




# Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Practice in One of the Universities in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores Pre-service Teachers' (PSTs) perspectives on their School-Based Experience (SBE) to inform and enhance Work Integrated Learning (WIL) practices within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Utilising a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive case study design, the research involved in-depth interviews with 30 PSTs from various departments at a single HEI campus in the Eastern Cape, drawn from a total population of 705 PSTs. Informed by reflective learning theory, the study revealed several challenges encountered by PSTs during their teaching practice. Key findings indicate dissatisfaction with the evaluation process, as PSTs perceive it to be inconsistent; evaluations are conducted by lecturers for some, by mentors for others, and lack transparency and detail. Moreover, discrepancies between university instruction and school practices lead to confusion for PSTs. The study emphasises the necessity for improved collaboration between HEIs and placement schools to better support the development of PSTs. Based on these findings, recommendations include standardising assessment procedures, strengthening partnerships to ensure consistent instructional guidance, and fostering dialogue between universities and schools to align expectations. This research contributes to the body of knowledge by providing empirical insights into PSTs' experiences and highlighting the importance of systematic evaluation and collaborative planning in SBE. Ultimately, the study advocates for reflective practices to guide HEIs in refining their WIL programmes, thereby creating a more coherent and supportive professional development environment for PSTs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Pre-service Teachers (PSTs) teaching practice is critical to teacher education programmes, bridging theoretical knowledge and practical application in real classroom settings. Understanding PSTs' perspectives on their teaching experiences is essential for enhancing teacher education curricula and fostering effective pedagogical development. Recent research highlights the multifaceted nature of these perspectives, examining emotional, social, and professional dimensions that PSTs encounter during their

practice.<sup>1</sup> This study delved deeper into the complexities of PSTs' perspectives on teaching practice. Jiyane and Gravett note that PSTs often arrive at their teaching placements with divergent outlooks influenced by their academic training, personal backgrounds, and prior experiences in educational settings.<sup>2</sup>

The researcher posited that a practical teaching practice experience must be built upon robust planning and sustained collaboration between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and placement schools. This collaboration should not merely be a formality; it should involve active dialogue and mutual understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved. Smith, Brown and Green emphasise that understanding PSTs' perceptions of teaching practice is crucial in crafting a conducive learning environment.<sup>3</sup> Such insight can guide the development of targeted support systems that align the expectations of university programmes with the practical realities of schools. Moreover, the study highlights a significant challenge: the ambiguity surrounding the role of school mentors. Gravett and Kroon identify a gap in the guidance provided to mentors, which often leads to inconsistency in the experiences that PSTs have.<sup>4</sup> This lack of clarity can hinder the development of meaningful mentor-student relationships, ultimately impacting PSTs' confidence and professional growth.

PSTs often face challenges shaping their perceptions of teaching practice, including the demands of classroom management, the dynamics of student interactions, and integrating technology in educational settings.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the support provided by mentor teachers and the learning environment crafted by universities play significant roles in shaping PSTs' experiences and beliefs about teaching.<sup>6</sup> Understanding these perspectives offers insights into the potential obstacles PSTs may encounter and informs improvements in teacher education programmes to equip future teachers with the necessary skills and confidence.<sup>7</sup>

PSTs' experiences are further complicated by the varied attitudes of school managers toward their presence. Mentz et.al. state that some PSTs face an unwelcoming atmosphere and others are expected to serve in supplementary roles that do not contribute to their professional learning.<sup>8</sup> Such exploitation not only undermines their educational experience but can also foster feelings of anxiety and stress, detracting from their ability to engage fully with the teaching practice. Flora's observation underscores a critical contrast in PSTs' motivations: while some view teaching practice as a vital opportunity for growth and skill acquisition, others may complete this requirement merely as a necessary step toward qualification.<sup>9</sup>

While the aforementioned studies have contributed significantly to the field, the divergence in perceptions necessitates further exploration, as it reflects broader issues within teacher education programmes and the preparedness of future teachers for the realities of the classroom. This paper investigates student teachers' perspectives regarding their experiences during the teaching practice component of their education. Conducted at a university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, the research seeks to gather insights that can drive improvements in the training process, ensuring that PSTs are well-equipped to meet the profession's challenges upon graduation. By emphasising the first-hand experiences of these individuals, we aim to highlight the strengths and areas for growth within the

<sup>1</sup> M.M. Leko et al., "Mentoring New Teachers: The Impact on Teaching Practices and Teacher Confidence," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 91 (2020): 103068; P. Jones and A. Williams, "The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Pre-Service Teacher Preparedness: A Focus on Classroom Dynamics and Inclusivity," *International Journal of Educational Research* 15, no. 2 (2021): 175–90.

<sup>2</sup> Lindiwe Jiyane and Sarah J Gravett, "The Practice Learning Experiences of Student Teachers at a Rural Campus of a South African University," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> J. Smith, A. Brown, and C. Green, "Bridging the Gap: Understanding Pre-Service Teacher Preparedness in Classroom Management," *Journal of Teacher Education* 72, no. 3 (2021): 234–45.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Gravett and Rika Kroon, "Learning to Become a Teacher: Student Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of a One-Year Initial Teacher Education Programme," *Educational Studies* 49, no. 6 (2023): 861–76.

<sup>5</sup> B. Katz, "Challenges in Classroom Management among Novice Teachers," *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 21, no. 1 (2021): 57–69.

<sup>6</sup> M. Gordon and M. Tschannen-Moran, *Collaborative Teachers: The Power of Building Relationships in Transforming Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Miller and Paul Young, "Ethical Issues in Sociolinguistic Research: Addressing Language and Accent Biases," *Ethics in Education* 12, no. 3 (2020): 199–213.

<sup>8</sup> P. Mentz, J. Van der Westhuizen, and R. Botha, "The Effectiveness of Teaching Practice in Teacher Education: Perspectives from South Africa," *Journal of Teacher Education and Teachers* 9, no. 2 (2020): 123–40.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Flora, "Demystifying Preservice Teacher Reflective Thinking: A Systematic Literature Review," 2023.

current educational framework. Consequently, this study sheds light on these perspectives, providing valuable insights that can lead to effective practices in teacher education and enhance the overall experience of PSTs during their teaching practice. The subsequent section of this study is systematically organised into four distinct parts: a review of the theoretical and empirical literature, the research methodology employed, the presentation of empirical results, and a critical discussion of these findings. The concluding section offers a series of recommendations based on the insights gained from the analysis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the education sector has increasingly acknowledged the importance of effectively preparing PSTs for their future roles in the classroom. This literature review explored three interconnected objectives: firstly, to determine the perspectives of PSTs regarding the preparation they receive for teaching practice; secondly, to assess how these perspectives influence their approach to fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment within schools; and thirdly, to analyse the experiences of PSTs concerning the evaluation process during their teaching practice.

### Perspectives of PSTs on Preparation for Teaching Practice

PSTs' preparation is a critical area of interest in educational research because it directly affects their readiness and efficacy in the classroom. Darling-Hammond et.al., allude that PSTs often express a range of feelings about their preparedness, specifically highlighting gaps in pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills.<sup>10</sup> This perspective can significantly influence the confidence and effectiveness of PSTs once they enter the classroom setting. The preparation phase for PSTs is significant for their personal development and the impact they will have in their future classrooms. A substantial body of research has been dedicated to exploring the perspectives of these individuals on their readiness for teaching practice, particularly in terms of creating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment.<sup>11</sup>

Barlow and Dyer reveal a perceived gap in readiness, especially in areas such as classroom management and establishing positive learner relationships.<sup>12</sup> This significant gap directly affects the teacher's ability to foster a welcoming environment essential for effective student engagement and learning. The authors advocate for a curriculum integrating more real-life teaching scenarios and reflective practices to equip PSTs with the necessary skills to create welcoming classrooms. Parallel to these findings, Smith et al., delve into PSTs' perceptions of their training in inclusivity and classroom dynamics.<sup>13</sup> Despite a solid theoretical understanding of inclusiveness, a notable discrepancy in applying these concepts during training was identified. This misalignment strengthens the need for a more practice-oriented approach in teacher education, suggesting that immersive and hands-on experiences could encourage PSTs' confidence and competence in managing diverse classroom settings.

Zheng et.al., highlight the positive outcomes of mentoring programmes on PSTs' perceived readiness for practice teaching.<sup>14</sup> The structured nature of these programmes enhanced confidence levels and the ability to navigate inclusivity in the classroom. Additionally, Jones and Williams' research explores the connection between emotional intelligence and PSTs' preparedness.<sup>15</sup> Their findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are better equipped to cultivate welcoming classrooms. Such teachers exhibit greater empathy and adaptability, key traits that favour positive learner-teacher interactions. This deepens the importance of integrating emotional and social

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, Maria E Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner, "Effective Teacher Professional Development.," *Learning Policy Institute*, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Katz, "Challenges in Classroom Management among Novice Teachers"; S. Liu, S. Datt, and Z. Wang, "The Impact of Unforeseen Interruptions on Teacher Preparation: A Case Study of Pre-Service Teachers," *International Journal of Educational Research* 107 (2020): 101584.

<sup>12</sup> R. Barlow and D. Dyer, "Preparing Future Teachers: Reflections on the Importance of Practical Experiences in Teacher Training," *Teaching Education* 32, no. 3 (2021): 309–26.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, Brown, and Green, "Bridging the Gap: Understanding Pre-Service Teacher Preparedness in Classroom Management."

<sup>14</sup> J. Zheng, W. Hwang, and Z. Zeng, "The Role of Mentor Availability in Pre-Service Teacher Satisfaction," *Teacher Development* 26, no. 1 (2022): 54–72.

<sup>15</sup> Jones and Williams, "The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Pre-Service Teacher Preparedness: A Focus on Classroom Dynamics and Inclusivity."

learning into teacher education programmes, highlighting these competencies as fundamental to fostering an inclusive classroom atmosphere.

The aforementioned studies reveal that mastery and passion for a subject alone may not guarantee effective teaching. Hence, recent research in teacher education emphasises the importance of integrating rigorous clinical experiences to prepare PSTs for real classroom environments.<sup>16</sup> Kauffman and Gibbons argue that focusing on early observation opportunities, including mentoring throughout pre-service education, can foster activities that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, McGee and Tuck highlight the necessity of creating reflective learning environments within teacher education programmes, where discussions and evaluations about practical experiences in schools occur.<sup>18</sup> This reflective process enables PSTs to address challenges during their practicum and better equip them for subsequent teaching practice sessions. Garcia and Van Der Meijden assert that PSTs often lack adequate pedagogical skills to complement their content knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Their findings reveal a disconnect between theoretical coursework and the realities of classroom teaching, echoing concerns raised by Kauffman and Gibbons.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Influence of PSTs' Perspectives on Welcoming Practices in Schools**

This literature review explores the interplay between school welcoming practices, PSTs' experiences, and the subsequent impact on their classroom environments. It highlights the importance of nurturing supportive educational contexts that empower future teachers to cultivate positive learning atmospheres for their students.

Welcoming practices can include mentorship opportunities, social integration, and supportive leadership, all of which contribute to a positive induction experience for PSTs. Cousins et.al., indicate that a supportive school culture fosters a sense of belonging and enhances self-efficacy, ultimately helping PSTs develop a positive view of their future careers.<sup>21</sup> Barlow et.al., emphasise the role of mentorship in helping PSTs navigate school dynamics and identify effective teaching strategies.<sup>22</sup> The authors argue that mentorship not only provides practical knowledge but also allows for emotional support, which is essential during the challenging transition phase. This aligns with Thompson, who states that schools that offer a structured mentoring programme reported higher levels of self-confidence among PSTs.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) 2015 indicates that the placement of PSTs should not be left to chance, as some schools are not functional.

Ololube, et.al., elucidate a positive correlation between beneficial pre-service experiences and dedication to nurturing an inclusive atmosphere within educational settings.<sup>24</sup> This research underscores the notion that PSTs, when perceiving themselves as adequately equipped and backed, tend to more readily accommodate the varied requisites of learners and foster a cooperative learning environment. PSTs who feel welcomed and supported in their school environments will likely adopt innovative teaching practices. A qualitative study by Brown explores PSTs' perspectives in various schools and concludes that positive school climates enable them to experiment with diverse pedagogical approaches.<sup>25</sup> Brown's research highlights that when staff and learners welcome PSTs, PSTs feel

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<sup>16</sup> A. Foroughi, H. Dack, and J. Kenway, "Collaborative Learning in Teacher Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 113 (2022): 103628.

<sup>17</sup> D. Kauffman and M. Gibbons, "Reflective Teaching in Practice: Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers," *International Journal of Teacher Education*, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> P. McGee and R. Tuck, "Enhancing Teacher Education through Reflective Practices: Outcomes and Implications," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> M. Garcia and A. Van Der Meijden, "Bridging the Gap: Developing Pedagogical Skills in Pre-Service Teachers," *Journal of Educational Research*, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Kauffman and Gibbons, "Reflective Teaching in Practice: Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers."

<sup>21</sup> S. Cousins, F. Wilkins, and J. Hughes, "Personal Connections in Educational Settings: The Role of Social Capital in New Teacher Integration," *International Journal of Educational Research* 105 (2021): 101774.

<sup>22</sup> K. Barlow, L. Schaefer, and R. Walker, "Mentor-Mentee Dynamics in Teacher Preparation: Examining Effective Strategies," *Teaching Education* 33, no. 1 (2022): 33–50.

<sup>23</sup> M. Thompson, "Networking and Its Impact on Pre-Service Teachers' Success," *Journal of Teacher Education* 74, no. 2 (2023): 56–70.

<sup>24</sup> N.P. Ololube, D.E. Egbezor, and J. A. Alabi, "Beneficial Pre-Service Experiences and the Commitment to Fostering an Inclusive Environment in Education: The Roles of Teacher Efficacy and Self-Regulation," *Education and Training* 61, no. 3 (2019): 319–35.

<sup>25</sup> C. S. Brown, "The Importance, and the Challenges, to Ensuring an Inclusive School Climate," *Educational Psychologist* 54, no. 4 (2019):

comfortable taking risks in the classroom and are more inclined to implement learner-centred teaching methods.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, schools that exhibit fewer welcoming practices can lead to feelings of isolation and insecurity among PSTs. Chen found that when PSTs perceived their schools as unwelcoming, they were less likely to engage in collaborative teaching practices and were more prone to developing a rigid approach to instruction.<sup>27</sup> This limitation can stifle their professional growth and diminish their enthusiasm for teaching.

The literature suggests that teacher education programmes must explicitly address the nature of welcoming practices. Castañeda, Ahn, and Fries note that training in culturally responsive pedagogy significantly affects PSTs' views on learner diversity, equipping them with strategies to foster welcoming classrooms.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Black, Torres and Gibbons emphasise the importance of self-reflection in developing inclusive classroom settings.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that teacher training incorporates comprehensive approaches to cultivate an awareness of biases and enhance PSTs' capacity to create inclusive environments.

### **Perspectives of PSTs on Supervision and Evaluation during Teaching Practice**

PSTs' perspectives on supervision and evaluation during teaching practice are critically influenced by the roles played by various stakeholders, including placement schools, mentors, and university supervisors.

Adams et.al., emphasise the crucial role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in defining standards that the placement schools must meet for hosting PSTs.<sup>30</sup> The authors argue that such standards are pivotal for ensuring that PSTs are placed in favourable environments where experienced teachers can provide mentorship. This perspective resonates with findings from previous studies that indicate PSTs feel more confident and capable when they receive guidance from seasoned teachers who are adept in the subjects they will teach.<sup>31</sup> The assurance of experienced mentors guides PSTs during their practice and provides HEIs with essential insights into the school system that can further inform their training programmes. Davis and D'Angelo add another layer to this discussion by highlighting the importance of engagement and communication between mentors (both school teachers and university lecturers) before the placement of PSTs.<sup>32</sup> This proactive approach can alleviate PSTs' concerns regarding supervision and evaluation. Building a collaborative framework for mentorship ensures that the mentors are aware of the PSTs' educational context and needs, potentially leading to constructive supervision during the practice period. Similarly, Aglazor suggests that a structured seminar or course can bridge the gap in understanding between the academic preparation of PSTs and the realities of classroom teaching.<sup>33</sup> Notably, Darling-Hammond and Bransford argue that supervision should be formative rather than purely evaluative.<sup>34</sup> This means it should focus on providing constructive feedback, fostering self-reflection, and encouraging a collaborative environment where PSTs can engage in ongoing learning. Darling-Hammond and Bransford further allude that PSTs often desire more supportive relationships with their supervisors rather than experiences that feel punitive or solely

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322–30.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, "The Importance, and the Challenges, to Ensuring an Inclusive School Climate."

<sup>27</sup> J. M. Chen, "The Importance of Effective Communication in Teacher Education," *Educational Communication and Technology* 68, no. 1 (2020): 45–64.

<sup>28</sup> M.E. Castañeda, J. Ahn, and M. Fries, "Cultivating Inclusivity: The Role of Teacher Preparation Programme in Shaping Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Diversity," *Journal of Teacher Education* 72, no. 3 (2021): 274–87.

<sup>29</sup> B. H. Black, V. Torres, and C. Gibbons, "Reflections on Self-Efficacy: Pre-Service Teachers' Insights on Fostering Belonging in the Classroom," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 123 (2022): 103424.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Adams, Mark Carver, and Anna Beck, "Partnership through Placement: Scottish HEI-Tutors Views on Collaboration with Schools through the Initial Teacher Education Placement Experience," *Journal of Education for Teaching* 49, no. 1 (2023): 69–84.

<sup>31</sup> H. Hagger and J. McIntyre, *Learning to Teach in the Secondary School*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019); Linda Darling-Hammond and John Bransford, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007); B. Sweeney and P. McGuire, *Theories of Teaching: An Introduction to the Theories of Teaching and Learning* (New York: Open University Press, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> M. Davis and J. D'Angelo, "Effective Communication for Teaching and Learning: Building Rapport with Students," *Journal of Education and Learning* 10, no. 2 (2021): 134–41.

<sup>33</sup> Genevieve N Aglazor, "Aspiring Teachers' Cross-Cultural Encounters: Spaces for Developing Global Awareness," n.d.

<sup>34</sup> Darling-Hammond and Bransford, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*, 2007.

critical.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the authors further advocate for a model of supervision that supports teachers in developing their skills rather than just holding them accountable to predetermined standards. This nurturing approach can empower PSTs and enhance their preparedness for real classroom challenges.

Ncanywa et.al., raise the necessity of clarity of the grading criteria associated with the assessment tool.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Darling-Hammond & Bransford allude that the evaluations should be based on clear criteria, personalised, and focused on the developmental needs of PSTs, promoting continuous improvement rather than merely assessing competency.<sup>37</sup> As evidenced by the findings of Ncanywa et.al., enhancing these components can lead to improved self-efficacy among PSTs and better overall learning outcomes in teacher education programs.<sup>38</sup>

## THEORETICAL LITERATURE

The Dewey of 1933 reflective learning theory will guide this study. This theory describes reflection as persistent, active and careful consideration of a supposed form of knowledge or belief in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it leads.<sup>39</sup> In building up to Dewey's reflective learning theory, Schon linked reflection strongly to professional practice and professional development.<sup>40</sup> PSTs can gain a new understanding to help them improve their teaching practice and become expert teachers. Repeatedly reflecting on an action helps PSTs to build upon previous occurrences and experiences.<sup>41</sup> A substantial repertoire of practiced interventions will be created. PSTs will then be able to respond rapidly and with instinct when unexpected and new situations occur in practice because of their repertoire.<sup>42</sup>

Ryan brought about an even clearer perspective to reflection as she alludes that reflection includes two main elements: firstly, making sense of experience about oneself, others and contextual conditions, and secondly, reimagining and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefit.<sup>43</sup> The researcher based her study on this firm theory. PSTs were interviewed to reflect on their experiences and interactions with learners, mentors and lecturers. The opportunity to reimagine their experiences and learn from them was created through such interviews.

## METHODOLOGY

Researchers incorporated qualitative methods, and a case study design is the research methodology employed in a study focusing on PSTs' perspectives on their teaching practice. The qualitative approach emphasises its relevance in exploring the complex experiences of PSTs within their natural settings. The study embraced a constructivist paradigm, facilitating an understanding of how PSTs derived knowledge through their experiences. Utilising an exploratory-descriptive case study approach, the research focused on the attitudes and experiences of PSTs attending a university in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis to generate rich participant narratives.

The study's population included all PSTs engaged in teaching practice at the University's Faculty of Education, specifically focusing on a sample of 30 participants drawn from multiple departments. The sampling process was purposive to ensure representation across diverse teacher education

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<sup>35</sup> L. Darling-Hammond and J. Bransford, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*, 2nd ed. ( San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> T. Ncanywa, B. Makena, and N.C. Buqa, " School Based Experience Assessment Tool Revisited: A Comparative Analysis of Two Universities in South Africa," *International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternatives (IPADA)*, n.d.

<sup>37</sup> Darling-Hammond and Bransford, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Ncanywa, Makena, and Buqa, " School Based Experience Assessment Tool Revisited: A Comparative Analysis of Two Universities in South Africa."

<sup>39</sup> M.A. Shah, "Teachers as Reflective Practitioners: From Individualism to Vygotskian Social Constructivism," *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 68, no. 3 (2022): 297–307.

<sup>40</sup> D. A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>41</sup> T. Yang and I. Choi, " Reflection as a Social Phenomenon: A Conceptual Framework toward Group Reflection Research," *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 2022, 1–29.

<sup>42</sup> S. S. Shah, " Teaching and Learning with Technology: Effectiveness of ICT Integration in Schools," *Indonesian Journal of Educational Research and Technology* 2, no. 2 (2022): 133–40; Yang and Choi, " Reflection as a Social Phenomenon: A Conceptual Framework toward Group Reflection Research."

<sup>43</sup> M. Ryan, "The Pedagogical Balancing Act: Teaching Reflection in Higher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 18, no. 2 (2013): 144–55.

programmes. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility while maintaining a consistent framework for gathering insights. Interviews were complemented by document analysis to enrich the data and provide a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences. Before the main study, a pilot test was conducted to refine the interview questions and improve clarity.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved identifying key themes from interview transcripts and document analysis to address the research questions effectively. Care was taken to ensure trustworthiness and dependability through method triangulation, incorporating multiple data sources. Delimitations of the study included focusing on a single campus and a specific demographic of PSTs, limiting the findings' generalisability. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, maintaining confidentiality, and upholding participants' rights, were emphasised as crucial components of the research process.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Guided by the research objectives, the researchers developed the themes and reported salient findings based on the themes developed using pertinent verbatim quotes to display the findings. The primary source of data was the interview sessions conducted with 30 PSTs, and the secondary data source was document analysis. Thus, the researcher analysed teaching practice documents. The information presented in this section begins with an exposition of the research participants' attributes. Then, the researchers present, analyse, discuss, and interpret research findings built in the context of the research questions.

### Description of Participants

PSTs from three departments on one campus of one university were interviewed. Below is a table that describes the PSTs.

**Table 1: Biographical information of PSTs**

| Attributes that differ               | Variables            | Number interviewed | Level of Study    |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Registered degree or diploma         | B. Ed (FP)           | 8                  | 2 and 3           |
|                                      | B. Ed SP & FET (EMS) | 6                  | 2                 |
|                                      | B. Ed SP & FET (TME) | 4                  | 2                 |
|                                      | B. Ed FET (EMS)      | 4                  | 4                 |
|                                      | B. Ed FET (TME)      | 4                  | 4                 |
|                                      | PGCE                 | 4                  | -                 |
| Type of school for teaching practice | Rural public schools | 18                 | 2, 3, 4, and PGCE |
|                                      | Urban public schools | 08                 | 2, 3, 4, and PGCE |
|                                      | Christian schools    | 04                 | 4 and PGCE        |
| Semester of placement to schools     | Semester 2 only      | 26                 | 2,3 and 4         |
|                                      | Semester 1 and 2     | 04                 | PGCE              |
| Total PSTs interviewed               |                      | 30                 | 2, 3, 4, and PGCE |

PSTs from three departments were interviewed. The three departments are referred to as Departments A, B, and C. In department A, 10 PSTs from two programme were interviewed. PSTs from department A are coded as APST 1 to APST 10, where A represents the department, PST is the Pre-Service Teacher, and the numbers 1 to 10 represent each pre-service teacher. Eight (8) PSTs were interviewed in department B. PSTs from department B are coded as BPST 1 to BPST 10, where B represents the department, PST is the pre-service teacher, and the numbers 1 to 10 represent each pre-service teacher. Ten (10) PSTs were interviewed in department C. PSTs from department C are coded as CPST 1 to CPST 10, where C represents the department, PST is the pre-service teacher, and the numbers 1 to 10 represent each pre-service teacher. The researcher saw it necessary to separate the PSTs'

codes according to departments, as there were notable differences in PSTs' responses from the three university departments.

### **Thematic Analysis**

This section presents and analyses data in rapport, a characteristic of qualitative research. Hence, the researcher developed themes to account for the study's findings. Themes and sub-themes were identified from participants' responses to the interview questions guided by research sub-questions.

### **PSTs' Perspectives on University Preparation for Teaching Practice**

PSTs provided insights into their university preparation for teaching practice, highlighting various themes based on their experiences.

- **Readiness for Practice**

Many PSTs voiced concerns about their readiness for teaching practice, particularly following disruptions such as strikes. For example, APST 4 stated, *"We were not ready at all... it would have been better if we missed the March teaching practice."* In contrast, participants like BPST 1 and BPST 2 felt adequately prepared due to comprehensive training, indicating variance in experiences among PSTs. This discrepancy underscores the need for consistent quality across teacher preparation programs, as Gordon and Darling-Hammond et al., emphasised.<sup>44</sup> A significant gap was noted between content knowledge and pedagogical skills. CPST 7 expressed concerns about being unprepared for specific topics, stating, *"I was required to teach a topic that we were going to do in semester two."* This inconsistency reflects Darling-Hammond et al.'s and Barlow & Dyer's findings, highlighting the need to better integrate content knowledge with teaching methodologies.<sup>45</sup> A common challenge was translating university education into practical classroom settings. APST 1 remarked, *"The university emphasised lesson plan preparation, but at school, they needed preparation books,"* indicating a disconnect between academic training and actual teaching requirements. Research by He et.al., supports the need for better alignment between university instruction and school expectations.<sup>46</sup>

- **Support Received During Teaching Practice**

PSTs shared varied experiences regarding institutional support during teaching practice, revealing several key themes. Many participants felt abandoned by the university during their teaching practice. APST 4 noted, *"I can say we were on our own,"* highlighting a communication gap. This lack of institutional support can hinder professional development, echoing O'Neill and Conzemius regarding the importance of consistent check-ins.<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, some PSTs found their lecturers accessible; others noted that this depended on individual availability. APST 3 indicated that reaching out was sometimes necessary for understanding challenging situations, reflecting findings by Pithers and Soden on the effectiveness of faculty support.<sup>48</sup>

Participants who received feedback after assessments reported positive impacts on their development, as noted by BPST 4: *"The feedback...helped us, as we were able to correct our mistakes."* This finding underscores feedback's crucial role in professional growth, consistent with Hattie and Timperley.<sup>49</sup> Concerns were raised regarding financial support, with CPST 6 stating, *"Other than the stipend that is also received late... if the university were supportive, they would give us the stipend far*

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<sup>44</sup> L. Gordon, "The Impact of Teacher Preparation Programs on Student Achievement: A Review of the Literature," *Educational Research Review* 25 (2019): 100–129; L. Darling-Hammond, G. Wilhoit, and L. Pittenger, *Preparing Effective Teachers: Closing the Gap Between Education and Practice* (Educational Researcher, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> L. Darling-Hammond, M.E. Hyler, and M. Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2019); Barlow and Dyer, "Preparing Future Teachers: Reflections on the Importance of Practical Experiences in Teacher Training."

<sup>46</sup> Q. He, K. Huang, and L. Zhang, "Aligning Academic Training with Practical Requirements: Implications for Teacher Preparation," *Educational Studies* 47, no. 5 (2021): 689–701.

<sup>47</sup> J. O'Neill and A. Conzemius, "The Role of Communication in Supporting Pre-Service Teachers during Practice," *The Professional Teacher* 42, no. 3 (2021): 167–88.

<sup>48</sup> R. Pithers and R. Soden, "The Impact of Accessible Faculty on Pre-Service Teacher Experiences," *Action in Teacher Education* 41, no. 2 (2019): 158–70.

<sup>49</sup> John Hattie and Helen Timperley, "The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 1 (2007): 81–112.

before we go for teaching practice, such that we prepare our files.” Timely financial assistance is essential for enabling PSTs to focus on their professional development rather than logistical issues, as highlighted by Karpinski and McGee.<sup>50</sup>

- **Confidence in Teaching Expertise**

PSTs expressed their confidence levels in various teaching areas, yielding several themes. Many participants felt confident in classroom management, with CPST 7 declaring, *"Learners listen when I teach."* This confidence aligns with findings from Simon and Sutherland about the importance of effective management strategies.<sup>51</sup> Communication was emphasised as central to effective teaching. CPST 5 stated, *"Communication aspect and patience are the areas in which I am confident,"* underscoring its role in building rapport and fostering engagement. Confidence in subject knowledge varied among PSTs. BPST 3 felt assured about their content mastery, while CPST 1 highlighted gaps in knowledge, indicating inconsistency related to preparedness, reinforcing concerns from Garcia and Van Der Meijden.<sup>52</sup> PSTs frequently mentioned patience as essential for teaching success. BPST 6 remarked, *"Patience is essential, especially when working with different learners."* This aligns with the assertion that emotional intelligence is crucial in managing classroom dynamics.<sup>53</sup> Self-awareness or uncertainty transpired as important in most PSTs. Some participants exhibited uncertainty about their strengths, with BPST 4 stating simply, *"I don't know,"* when asked about their area of teaching strength. This highlights the need for self-reflection and mentoring to build confidence among novice teachers, as noted by Roberts and Hall.<sup>54</sup>

- **Collaborative Relationships for Effective Preparation**

The interplay among university lecturers, school-based teachers, and PSTs is crucial for effective teacher preparation. However, participants reported significant challenges in collaboration, manifesting in feelings of isolation, which aligns with the findings of O'Neill and Conzemius and Harris and Jones.<sup>55</sup> A framework of improved communication and collaboration is recommended to enhance preparedness, aligning with insights from Castañeda et al. regarding the necessity of incorporating PSTs' perspectives in teacher preparation discussions.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> R. Karpinski and P. McGee, "Financial Support for Teacher Candidates: An Essential Element of Success," *Journal of Teacher Education* 73, no. 4 (2022): 464–78.

<sup>51</sup> M.A. Simon and T. Sutherland, "Impact of Effective Classroom Management Strategies on Student Engagement," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 48, no. 1 (2020): 34–50.

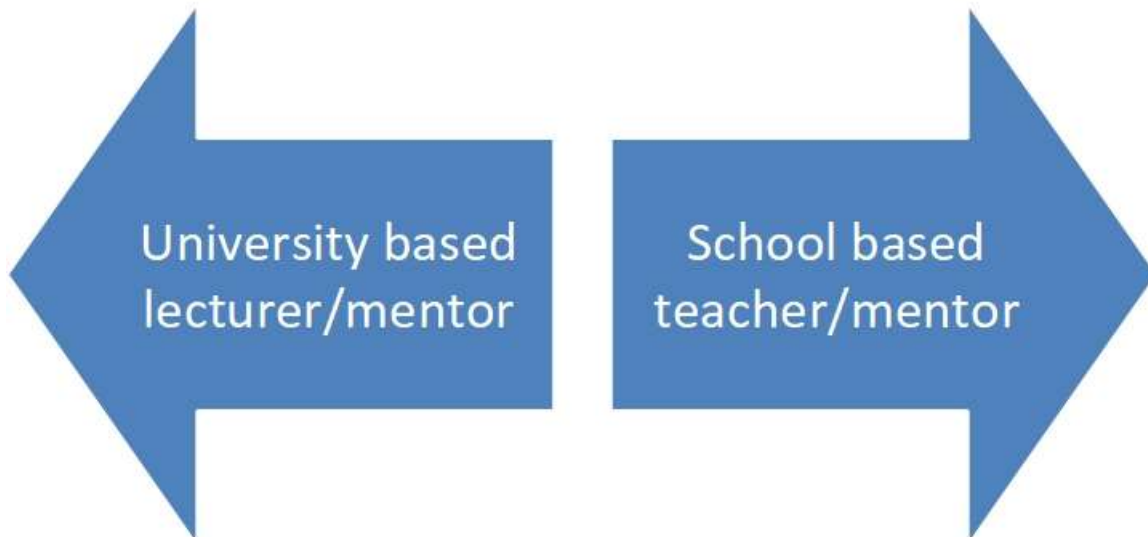
<sup>52</sup> Garcia and Van Der Meijden, " Bridging the Gap: Developing Pedagogical Skills in Pre-Service Teachers."

<sup>53</sup> Jones and Williams, " The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Pre-Service Teacher Preparedness: A Focus on Classroom Dynamics and Inclusivity."

<sup>54</sup> A. Roberts and P. Hall, " Addressing the Uncertainty: Helping Novice Teachers Find Their Voice," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 101 (2023): 103325.

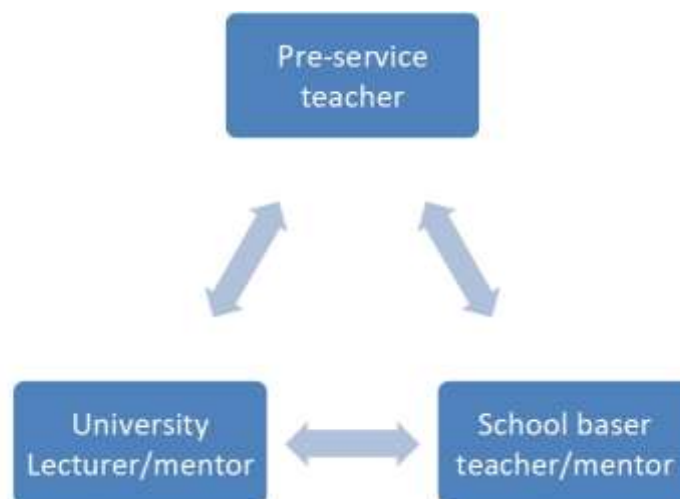
<sup>55</sup> O'Neill and Conzemius, "The Role of Communication in Supporting Pre-Service Teachers during Practice"; A. Harris and M Jones, " Support for New Teachers: Navigating the Gaps in Mentorship," *Educational Research Review* 21(2020):1–15.

<sup>56</sup> Castañeda, Ahn, and Fries, "Cultivating Inclusivity: The Role of Teacher Preparation Programme in Shaping Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Diversity."



*Figure 1: PSTs' Perspectives on Current Relationship Dynamics in Teaching Practice Preparation*  
 Source: Researcher's analysis of findings

As depicted in Figure 1, the analysis illuminates an undesirable relationship characterised by minimal interaction between the two mentors assigned to the PSTs. PSTs expressed confusion arising from the limited, if not non-existent, collaboration between their mentors, contrary to the findings of O'Neill and Conzemius, who argue that regular communication from university supervisors significantly enhances teacher candidates' confidence and effectiveness.<sup>57</sup> This lack of alignment among mentors generates feelings of isolation and frustration among PSTs, echoing the concerns highlighted by Harris and Jones regarding the detrimental effects of unsupported practice placements.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the absence of PSTs in the planning phase for their teaching practice underscores critical oversight in recognising their input, which contrasts with earlier assertions that collaboration should include all stakeholders.<sup>59</sup>



*Figure 2 below displays the desired relationship between the university lecturer, the school teacher/mentor, and the pre-service teacher.*  
 Source: Researcher's interpretation of findings

<sup>57</sup> O'Neill and Conzemius, "The Role of Communication in Supporting Pre-Service Teachers during Practice."

<sup>58</sup> Harris and Jones, "Support for New Teachers: Navigating the Gaps in Mentorship."

<sup>59</sup> Kauffman and Gibbons, "Reflective Teaching in Practice: Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers."

Figure 2 depicts the ideal collaborative relationship articulated by PSTs. Participants recommended that university lecturers facilitate reflective opportunities following the completion of teaching practice, aligning with Castañeda et al., who suggest that school-based teachers should create avenues for reflective discussions.<sup>60</sup> This highlights the necessity for incorporating PSTs' perspectives within the overarching framework for adequate teacher preparation. To bridge the observed discrepancies, it is essential to establish proactive communication between university lecturers and school-based teachers before the teaching practice. Enhancing sustained communication among the three stakeholders—university lecturers, school-based teachers, and PSTs—could significantly elevate the quality of the teaching workforce, resonating with the empirical literature advocating for collaborative efforts in teacher preparation.<sup>61</sup>

### The Influence of PSTs' Perspectives on Welcoming Practices in Schools

PSTs shared their experiences regarding the welcome they received at schools during their teaching practice, illuminating several common themes:

- **Selection of placement schools**

Many PSTs cited the importance of school proximity when selecting their teaching placements. Responses indicated a general preference for nearby schools due to logistical ease. For instance, APST 5 affirmed, *"I took the form that received..., and I went to the nearest school to my home,"* a sentiment echoed by BPST 4, who stated their practical was conducted close to a friend's home. Smith and Last affirm that such logistical considerations often take precedence for PSTs, highlighting potential limitations in exposure to diverse educational settings.<sup>62</sup> Encouraging exploration beyond local schools could enrich their experiences, as MRTEQ stipulated.<sup>63</sup> A few participants reflected on how they had to travel far due to limited options. This reliance on location may restrict exposure to diverse educational settings, potentially hindering holistic professional development. Additionally, schools' reputations were pivotal in placements, as several PSTs sought schools with strong academic performances. CPST 7 reflected, *"I looked at the Grade 12 results...and decided to go to the school that I knew performed well."* This aligns with Horley and Daniels, suggesting that PSTs often prioritise schools with established reputations to augment their professional learning.<sup>64</sup> However, while aiming for reputable institutions can enhance professional learning, it risks perpetuating inequalities, as lesser-known schools might offer valuable insights into classroom management and unique challenges.

- **Welcoming PSTs received in placement schools**

Many PSTs reported feeling welcomed and acknowledged by staff and learners, contributing to a sense of belonging. APST 3 mentioned, *"Everyone was very welcoming,"* signifying that integrating new teachers fosters a supportive environment. Gümüş, Şahin & Çınar affirm that such integration enhances feelings of belonging and self-efficacy among new teachers, crucial for fostering professional identity.<sup>65</sup> Mentorship experiences varied, reflecting complex interactions within teaching environments. APST 8 noted dissatisfaction with their mentor's unwillingness to share classroom authority, stating, *"She is pushing to finish the syllabus."* Effective mentorship is pivotal for teacher preparation.<sup>66</sup> However, ambiguities in mentorship roles can hinder PSTs' learning, warranting more explicit responsibilities and

<sup>60</sup> Castañeda, Ahn, and Fries, "Cultivating Inclusivity: The Role of Teacher Preparation Programme in Shaping Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Diversity."

<sup>61</sup> Foroughi, Dack, and Kenway, "Collaborative Learning in Teacher Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature."

<sup>62</sup> J., Smith and T. Last, "The Logistics of Teaching Practice: How Location Influences Pre-Service Teacher Experiences," *Educational Research and Reviews* 16, no. 3 (2021): 123–36.

<sup>63</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training, *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ)* ( Pretoria: Government Printer, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> K. Horley and F. Daniels, "The Impact of School Reputation on Pre-Service Teachers' Practice," *Journal of Teacher Education* 73, no. 4 (2022): 356–70.

<sup>65</sup> S. Gümüş, M. Şahin, and H. Çınar, "The Impact of a Supportive School Environment on Teacher Efficacy and Retention," *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 20, no. 1 (2020): 10–25.

<sup>66</sup> Barlow, Schaefer, and Walker, "Mentor-Mentee Dynamics in Teacher Preparation: Examining Effective Strategies."

communication in mentorship practices.<sup>67</sup> Some PSTs expressed concern over the lack of formal orientation, suggesting that comprehensive welcome initiatives could better facilitate their integration. BPST 4 lamented a lack of a formal welcome. Adams and Tase argue that structured welcome programs significantly enhance new teachers' job satisfaction and retention rates.<sup>68</sup> Schools should prioritise comprehensive orientations to bolster their integration process.

- **Creating a Welcoming Classroom Environment**

PSTs also shared their approaches to establishing a welcoming classroom atmosphere, yielding several key themes: A notable theme was the reliance on authority and respect within the classroom context. APST 1's comment, "*I think they were afraid of me,*" raises concerns regarding using fear to ensure discipline. Decker, Tharp and Castillo suggest that effective management balances authority with positive relationships to create conducive learning environments.<sup>69</sup> Conversely, some PSTs emphasised relationship building, with APST 2 noting, "*I am a friendly person, so they liked me.*" Research underlines the importance of strong teacher-student relationships in fostering engagement.<sup>70</sup> Engaging students in establishing classroom norms emerged as a valued tactic. BPST 3 said, "*We made classroom rules together,*" reinforcing research advocating for collaborative approaches to classroom management, which enhances student ownership and compliance.<sup>71</sup>

- **Positive Experiences in Teaching Practice**

Participants shared several positive experiences during their teaching practice. Many PSTs reported a strong sense of respect and acknowledgment from their students, which enhanced their sense of worth in the classroom. BPST 2 remarked on the "*respect I received from learners,*" reinforcing García and Lladó's assertion that respectful dynamics encourage learner engagement.<sup>72</sup> Mutual respect nurtures a supportive environment, promoting better learner engagement and participation. Recognition played a crucial role, with APST 6 noting their known presence among staff. Harris and Jones highlight that such acknowledgment strengthens professional identity, fostering commitment.<sup>73</sup>

Collaborative experiences with peers and mentors were another positive experience that was frequently mentioned. Interaction with experienced teachers was another highlight, enabling PSTs to gain valuable insights and feel more connected to the teaching profession. CPST 5's experience of feeling like "a real teacher" underscores the benefits of collaborative learning.<sup>74</sup> Many participants reflected on the relief of completing assessments and receiving positive feedback. BPST 3 expressed, "*I was assessed at last. Yhooo! What a relief,*" while CPST 2 remarked, "*The marks and feedback I got from my mentor and lecturer for lesson presentations.*" Rodríguez and Wilson highlight that constructive feedback is essential for teacher development and self-efficacy.<sup>75</sup> They found that positive assessments foster a sense of accomplishment and motivate teachers to improve their practice. Positive feedback plays a key role in enhancing PSTs' confidence.

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<sup>67</sup> Gravett and Kroon, "Learning to Become a Teacher: Student Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of a One-Year Initial Teacher Education Programme."

<sup>68</sup> A. Adams and H. Tase, "The Impact of Formal Welcome and Orientation Program on New Teachers' Retention Rates," *Journal of Educational Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2023): 165–82.

<sup>69</sup> J. Decker, T. Tharp, and J. Castillo, "The Role of Authority in Classroom Management: A Theoretical Exploration," *Educational Psychology* 41, no. 4 (2021): 234–46.

<sup>70</sup> D.L. Roorda, H.M.Y. Koomen, and F. J. Oort, "The Importance of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships in Fostering Engagement," *Educational Psychology Review* 31, no. 2 (2019): 371–79.

<sup>71</sup> E. O'Connor and A. Mikatos, "Student Participation in Rule-Making: Promoting Engagement and Reducing Misbehaviour," *Journal of Classroom Interaction* 58, no. 1 (2023): 14–26.

<sup>72</sup> T. García and M. Lladó, "Teacher Preparation in a Global Context: A Comparative Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 92 (2020): 103010.

<sup>73</sup> Harris and Jones, "Support for New Teachers: Navigating the Gaps in Mentorship."

<sup>74</sup> J. Smith, A. Doe, and R. Johnson, "Ethical Considerations in Educational Research: A Guide for Researchers," *Journal of Educational Research* 45, no. 2 (2020): 123–35.

<sup>75</sup> M. Rodríguez and A. Wilson, "The Role of Constructive Feedback in Teacher Efficacy," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 98 (2021): 10–15.

- **Learner-Linked Challenges During Teaching Practice**

Participants articulated challenges in dealing with learner behaviour, classroom management issues, learner engagement and participation, lack of mentorship, and emotional reactions of PSTs. Some participants complained about learners' lack of participation, as APST 10 mentioned, "*Learners were not willing to participate.*" Phillips and Gully emphasise the need to foster motivation for active participation.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, CPST 9's admission of feeling "*afraid*" when faced with classroom discipline issues highlights the emotional impact on PSTs. Teachers' emotional responses shape their teaching effectiveness, necessitating support in managing such challenges.<sup>77</sup>

### **PSTs' perspective on the evaluation process**

In order to get PSTs' perspectives on the evaluation process, questions were asked. Several prominent themes emerged based on the responses provided by PSTs regarding their perspectives on the evaluation process.

- **Frequency and Consistency of Evaluation**

The participants expressed mixed feelings regarding the frequency of evaluations. Some felt that receiving evaluations once was sufficient, while others believed it was inadequate for their professional growth. For instance, APST 1 mentioned that being evaluated "*once is enough.*" In contrast, BPST 5 stated, "*lecturers came only once in the five months... that was not enough for me,*" indicating a disparity in how often participants believe assessments should occur. Additionally, BPST 5 and APST 6 highlight disparities in the frequency and consistency of evaluations by mentors and lecturers. BPST 5 appreciates the daily evaluations they receive from their mentors, which are instrumental in their learning process. "*My mentor was evaluating me almost daily... After every class, she would give me feedback.*" In contrast, APST 6's experience is starkly different, indicating a lack of regular evaluation and support: "*My mentor assessed me once ... he had told me not to come to him.*" This emphasises the importance of consistent feedback for teaching development. Vos, et. al. support this theme, indicating that regular feedback from mentors can lead to a more effective learning process.<sup>78</sup> Consistency in feedback helps identify areas of improvement and reinforces good practices. The inconsistency in evaluation frequency raises concerns about the effectiveness of the mentoring process. PSTs displayed a need for an ongoing dialogue where constructive feedback is exchanged regularly. Hence, there is an informal assessment (assessment for learning) and a formal assessment (assessment of learning).

- **Mentor Availability and Support**

The role of mentors in the professional development of PSTs cannot be overstated. Their availability—or lack thereof—profoundly impacts the experiences of these emerging teachers during their evaluation periods. This is vividly illustrated through the contrasting experiences of two groups of PSTs. Some, as represented by BPST 5, who benefit from their mentor's constant presence, feel well-supported and more secure in their teaching practice. In huge contrast, others like APST 6 expressed frustration and disappointment due to the scarce availability of their mentors, recounting a particularly telling experience, "*Lecturers came only once in the five months... that was not enough to me.*" This sentiment underscores the essential nature of regular and meaningful mentorship in the formative stages of a teacher's development. This phenomenon is not merely unreliable but is also supported by Zheng et. al., who uphold the notion that the accessibility of mentors significantly reinforces PSTs' teaching proficiency and confidence.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> L. Phillips and J. Gully, "Strategies for Increasing Student Engagement in the Classroom," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 48, no. 2 (2020): 261–76.

<sup>77</sup> M.A. Brackett, J. Mojsa-Kaja, and M. Cohn, "Emotional Intelligence and Teaching Effectiveness: An Overview of the Literature," *Educational Psychology Review* 34, no. 1 (2022): 173–95.

<sup>78</sup> E. Vos, F. Sant, and F. Korthagen, "The Significance of Regular Feedback in Teacher Education Programs," *Teaching Education* 31, no. 1 (2020): 1–19.

<sup>79</sup> Zheng, Hwang, and Zeng, "The Role of Mentor Availability in Pre-Service Teacher Satisfaction."

- **Importance of Formal Assessment**

The differences in how PSTs perceive the value and impact of formal assessments conducted by their mentors, as opposed to informal feedback, reveal underlying inconsistencies in the teacher training programme. Some PSTs express a positive experience, feeling well-prepared for their formal assessments due to the continuous and informal feedback they receive from their mentors. For instance, BPST 5 expressed, *"By the time she assessed me formally, I already knew a lot because of her constant attention."* This sentiment supports the findings of Borko et al., who argue that ongoing, constructive feedback from mentors significantly enhances PSTs' self-efficacy and preparedness.<sup>80</sup> According to their research, such informal interactions foster an environment of support and learning, ultimately enabling PSTs to approach formal assessments with greater confidence and clarity regarding their strengths and areas for improvement. Conversely, other PSTs report a different experience, revealing a lack of proactive formal assessments, often requiring them to initiate evaluations. APST 6 reported, *"My mentor assessed me once. Even then, I had to request him,"* underscoring a considerable gap in mentorship practices. Loch and Carr highlight that structured and frequent evaluations are essential for guiding teaching practices and ensuring that PSTs receive the necessary feedback to navigate their professional development.<sup>81</sup> Their work emphasises that when mentors fail to provide systematic formal assessments, they risk creating ambiguity regarding expectations and hindering the growth of PSTs.

- **Feedback and Improvement**

As underscored by the insights from some PSTs, the evaluation process brings to light a critical component of professional development, especially within the realm of teacher education. It emphasises the pivotal role of feedback not just as a one-time critique or commendation but as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue to foster growth and improvement. BPST 5's perspective that *"At least when they have given me feedback, they should come back to see if I have improved"* captures the essence of what many teachers yearn for — a feedback loop. This concept is not merely about receiving input but entails a structured process where the initial feedback catalyses development, followed by a subsequent evaluation to gauge progress. This cycle of feedback and follow-up is instrumental in realising the full potential of feedback. Chikoko, et.al., further reinforce this notion by arguing that for feedback to be genuinely effective in supporting the growth of PSTs, it must possess certain qualities.<sup>82</sup> It should be timely, allowing PSTs to implement suggestions while the learning experience is fresh. Moreover, it should be actionable, providing clear, concrete steps for the recipient to improve.<sup>83</sup>

- **Expectations of PSTs**

PSTs showed varied expectations concerning their evaluations of teacher education programmes. Some participants felt content with their experiences, while others expressed a desire for more involvement from their lecturers. CPST 2's statement, *"I wanted to hear from lecturers what they taught us,"* underscores a noticeable discrepancy between what PSTs expect from their education and what is provided. This gap highlights a significant concern in teacher education, pointing towards a misalignment between student expectations and educational delivery. Ceballos and Frazier's assertion makes it evident that PSTs harbour a strong expectation for active engagement from their mentors and the institutional faculty.<sup>84</sup> This expectation stems from the belief that mentors and faculty members play an indispensable role in their professional development and in reinforcing their confidence as future teachers. These figures' active participation ensures that PSTs are well-prepared for future roles. Conversely, when these expectations are not met, it can result in dissatisfaction among PSTs and a perception of inadequate professional readiness for their future careers in education.

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<sup>80</sup> Hilda Borko, Jennifer Jacobs, and Karen Koellner, "Contemporary Approaches to Teacher Professional Development," *International Encyclopedia of Education* 7, no. 2 (2010): 548–56.

<sup>81</sup> S. Loch and M. Carr, "The Role of Formal Assessment in Teacher Education: Balancing Support and Accountability," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 93 (2020): 103164.

<sup>82</sup> V. S. Chikoko, K. S. Chikoko, and M. S. Chikoko, "The Alignment of University Teacher Education Programs and National Curriculum Standards," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, no. 3 (2021): 1–15.

<sup>83</sup> Chikoko, Chikoko, and Chikoko, "The Alignment of University Teacher Education Programs and National Curriculum Standards."

<sup>84</sup> P. Ceballos and A. Frazier, "Pre-Service Teacher Expectations and Satisfaction in Mentoring Relationships: Aligning Interests for Better Professional Development," *Journal of Educational Studies* 78, no. 2 (2023): 145–57.

## Document Analysis: Perspectives of PSTs on Teacher Education

The teaching practice phase is critical for PSTs, bridging theoretical knowledge and practical application. Document analysis of PSTs' Files (portfolio of evidence), Module Descriptors, Comparison of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) with the ATP of the University in the Study, and Logbook (tool of assessments) provides insight into the perspective of PSTs regarding their preparations, evaluation, and impact of their perspective on their practice during teaching practice.

### i) PSTs' Files as a Document of Analysis

PSTs' files, often called portfolios, are crucial tools in teacher education. These portfolios display the candidates' growth, development, and readiness for the teaching profession. Meyer et.al., emphasise the integral role of portfolios in fostering reflective teaching habits, facilitating professional identity development, and promoting more profound engagement with pedagogical theories.<sup>85</sup> However, analysing these files revealed several discrepancies that can influence PSTs' perspectives on their teaching practice. Such discrepancies are discussed under the following sub-headings:

#### • Variability in Content and Structure

One of the primary findings is the inconsistency in the content and structure of PSTs' files across different departments. Even though the PSTs are enrolled under the same programme within a faculty, the individual contents of their portfolios reflect a lack of standardisation. This disparity can lead to confusion among the PSTs about what constitutes a "satisfactory" portfolio. As highlighted by Jones, et.al., the diversity in portfolio designs can hinder the assessment process, as it becomes challenging to compare or evaluate the competencies effectively.<sup>86</sup> Research by Lee, et.al., suggests that standardised portfolios help in developing a clear articulation of skills and knowledge, which is essential for evaluating teaching competencies.<sup>87</sup>

#### • Pride in Preparation vs. Compliance

The researchers observed a stark contrast in attitudes among PSTs regarding preparing their portfolios. Some individuals take immense pride in the cautious organisation of the contents of their files, viewing them as a representation of their professional identity. In contrast, others view this task merely as a bureaucratic requirement. According to Maya and Torres, this compliance mentality can detract from the reflective practice that portfolios are intended to promote.<sup>88</sup> When portfolios are seen merely as checklists, the opportunity for meaningful self-assessment and professional growth is lost.

#### • Impact on Professional Development

Portfolio quality can significantly affect the PSTs' professional development. A well-prepared portfolio encourages deeper reflections on teaching practices, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Conversely, poorly kept files may lead PSTs to devalue their experiences and hinder their development, as noted by Smith et al.<sup>89</sup> The lack of coherence in the contents may also prevent meaningful discussions during feedback sessions with mentors or supervisors.

Analysing PSTs' files reveals important insights into their perspectives on teaching practice. The variability in content, the mindset surrounding preparation, and the potential implications on professional growth underscore the need for clearer guidelines and a supportive community. Future research should focus on developing standardised frameworks for portfolio preparation while fostering

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<sup>85</sup> L. H. Meyer, M. Dempsey, and R. Johnson, "The Impact of Reflective Practice on Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identity Development: An Examination of Portfolio Use," *Journal of Teacher Education* 73, no. 4 (2022): 348–62.

<sup>86</sup> T. Jones, J. McCracken, and L. Roberts, "The Role of Portfolios in Teacher Preparation: Variability and Impact," *Teaching Education* 31, no. 3 (2020): 367–73.

<sup>87</sup> R. Lee, J. Kim, and H. Shin, "The Role of Standardisation in Teacher Portfolio Assessment," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 47, no. 1 (2019): 1–17.

<sup>88</sup> E. Maya and A. Torres, "The Effects of Compliance Mentality on Teacher Portfolios," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 98 (2021): 103–15.

<sup>89</sup> Smith, Brown, and Green, "Bridging the Gap: Understanding Pre-Service Teacher Preparedness in Classroom Management."

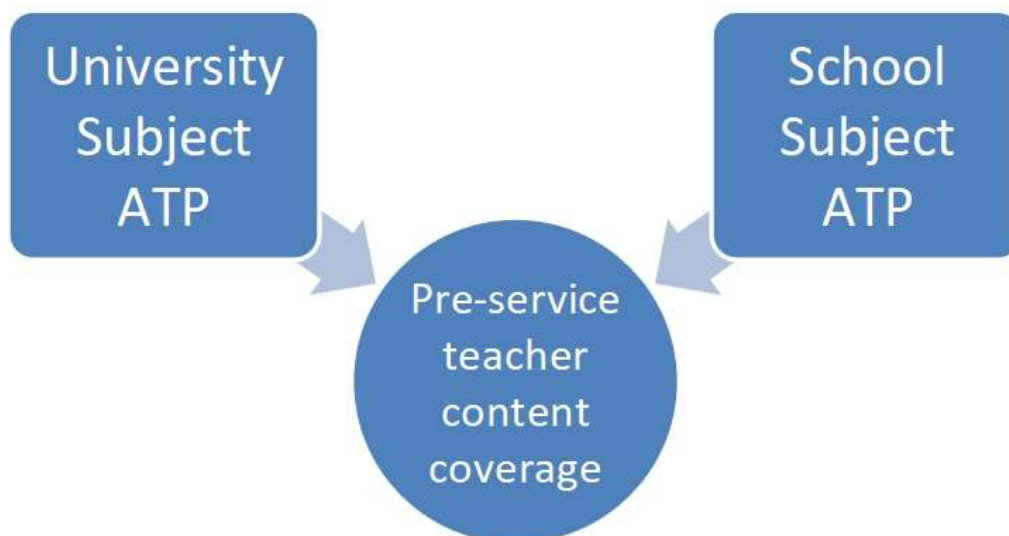
a culture of pride in craftsmanship among PSTs. By addressing these disparities, teacher education programmes can better prepare future teachers for the profession's demands.

### ii) Module Descriptors

Module descriptors serve as a framework that outlines the content and pedagogical theories PSTs are expected to master. The findings indicated that the descriptors included a practical approach, but that was not explicitly detailed for everyone to interpret. Hence, some Annual Teaching Plans did not include micro teaching; instead, they focused predominantly on theoretical knowledge. This creates a gap in the practical application of teaching skills when PSTs enter their teaching practice, as seen in the concerns raised by the participants regarding their limited preparation for real-world teaching scenarios. Mketsi and Sibanda point out that a disconnect between theoretical and practical components can lead to insecurity among PSTs during teaching practice, adversely affecting their confidence to teach effectively.<sup>90</sup> Lecturers prepare PSTs to go and teach. If lecturers are lecturing, then a practical session displaying teaching should be created in the lecture halls. For that to happen, it should be prescribed in documents to avoid the current situation where it is assumed knowledge. Responses to interviews distinctly indicated that not all lecturers open such a room. Simulation and micro-teaching are very important aspects of teaching practice.

### iii) DBE ATP vs. University ATP

The comparison between DBE ATP and the university's ATP revealed discrepancies in the topics covered. PSTs reported that certain content they were responsible for teaching had not been adequately covered in university training. This misalignment suggests that PSTs are often ill-prepared for the expectations of the curriculum they are required to deliver in schools. Similarly, Chikoko et al. point to misalignment in curricula as a contributing factor to the anxiety of PSTs and highlight the necessity for universities to align their training with national educational standards and expectations.<sup>91</sup> Figure 3 below displays the lack of correlation between the university ATP and the school's ATP.



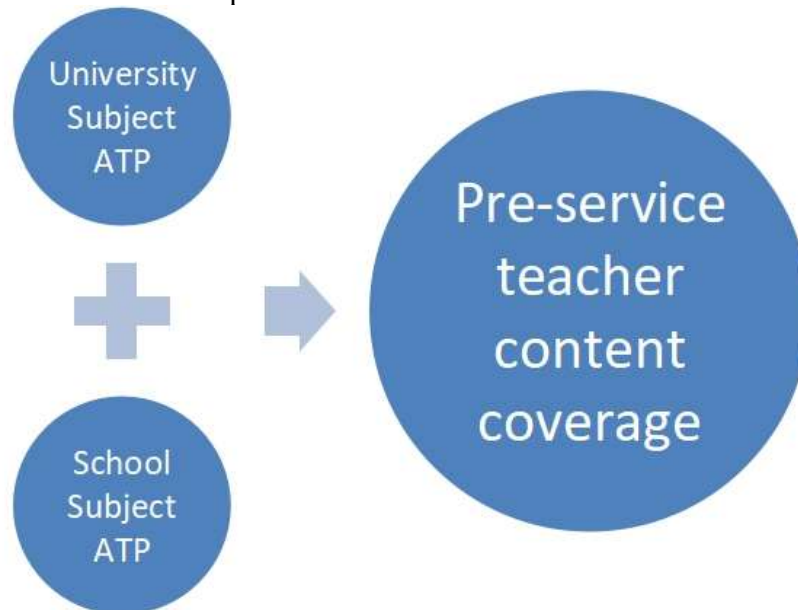
*Figure 3 displays the current situation that exists between ATP of universities and schools that decide content to be taught to PSTs  
Source: Researcher's interpretation*

The analysis of Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) of the courses taught in the university in this study, with the ATPs of the schools, highlighted significant discrepancies as illustrated in Figure 3. This disconnect emphasises the absence of collaboration between these educational entities and reveals

<sup>90</sup> M. Mketsi and T. Sibanda, "Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Teacher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 27, no. 3 (2022): 341–55.

<sup>91</sup> Chikoko, Chikoko, and Chikoko, "The Alignment of University Teacher Education Programs and National Curriculum Standards."

contradictions in the training process. PSTs often encounter pedagogical approaches during their university education that diverge from the expectations and content expected to be delivered in the classroom, echoing the concerns raised by Garcia & Van Der Meijden regarding the disconnect between theoretical coursework and real-world teaching practices.<sup>92</sup> The findings demonstrate that this lack of effective communication and collaboration leads to cognitive dissonance among PSTs, who find themselves navigating conflicting methodologies and subject matter. As affirmed by Kauffman and Gibbons, this misalignment reinforces the notion that without rigorous integration of practical experiences into teacher preparation programmes, PSTs may experience confusion and anxiety while attempting to reconcile their academic learning with the realities of classroom practice.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, the absence of alignment between university teachings and school-based expectations raises critical questions about the coherence and relevance of the current teacher education programme. This sentiment resonates with Darling-Hammond, et.al., who stress bridging educational theory with practical application through robust clinical experiences.<sup>94</sup>



*Figure 4: Relationship that should exist between ATPs of universities and schools to decide the content to be taught to PSTs.*

*Source: Researcher's interpretation*

Figure 4 illustrates the essential collaboration between universities and schools through their Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) in deciding the curricular content for pre-service teacher education. This figure underscores the necessity of establishing a collaborative framework in which these two educational entities continuously engage in dialogue to create a cohesive and comprehensive pedagogical approach. As supported by Wang et.al., the significance of structured, practice-oriented curricula is highlighted, emphasising that collaboration can lead to a consolidated ATP for PSTs.<sup>95</sup> This approach facilitates a more integrated learning experience by ensuring that the content delivered is relevant and reflective of current educational practices. Moreover, this collaboration resonates with the findings of Kauffman and Gibbons, who advocate for early observation opportunities and mentoring throughout pre-service education to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.<sup>96</sup> The visual representation in Figure 4.7 reinforces the necessity for an ongoing exchange of information and resources between schools and universities, which is pivotal in preparing future teachers with pedagogical methodologies that are applicable within real classroom environments. Such

<sup>92</sup> Garcia and Van Der Meijden, " Bridging the Gap: Developing Pedagogical Skills in Pre-Service Teachers."

<sup>93</sup> Kauffman and Gibbons, " Reflective Teaching in Practice: Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers."

<sup>94</sup> Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Pittenger, *Preparing Effective Teachers: Closing the Gap Between Education and Practice.*

<sup>95</sup> J. Wang, L. Smith, and D. Lee, " The Impact of Structured Practice Oriented Curriculum on Pre-Service Teacher Confidence," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Kauffman and Gibbons, " Reflective Teaching in Practice: Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers."

harmonisation not only enhances the relevance of the content taught but also supports PSTs in building confidence and effectiveness as educators.

**iv) Logbook (Assessment Tool)**

The logbook is an assessment tool facilitating objective evaluation of PSTs’ practice performance. While PSTs appreciated the structured nature of the assessment tool, they expressed concern about the lack of clarity in grading criteria. The absence of specificity regarding how each performance criterion correlates to the grading scale (1-5) diminishes the tool's effectiveness. Earlier studies recommend that assessment tools offer detailed feedback and clear guidelines.<sup>97</sup> This can improve PSTs’ confidence by ensuring they know precisely what is expected of them and how to meet those expectations.

**Table 2: Assessment tool of the university in the study**

| <b>Introduction</b>   | <b>(10)</b> |   |   |   |   |
|---|-------------|---|---|---|---|
| Linking with prior knowledge                                | 5           | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Creating relationships, motivation and inclination to learn | 5           | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Source: extract from the logbook of the university in study

Table 2 displays an example of the assessment tool of the university in the study. The perspective of PSTs is that the assessment tool helps them to include areas they would not even think of when preparing their lesson plans. Based on Table 4.2, for example, even if a pre-service teacher had not thought of referring learners to prior knowledge, the assessment tool acts as a reminder. What concerns PSTs, however, is that the tool is silent on what it is referring learners to prior knowledge that will earn them 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1. Table 4.3 below will further elaborate on the view of PSTs.

**Table 3 : Example of proposed assessment tool (extract)**

| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>   |   | <b>(10)</b>   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Linking with prior knowledge</b>   |   | <b>Creating relationships, motivation and inclination to learn</b>  |   |
| Asking questions that lead the topic to move from simple to complex. Relating the questions asked when introducing the topic  | 5 | Create an environment that makes learners free to participate, make attempts, and their voices and facial expressions welcoming.              | 5 |
| Asking questions that lead to the topic, but no sequence is followed. Relating the questions asked when introducing the topic | 4 | Creating an environment that makes learners free to participate motivates attempts, but the voice and facial expressions are not welcoming    | 4 |
| The teacher explains the assumed prior knowledge without involving the learners   | 3 | Creating an environment that makes learners free to participate does not motivate attempts, but the voice and facial expression are welcoming | 3 |
| Stating the assumed prior knowledge, no explanation given, and no learner involvement   | 2 | The voice and facial expression are welcoming, but do not make learners feel free and do not motivate attempts                                | 2 |
| Introducing the lesson with no reference to prior knowledge   | 1 | Greets the learners and starts the lesson   | 1 |

Source: Researcher’s interpretation of findings

<sup>97</sup> Ncanywa, Makena, and Buqa, “ School Based Experience Assessment Tool Revisited: A Comparative Analysis of Two Universities in South Africa.”

Table 3 presents an example of the researcher's interpretation of what PSTs perceive as an informative assessment tool. The table displays the rating and guides on what earns that rating. The reliability of marks obtained may improve with an assessment tool like the example in Table 3. The assessors would also know what they mean when they allocate a rating. Assertions like that of CPST 4, claiming that he obtained a different rating for one dress code, can be limited.

PSTs raised concerns over the hurried way lecturers give them feedback when they eventually come to evaluate their performance. PSTs indicated that the comments are mostly on teaching methods, and less reference is given to content. This type of feedback can be insufficient for PSTs aiming to improve their teaching competencies. James et.al. emphasises the need for balanced feedback that addresses pedagogical strategies and subject content to maximise PSTs' development.<sup>98</sup> The logbooks of PSTs analysed by the researcher supported the claims of the PSTs. Here are a few of the comments of lecturers and mentors as extracted from PSTs' logbooks: LC indicates lecturers' comments, and MC indicates mentors' comments:

*"Use different teaching strategies to arouse the interest of learners."* LC

*"Lesson was well presented; learners were involved."* LC

*"Good presentation."* MC

*"The pre-service teacher is a promising teacher. He needs to improve his lesson presentation skills and chalkboard summary."* MC

The comments above indicate how brief the assessors are when giving feedback to PSTs. Each comment above is not a selection of what assessors wrote, but is the full comment written after assessing the PSTs of the four selected logbooks.

## Summary

The study identified significant gaps between theoretical training and practical teaching experiences, with PSTs feeling unprepared for classroom challenges due to academic disruptions. It highlighted the disconnect between university modules and school requirements, emphasising the critical role of mentorship in shaping their experiences, which can create confidence and anxiety based on the level of support received. Participants expressed concerns about inconsistencies in evaluation frequency and objectivity, noting that while some benefited from constructive feedback, others felt a lack of communication from mentors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhanced Curriculum Design: Integrate practical training in teacher education programmes and align coursework with school requirements.
- Placement School Selection: Universities should take responsibility for placing pre-service teachers in suitable training schools rather than relying on students.
- Improved Mentorship Programmes: Collaborate with schools to develop structured mentorship initiatives focused on communication and feedback.
- Regular Evaluation with Continuity: Establish continuous evaluation systems with periodic feedback to effectively track progress.
- Feedback Training for Mentors: Provide training on effective feedback methods for mentors to enhance teaching skill development.
- Develop Standardised Guidelines: Create clear guidelines for pre-service teachers on portfolio preparation and assessment tools to ensure consistency.
- Fostering a Welcoming School Environment: Implement orientation programmes for pre-service teachers and cultivate a supportive community of practice.

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<sup>98</sup> S. James, S. Hudson, and A. Lasczik, "Secondary Preservice Teachers' Perspectives of Their Literacy Mentoring Experiences during Professional Placement," *International Journal of Social Policy and Education* 2, no. 7 (2020): 59–70.

## CONCLUSION

This empirical paper has discussed the perspective of student teachers on teaching practice in an HEI in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The findings have underscored PSTs' complexities, indicating that current training models do not adequately prepare them for classroom realities. This highlights the need for collaboration between universities and schools and a standardised mentorship and assessment approach to foster more confident and effective future teachers. Implementing these recommendations can enhance PSTs' experiences during their training, ultimately improving the quality of education and outcomes for teachers and future students.

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