature Review

Researchers and professional standards have positioned supervisory work in particular ways. For instance, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2018) and scholarship on clinically rich preparation have called for hybrid roles that integrate university and school-site work, repositioning supervisors as developmental partners rather than evaluators alone (Burns et al., 2016; Grossman, 2011; Zeichner, 2010), and the Council for Exceptional Children, through its HLP framework, positioned the work as supporting candidate development across collaborative, instructional, and assessment dimensions (McLeskey et al., 2017). This expanded positioning has been studied in varied ways such as naming the pedagogical skills supervision requires, the supervisor's distinct situation relative to the cooperating teacher, and the difficulty of seeing supervisory work clearly at all (Buchanan, 2020; Burns & Badiali, 2016; Burns et al., 2019; Cuenca et al., 2011; Isik-Ercan et al., 2017). As the field has moved beyond evaluation alone, scholars have examined supervision through equity and culturally responsive frames, describing how supervisors shape candidates' understanding of social justice and attend to the relational dimensions of supervision (Hood, 2023; Lee, 2011; Lynch, 2021; Shaver & Elfreich, 2021; Strieker et al., 2016). Across teacher education, however, evaluative framings remain prevalent in policy documents, program structures, and the research designs that test interventions delivered through supervisors.

Within the special education-specific empirical literature, supervisory work has been studied predominantly through interventions designed to shift candidate teaching and learning. Scholars have identified learning activities and feedback opportunities as the two primary categories of supervisory activity across the P–12 and early childhood special education literature (O'Brien et al., 2024; Szocik et al., 2024), and scholars conducting quantitative studies on placement quality reported that the cooperating teacher and school site shape candidate outcomes, while the supervisor's specific contribution has rarely been examined (Goldhaber et al., 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2018). Researchers examining technology-mediated feedback, guided video analysis, and integrated coaching have consistently positioned the supervisor as the deliverer of feedback or the conduit for an intervention, focusing on what changes in the candidate rather than on what the supervisor brings to the work (Artman-Meeker et al., 2017; Nagro et al., 2017; O'Brien et al., 2020; Regan & Weiss, 2020; Rock et al., 2009; Scheeler et al., 2012). Across this literature, the university supervisor is rarely the central analytic object. Fewer studies still document the promise of culturally responsive supervision for candidate development and the resistance and

time constraints that limit it (Hassaram et al., 2018), and fewer are special education-specific (Bussey & Lay, 2023).

Scholars who have studied supervision using CHAT are situated largely outside the United States. Working across Canadian, French, and United States community college settings, scholars have surfaced the contradictions supervisors navigate: a gap between the broad aim of preparing competent professionals and the situational pressure for candidates to please their supervisors, the way one-directional supervisory talk constrains candidate learning relative to dialogic exchange, and the importance of equitable power-sharing within the triad for fostering culturally responsive practice (Cartaut & Bertone, 2009; Gart & Kronen, 2020; Goodnough et al., 2017).

In special education specifically, researchers have shown the value of activity theory for surfacing the complexity of pre-service teachers' decision-making with bilingual children with disabilities (Martínez-Álvarez et al., 2020). Taken together, these scholars describe the supervisor not as a deliverer of feedback but as someone who makes meaning in a position pulled by competing demands, and they reframe the goal of supervision as the joint construction of meaning among supervisors, candidates, and cooperating teachers, holding instructional, relational, developmental, and equity-oriented dimensions together in a single role.

Methodology

The data presented here are drawn from a larger study of special education university supervisor praxis, approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The research design is presented first, followed by the settings and participants and the data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design

I approached this study from a constructivist stance, viewing individuals as constructing knowledge through their experiences and interactions within social contexts (Postholm, 2020). CHAT was the foundational analytic methodology, and from it the categories for examining the supervisory activity system were drawn (Engeström & Sannino, 2021; Postholm, 2015; Yamagata-Lynch et al., 2016). As noted earlier, the object–objective distinction was used to separate what a supervisor oriented toward over time from the objectives pursued in particular moments of practice (Foot, 2014). Third space theory was used as an interpretive framework rather than a coding scheme, applied during interpretation to make sense of the boundary-crossing that surfaced in the activity-theoretical analysis (Gutiérrez, 2008; Zeichner, 2010).

Positionality

I am an international scholar of color, wearing multiple professional and personal identities past and present: special education teacher, teacher educator, supervisor across geographical contexts, parent to a disabled young adult, and researcher. At the time of the study, I was a doctoral candidate who had supervised in a special education teacher preparation program at the same university and had contributed to professional development for supervisors across teacher preparation programs there; I came to this study embedded in the supervisory work I set out to

examine. That history shaped the questions I asked and my attunement to the demands of the role. My commitment to disability justice and to the equitable preparation of teachers for all students, especially minoritized P–12 students with disabilities, led me to view my positionality as a valuable analytical resource to be explicitly acknowledged, rather than a removable bias (Banks et al., 2023).

Settings, Participants, and Procedures

Participants were university fieldwork supervisors in the special education department at a large Midwestern university. Purposive sampling was used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018); participants had supervised special education or dual-licensure (i.e., elementary and special education) teacher candidates since at least 2020. Primary supervisory responsibilities involved conducting at least two classroom observations and facilitating post-lesson conferences during pre-student-teaching and student-teaching clinical hours. Interviews were conducted between summer 2024 and spring 2025. Of the 20 individuals who expressed interest through the intake survey, 15 completed the full sequence of consent, demographic survey, and semi-structured interview, which served as the primary data source. The remaining five did not proceed past the intake or consent stage and offered no reason for not continuing, a level of non-completion consistent with interview-based qualitative research (Robinson, 2014). None of the 15 participants had been taught, supervised, or evaluated by me, nor had I been in a reporting relationship with any of them; recruitment was routed through the program coordinator rather than through my own networks to keep participation voluntary and unpressured. Participants selected their own pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Demographic characteristics appear in Table 1. The group was predominantly White (n = 13; 86.7%) and female (n = 14; 93.3%), and just over half were supervising as doctoral students (n = 8; 53.3%) at the time of data collection. The racial and gender composition mirrors the national special educator workforce, in which more than 80% of special education teachers in United States public schools are White and the majority are women (Bettini et al., 2024). However, the substantial share of doctoral students differs from the field-wide pattern, in which retired teachers, adjunct faculty, and current P–12 educators often make up the larger part of the supervisory workforce (Burns & Badiali, 2015; Isik-Ercan et al., 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source. The protocol (see Appendix A) drew on guidance for designing activity-theory interviews (Postholm, 2015; Yamagata-Lynch et al., 2016) and was built to elicit how supervisors described the goals and practices of their work and the institutional contexts in which that work unfolded (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Special Education University Supervisor Participants (N = 15)*

Characteristic	Category	*n*
Gender	Female	14
	Male	1
Race/ethnicity	White	13
	Asian American	1
	Black	1
Professional position at data collection	Faculty	5
	Doctoral student	8
	Program coordinator	1
	Supervisor coordinator	1
Years of PreK–12 teaching experience	1–3 years	1
	3–6 years	8
	6–9 years	4
	More than 10 years	2
Years of supervisory experience	1–3 years	8
	3–6 years	3
	6–9 years	2
	More than 10 years	2

Note. Demographic data were self-reported through a demographic survey. Professional position reflects role at the time of data collection.

The analysis proceeded through three cycles of deductive coding grounded in CHAT, with categories, themes, and the resulting theory defined from the CHAT framing (Engeström, 1987; Postholm, 2015). A substantive segment was defined as a stretch of transcript, typically one to several turns of talk, in which a supervisor described a single practice, goal, relationship, or constraint of the work; segment boundaries were set where the topic shifted, so that a single interview yielded between 30 and 60 segments. First, components of the supervisory activity system were identified in each substantive segment: the tools supervisors used, the rules and community within which they worked, and the division of labor across the triad. Next, the object a supervisor oriented toward over time was distinguished from the objectives pursued in particular moments, and the contradictions and tensions supervisors described were identified. These categories were then drawn together to build an activity-system theory.

Table 2 illustrates how the CHAT constructs mapped onto coding categories and onto the kinds of supervisor accounts that populated them.

Table 2. *CHAT Constructs, Coding Categories, and Illustrative Data*

CHAT construct	Coding category	Illustrative supervisor account
Object	The enduring aim the institution set for the role	"The supervisor has to notice a lot of things that [candidates] can do and encourage them, but a huge role is to find a way to take what they have and make them better." (Sandy)
Objectives	Situated goals pursued in particular moments of practice	"Yes, was I there to ultimately assess them, yes," alongside "I really saw it as a form of mentoring." (Lee)
Mediating tools	Program-provided and supervisor-created materials and practices	"We used high-leverage practices when we created a template, and so it's consistent throughout the program." (CS)
Rules	Accreditation, observation-cycle, and evaluation requirements	"I was asked to participate in three observations… review their lesson plans… and complete these observation forms." (Mimi)
Community	Who convened around the work in practice	"The times in which I did see them together, in… those triad type meetings, you could clearly see that there was… this strong relationship." (JessyB)
Division of labor	How evaluative, mentoring, and innovative work was distributed	"…the best scenario is to have triad meetings with the teacher [candidate], the mentor and the supervisor..." (Louise)
Contradiction/tension	Where the institutional object and the situated objectives pulled apart	"I wouldn't expect supervisors to be mentors." (Katherine)

Note. Illustrative accounts are drawn from the interview data and are representative of the segments coded to each category, not exhaustive.

I coded all transcripts myself. In place of a second coder, two forms of check were used. First, the object–objective analysis and the visual models of the activity system were refined through in-person peer debriefing sessions with two colleagues whose expertise in CHAT complemented my expertise in special education supervision. These discussion-based sessions focused on testing whether the assignment of supervisor accounts to object or to objective held under a second reader's scrutiny, which led to revisions in how the evaluative mandate and the situated goals were distinguished in the final model. Second, all 15 participants received a transcript of their interview and a summary of the emergent themes for member checking (Creswell & Plano

Clark, 2018); those who responded confirmed the accuracy and authenticity, and no responses required changes to the findings. Throughout, I maintained reflexive analytic memos (Charmaz, 2019); trustworthiness and credibility were guided by reflexive quality criteria for purpose-driven special education qualitative research (Banks et al., 2023).

Findings

Findings are organized into four sections that move from the most institutionally mandated dimension of supervisory work to the most individually developed. A fifth section then draws the four together into a theory of the supervisory activity system, as shown in Figure 2 at the end of the findings section.

The Evaluator–Mentor Role(s)

As institutionally defined in this study, the supervisor's role was evaluative. The expected work centered on observations, lesson plan feedback, completing evaluation forms, and assigning grades against required competencies. This evaluative work was the object of the supervisory role, the enduring goal the institution set, and supervisors described their activities in those terms. For instance, JessyB described the institutional weight of the position: "You're almost like the enforcer of the requirements, of the expectations, and then the giver of the grade." Anna described the position's structural distance: not responsible for grading, she "kind of end[ed] up as this third party who's a little bit more objective," whom candidates approached with concerns about their placements. Sandy framed the role's aim in asset terms: "the supervisor has to notice a lot of things that [candidates] can do and encourage them, but a huge role is to find a way to take what they have and make them better." Mimi recounted the concrete tasks she was assigned: "I was asked to participate in three observations… review their lesson plans and give them feedback… and complete these observation forms." For several supervisors, this evaluative work was the complete role of a supervisor, and all their supervisory activities centered this object.

Interestingly, supervisors distinguished this institutional mandate from mentoring, which they treated as related but separate. Sandy described the boundary: "I think mentorship is, like, embedded in there a bit. But I see a mentor role as… this long-standing, maybe career-long, support system, and the supervisor's like specialty." Katherine described the two as overlapping but not identical: "It almost would see it as a bit of a Venn diagram… I wouldn't expect supervisors to be mentors."

However, some supervisors chose to provide mentorship in addition to the evaluation, describing it as something they had reflected on and built over time rather than something the role required. Lee reframed the work for herself: "I really saw it [supervising] as a form of mentoring, versus like I'm coming in and assessing you," while still acknowledging that "yes, was I there to ultimately assess them, yes." Jane described positioning herself as "…not an evaluator, but a facilitator," someone who could help candidates "…feel connected, get the resources they need, [and] talk through any problems that come up," so that candidates would learn to self-evaluate rather than perform out of fear of an outside judge. Louise similarly located mentorship in reflection: "one of the most important things as a mentor is trying to support the individual in strengthening their reflection, their self-reflection." John used the evaluation form for narrative

feedback rather than differential scoring: "I'm always going to give them the 25 out of 25." Mimi extended the role beyond the observation cycle, establishing weekly one-on-one meetings she described as relational rather than evaluative: "My role can extend beyond coming to see you during observations… checking in with them… about things other than the observations." For these supervisors, mentorship was added to the institutional role rather than required by it.

Supervisors' Goals: Centering the Teacher Candidate, Considering the P–12 Student

Across the 15 interviews, supervisors described the central goal of their work as the teacher candidate's development, a goal tied directly to what they were assigned to do. The goals reported in this section are the objectives of the analysis, the situated aims supervisors pursued in particular moments. Pam described her early practice as task-focused on the candidate: "I viewed it much more as like a formal logistic… I come in, I observe you. I tell you what you should do differently." Sandy described matching candidates with supervisors who could relate to them "humanistically… beyond lesson plans." Across these accounts, the candidate, including their lesson plans, their reflections, and their placement experience, was the gravitational center of the role. Several supervisors brought attention to the P–12 students with disabilities in the candidates' classrooms. John spoke at length about individual children he had taught: "I could go on and on about the students." Pam encouraged candidates to see the children behind the paperwork: "…not just a disability label. They're not just another kid on your caseload. They are a real human being!" The P–12 student surfaced most clearly where a supervisor's prior practitioner experience pulled the candidate's reflection or stance there.

Supervisor-Mediated Practices

Supervisors carried out their work with a combination of program-provided materials, their own previous experiences, and practices and tools they developed over time. The program provided observation forms, lesson plan templates, rubrics, evaluation cycles, and content standards. Anna centered the HLPs and the GoReact platform in her observation cycle, "…time stamping, pinpointing specific moments of practice where [high-leverage practices] were being demonstrated." CS used the HLPs as a shared template: "We used high-leverage practices when we created a template, and so it's consistent throughout the program." Robin pointed to the consistency built into her team's materials: "We all complete the same one for my practicum… the observation forms themselves are just Word documents." These provided materials gave supervisory work a common technical architecture.

Beyond what the program provided, supervisors drew on their previous experiences as classroom teachers, cooperating teachers, and former student teachers, and they used reflection to make sense of the work. Pam drew on her teaching to calibrate expectations and to humanize the disability labels candidates encountered. Anna brought her secondary teaching into her practice and modeled teaching videos for candidates to analyze. Louise drew on her career as a special education teacher and leadership roles to advocate for inclusive placements beyond the self-contained classrooms in which she observed candidates: "Every time that I was observing, it was always in the self-contained classroom. And every time I would say, I would really like to see… how this looks in the regular ed." Njehaki connected the work to her own preparation as a student teacher: "I chopped down so many of those experiences to my own experiences as a

student teacher," drawing on them to understand and empathize with what the candidates she visited were navigating. Tara traced her approach to the support she had felt in her own first years of teaching: "It was really helpful to me to feel like I wasn't alone. And so, I think that was kind of foundational to how I saw supporting teachers." Similarly, Mimi reflected on her own student teaching in the same program, recalling, "I don't remember having very deep relationships with my supervisors," and used that gap to shape what she offered candidates. For these supervisors, reflection and previous experience were as central to the work as the program-provided tools.

Some supervisors created additional tools and practices where the provided materials did not address what the work required. Pam built a supervisor vision statement through a self-study: "What did I want as a supervisor? What was important to me?" Lee designed a "321" debrief protocol (three things that went well, two to change, one goal) that opened every debrief with candidate self-reflection, and other supervisors in her program adopted it. Mimi's weekly one-on-one meetings grew, at the candidates' own initiative, into a collective group: "…they wanted to kind of create their own little community of practice." Robin built a three-meeting structure into how she supported the supervisors she worked with, and Nora, finding that "Giving [a] numerical value was a little tricky for me," created an additional reflection form to sit alongside the program rubric because she "…believe[d] in continuums and student teachers having that opportunity to reflect"; the coordinator later shared it with others. These created practices supplemented the program-provided materials rather than replacing them. Across these layers of practice, the work was carried out largely individually, a pattern the next section takes up.

Equity Frames in Supervisors' Praxis

Supervisors connected equity to their praxis in varied ways, framing what equity meant for teacher candidates, for P–12 students with disabilities, and for themselves as supervisors. Several worked from disability studies and disability justice commitments, naming ableism and the structural marginalization of disability in P–12 schooling. Pam articulated this approach most directly: "…ableism is often left out… disability is left out… There's no justice without disability justice." Louise tied disability directly to disproportionality and its intersections: "We know what disproportionality is, and it starts with disability… it's so closely aligned with race and poverty and gender… how can you remove disability from that conversation?" Anna brought a similar approach to her supervision: "I very strongly believe in addressing ableist structures in school," and she interrupted ableist talk in candidate reflections about students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Other supervisors brought race-conscious approaches into their equity work, often drawn from previous teaching in racially diverse contexts. John described how that teaching shaped him: "When you spend a lot of time unpacking your own whiteness and what that means in a classroom of students of color." Jane described the antiracist and anti-ableist commitments she carried into her supervision and the contradiction she wanted candidates to confront, that schools "…talk about… historical marginalization of students, and not blame students for it," and yet "the students come in who've been historically marginalized, and we blame them." Tara brought disproportionality analysis into her conversations with candidates, and Mimi described an equity

approach shaped by her own reflection on the marginalization of teachers of color in alternative certification pathways.

Still other supervisors held equity approaches that grew out of the field's traditions in evidence-based practice, asset-based pedagogy, and Universal Design for Learning; integrating equity into the technical and instructional practice of supervision rather than treating it as a separate commitment. CS described placing candidates in low-income districts and using "anti-racist IEPs" within a continuous-improvement frame: "we're better together." Katherine framed her work as asset-based: "We need to be asset-based with these pre-service teachers." Lee described inclusive education and Universal Design for Learning as foundational to her feedback, and Robin described the sociopolitical consciousness she sought to build in the supervisors she managed. Njehaki interpreted equity through inclusive placement and access, valuing that the special education candidates she visited taught alongside students with disabilities in general education classrooms and were encouraged to support a struggling reader within the whole class rather than apart from it.

Both the equity dimension of supervision and the organization of the work surfaced the same pattern: individual supervisors working within institutional silos. Across these accounts, supervisors positioned their equity work individually rather than through one shared, programmatic approach. Anna described her own siloing: "…it's not my area of expertise, so I feel less comfortable bringing those things up." Pam described herself as "a little bit of an abnormality within supervision," noting that her disability studies sensibility was not shared programmatically. Nora spoke of disability studies conditionally, stating, "We should move in the direction of disability studies!"

Each supervisor brought their own approach to their practices and no one named a framework held in common at the program or institutional level. Katherine did not get the opportunity to network with other supervisors, Pam was often the only special education voice in cross-programmatic meetings, and JessyB described the support available to supervisors as real but self-sourced: "I think there probably was support. I think I needed to facilitate that on my own, though, if I wanted to access it." Both Anna and JessyB noted that cooperating teachers routinely did not attend triad meetings or debriefs; as JessyB put it, "oftentimes, it was like, Oh, the CT couldn't join us for the post lesson." Louise named the ideal the structure was meant to serve: "the best scenario is to have triad meetings with the teacher, the mentor and the supervisor, because… we always want those comments to be transparent." The supervisor-candidate-cooperating teacher triad served as the institutional frame for clinical practice, but in practice the work was organized as a dyad between supervisor and candidate.

Synthesis: A Theory of Agentic Supervisory Praxis

The supervisory activity in this study was at once institutionally bounded and agentically expanded. The object of the activity, the enduring aim the institution set, was evaluation. Within that bounded object, however, the objectives supervisors pursued were broader, mediated by program-provided tools and, more heavily, by their previous experience as cooperating teachers and classroom practitioners and their reflexivity within their praxis. Those objectives were

responsive to who their candidates were and what they needed, and they were agentic: supervisors designed practices of their own, some of which their programs took up.

In practice, the community of the activity was the supervisor and the candidate, and the division of labor narrowed with it. In this sense, the praxis was agentic but siloed: supervisors expanded the evaluative object through situated, responsive objectives, yet did so individually rather than through any shared collective system. Because the data are supervisors' own accounts from a single vantage point, the study makes no claim about the effects of this praxis on candidates or P–12 students. What the accounts do reach is the transformation of the supervisors' own praxis, the tools built, the approaches developed across semesters, and the roles extended, which in Engeström's (1987) terms is the outcome of the activity for the subject. The equity approaches supervisors developed are the clearest instance of that outcome: held by neither the program's shared resources nor the intervention-centered tradition of the field (Grobart & Zepp, 2024), they were transformations supervisors made of their own praxis from resources the activity did not supply. A fuller cultural-historical account of that double boundary lies beyond the scope of this study. Figure 2 represents this activity system.

Figure 2. *Populated Cultural-Historical Activity Theory System for Special Education University Supervisor Praxis*

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Mediating Tools Program-provided: observation forms, rubrics, HLPs, lesson plan templates, GoReact. Supervisor-created: vision statements, 321 protocol, weekly check-ins, supplementary reflection forms. Carried in: previous classroom and cooperating-teacher experience, reflective practice.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Subject
Special education university supervisors</td><td>Object
(activity level, institutionally set): evaluation of teacher candidates against required competencies.
Objectives
(action level, situated): candidate development, mentorship, attention to P–12 students with disabilities, equity-oriented feedback.</td><td>→ Outcome
For supervisors' praxis, as described in their accounts: expanded individual practice through self-designed tools, mentoring approaches, extended roles, and equity approaches of their own. For teacher candidates and P–12 students: not examined in this study.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Rules
Accreditation requirements, observation-cycle expectations, evaluation against competencies</td><td>Community
Named: supervisor, candidate, cooperating teacher, program coordinators, fellow supervisors. Convened in practice: supervisor and candidate.</td><td>Division of Labor
Evaluation held by the supervisor as mandated; mentorship and innovation taken up by individual supervisors as chosen; cooperating-teacher and peer-supervisor labor largely absent in practice</td></tr>
</table>

Note. The activity system deconstructed from the triangular representation in Figure 1 and populated with elements identified across the 15 supervisor interviews. The object is the enduring aim the institution set for the role; the objectives are the situated goals supervisors pursued in particular moments of practice and are nested within the object rather than downstream of it (Leont'ev, 1978). Through those objectives, supervisors expanded the object of their own practice individually, rather than through any shared system, so the object the institution set remained evaluative even as the objectives supervisors pursued reached beyond it. The data show the transformation of the supervisors' own praxis; outcomes for candidates and P–12 students are not claimed.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss the historical contradiction the supervision field has built, the daily tensions supervisors encountered, the expansive responses they developed, the hybrid space those responses created, and what that space could become if built collectively. The contradictions that surfaced are discussed through CHAT lenses, while supervisors' actions at the boundaries of those contradictions are presented through third space theory (Gutiérrez, 2008; Zeichner, 2010).

The supervisors in this study worked within a field that centers collaboration as a high-leverage practice while its structures keep them apart (McLeskey et al., 2017). Engeström and Sannino (2010, 2021) describe contradictions of this kind as historically accumulated practices that create a system and make the object of an activity internally divided. The contradictions these supervisors worked within were historical and structural. General and special education are still prepared through separate licensure systems even as the field calls for the two to work as one (Blanton & Pugach, 2011; Pugach et al., 2011), and accountability pressures have narrowed the supervisory role toward evaluation and away from its developmental and relational purposes (Cochran-Smith, 2021). Ko et al. (2024) discussed how teacher preparation programs become sites where competing commitments collide and professional roles stay fragmented, leaving the work of equity to individuals rather than to a shared structure. Sannino (2011) argues that in the routines of ordinary work, individual experience hardens into one-sided, isolated views, and that the meeting of different experiences within a collective moves practice forward. The supervisors described being isolated in that way. Ilyenkov (1982, as cited in Sannino, 2011) described how any new form of practice first appears as an individual exception to the rule and becomes a shared norm only when others take it up; most of the practices supervisors built here stayed at the level of the exception, though a protocol adopted by a coordinator and a reflection form shared across a program show what the passage from individual innovation to shared practice can look like. These structural separations are, in third space terms, boundaries: places where distinct knowledge traditions meet and where hybrid practice becomes both necessary and possible (Bhabha, 1994; Zeichner, 2010).

Supervisors balanced what their institution expected and what the work in front of them required. This daily balancing was the tension: the lived, in-the-moment form of a contradiction that had built up in the system over decades (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). Because a tension shows up in the moment, supervisors' responses took the form of objectives rather than a redesign of the object itself. Clinical supervision is organized as a triad; however, the community that convened was the supervisor–candidate dyad, and hence the division of labor narrowed with it (Cartaut & Bertone, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2017). While evaluation was the object supervisors were accountable for, preparing a beginning teacher asked for more, and supervisors answered by reframing observation as mentoring, opening regular check-ins, and replacing directive feedback with questions, expanding the object of their own practice from evaluation toward development (Brownell et al., 2019; Burns et al., 2016, 2019). Engeström and Sannino (2010) and Postholm (2020) call this kind of response expansion: rather than choosing between the two demands, practitioners build a new object that holds both. In this study, the developmental objectives supervisors pursued in the moment challenged, if only briefly, the evaluative object they were assigned (Foot, 2014). This work took real agency, what Hopwood

and Sannino (2023) call transformative agency, through which people remake their own activity from inside it. Supervisors brokered between university and school through self-made protocols and sustained relationships. In third space terms, this was boundary crossing: supervisors moved across the separations the field maintains and carried knowledge in both directions (Gardiner & Lorch, 2015; Zeichner, 2010). Through that crossing, they built what Edwards (2010) calls relational agency, common knowledge that spans professional boundaries, drawing on the repertoires of both the classroom and the university rather than treating either as fixed (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Because the cooperating teacher and the school shape candidate outcomes as much as they do (Goldhaber et al., 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2018), this improvised bridging likely matters in ways the present data, drawn from supervisors alone, cannot measure.

The space supervisors built was hybrid, shaped by their own classroom histories and held by individual agency. Gutiérrez (2008) and Zeichner (2010) describe hybrid spaces as places where the knowledge of university and of school meet and produce something neither holds alone. Ko et al. (2024) describe teacher educators deliberately building such contact zones, where competing ideologies are renegotiated. The preparation program itself becomes a tool that shapes how candidates learn to practice. The supervisors made such a space from within an evaluative role, moving from the disenfranchised outsider Slick (1998) described toward the bridge Gardiner and Lorch (2015) and Cuenca et al. (2011) describe, drawing on prior classroom lives and an empathy for the candidate and the P–12 students in the room. Because each supervisor built that space alone, what they brought to equity, the most demanding dimension of the work, varied: some drew on disability studies and disability justice (Annamma et al., 2013; Connor & Gabel, 2013), some on race-conscious commitments (Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020), and some on asset-based and high-leverage traditions (Brownell et al., 2019; Grobart & Zepp, 2024; McLeskey et al., 2017). Artiles (2011) argues that educational inequity is produced by historically organized systems through which ability and difference are racialized, not by individuals, and Bal (2016) shows that durable change comes from redesigning those systems rather than from the commitment of people within them. These arguments reinforce Gutiérrez and Rogoff's (2003) point that equity, when held as the disposition of a well-meaning individual, cannot be taught, shared, or sustained the way a repertoire built across a community can. Scholars of culturally responsive supervision document the same fragility, as individual supervisors meet the time pressures and resistance that equity work evokes without collective backing to carry it (Hassaram et al., 2018; Hood, 2023; Lynch, 2021). Even though the supervisors were committed to equity, they were not institutionally and intentionally connected, so their work could not accumulate, and opportunities for minoritized P–12 students with disabilities risk resting on which supervisor a candidate happens to draw (Lynch et al., 2024; Milner, 2010).

The supervisors' improvised hybridity could be a blueprint for the shared practice the special education clinical field has not yet built. Sannino (2011) argues that the worth of an activity-system account lies not in picturing a system as it is but in modeling one that could be built and put into practice over time, and the boundary work these supervisors did alone is such a model in miniature, a more collaborative and developmental practice that already exists in fragments. A practice that lives only in individual disposition, though, is structurally inequitable, and leaving supervisory praxis to individual agency risks reproducing the very opportunity gaps the field is trying to close. The alternative is not to constrain supervisors but to build, at the system level, the

collective infrastructure their work already points toward (Buchanan, 2020; Zeichner, 2010). Built into that infrastructure, the empathy and agency these supervisors showed could do more than serve the candidates in front of them; it could shift the activity itself for the supervisors who come next, and through them for the students the field most hopes to reach (Lynch et al., 2024; Milner, 2010).

Implications for Teacher Preparation

Researchers working with the Learning Lab and Change Laboratory methodologies have shown how a culturally and historically situated activity system can be redesigned collaboratively, surfacing its contradictions and developing new tools, practices, and partnerships through participatory design with the people who do the work (Bal, 2016; Bal et al., 2018; Hopwood & Sannino, 2023; Sannino, 2022). Bringing that approach to supervisor preparation would treat supervisors not as recipients of a fixed protocol but as co-designers of the system they work within.

For program leaders, the findings suggest that the tools a program provides shape what its supervisors can see. Observation forms and rubrics organized around candidate performance kept the candidate at the center; the P–12 student surfaced only where a supervisor's own history pulled attention there. Program leaders could revise observation and reflection tools so that attention to P–12 students' intersectional identities is built into what supervisors look for rather than being left to each supervisor. Observation and reflection tools could also adopt a shared equity framework, one that holds disability studies and race-conscious commitments together, as the program's stated stance rather than as one supervisor's (Annamma et al., 2013; Buchanan, 2020).

For supervisor preparation, the findings suggest that what supervisors most relied on, their previous classroom experience and their own reflective practice, is exactly what programs least often make collective. The protocols, vision statements, and check-in structures supervisors built alone are the raw material for a shared supervisor curriculum. Structured induction and ongoing communities of practice that connect supervisors across the program would let this work accumulate rather than be reinvented by each supervisor (Burns et al., 2016; Buchanan, 2020). It would also give doctoral-student supervisors, who made up more than half of this pool, a professional home for the role.

For cooperating teacher partnership, the findings suggest that the triad the institution names is not the triad that convenes. Supervisors bridged that gap through relationships they built themselves. Structured pathways for sustained cooperating-teacher engagement, including shared observation tools, joint debriefs, and compensated time, would move the bridging work from individual improvisation to institutional design (AACTE, 2018; Goldhaber et al., 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2018). Because the data here are supervisors' accounts alone, research that includes cooperating teachers and candidates is needed to understand how they experience these gaps.

Limitations

Several limitations bound these findings. The participants were 15 supervisors from a single special education teacher preparation program at a large Midwestern university, and the themes identified may not hold in programs with different institutional configurations or epistemological commitments. Moreover, participants in studies of teacher educator practice also tend to be those most invested in or reflective about that practice (Robinson, 2014), so these accounts may not represent all supervisors' reflections about the role. All data were self-reported through interviews; observation of supervisory practice would deepen the analysis, particularly of how supervisors enacted their stated goals in real time.

Conclusion

Special education university supervisors work where institutional systems, knowledge traditions, and competing demands meet. Through 15 supervisors' accounts, this study showed how they held an evaluative object while pursuing objectives that reached beyond it, building mentoring relationships, tools, and equity approaches of their own, and doing so largely alone. Designing supervisor preparation so that this agentic, boundary-crossing work becomes a shared and supported feature of special education, rather than something each supervisor builds alone, is the opportunity these findings open. Realizing it will also require further research on how supervisory praxis shapes teacher candidates and, through them, the P–12 students with disabilities whose opportunity gaps the field seeks to close, connecting the work of supervision back to the students it is ultimately meant to serve.

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is the foundation for equitable, high-quality learning and for the broader work of capacity building through strong teacher preparation. In her research she draws on multiple methodologies, with a primary focus on formative interventions informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory and third space theory.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The protocol was organized around the components of an activity system. Section headings below correspond to the CHAT constructs each cluster of questions was designed to elicit.

Perceptions of the Role and Interest

1. Please describe the experiences that led you to this role and the aspects of it that you find most rewarding.
2. Can you explain the role of mentorship in your decision to become a university supervisor and how mentorship supports your continued development in this role?

Making Meaning of Supervision (Object and Objectives)

3. Describe the qualities and skills you believe contribute to being a successful university supervisor and how you have cultivated them. Follow-up: What strategies do you employ to stay abreast of the latest trends and best practices in teacher preparation and supervision?
4. Please explain the role of assessment in your supervisory approach and how it contributes to the development of teacher candidates.
5. How do you navigate the balance between fostering teacher candidate development and upholding the expectations of your educational institution? Follow-up: How have shifts in the educational landscape influenced your role as a university supervisor in supporting teacher candidates during their fieldwork experiences?
6. Are there specific educational theories or pedagogical approaches that have gained prominence over time, and how have they influenced your work as a university supervisor?
7. Considering ongoing societal changes and educational advancements, how do you envision the future evolution of teacher preparation and its impact on the role of university supervisors? What insights or advice would you offer to those aspiring to or just beginning a role as a university supervisor?

Pedagogies and Tools of Learning How to Supervise (Mediating Tools)

8. Please share what specific training or professional development you had to prepare for your role as a university supervisor.
9. Please describe the process of transitioning from being a classroom teacher to a university supervisor and any key learning experiences along the way.
10. Please share your approach to providing feedback and support to teacher candidates during fieldwork.
11. How do you ensure that there is a clear and effective flow of information and resources between you, teacher candidates, and other stakeholders involved in teacher preparation?
12. Please share your approach to balancing consistency in your role with adapting to the changing needs of teacher candidates to foster continuous improvement and growth.
13. Describe the resources or platforms you find most valuable in supporting teacher candidates and their development and how you ensure they have access to them.

Communities They Belong To (Community)

14. Please describe your network relationships and community engagement and how they influence your supervisory role in teacher preparation. Follow-up: In your role, how do

you identify a sense of community or belonging among other teacher educators or, in the triad, fostering a supportive environment for your development?

Rules They Are Governed By (Rules)

15. Describe the established protocols or guidelines that you are asked to follow when assessing the progress and performance of teacher candidates.
16. What are your thoughts about the influence of educational policies and political decisions on teacher preparation in general and on the role of supervisors specifically?

Division of Labor

17. Can you provide examples of situations where you have had to collaborate with other educators or professionals to enhance the teacher preparation program?
18. Can you share any experiences where you had to modify your supervisory approach due to external factors or trends unrelated to teacher preparation?
19. Describe how any significant cultural or demographic shifts in the teacher candidate and P–12 student population have influenced the preparation and support of teacher candidates.