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An Inter-Dependability of Systems: The Need for Holistic Support for Pre-Service Teachers During Teaching Practice[1]

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Abstract

Teaching practice is a crucial part of teacher training programmes that offer pre-service teachers the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills in real-life teaching environments. This microcosm of the reality of teaching as a profession highlights significant correlations between the needs of pre-service teachers during these times and the various systems and role players that these teachers encounter. Research shows that many pre-service teachers experience various challenges during these times that shape their perception of the profession, potentially leading to early career exits. This article explores the inter-dependability of the various systems in the teaching practice sphere. The inter-dependability of these different systems in navigating challenges such as the theory–practice gap, as well as the belief–practice gap, contributes to the perceptions of a sample of pre-service teachers regarding their needs for holistic support during and after teaching practice. Participatory action learning and action research was used as a methodology and approach to, through photovoice and a future creating workshop, collaboratively explore challenges and needs and suggest collaborative strategies to improve holistic support within the systems during and after teaching practice. Findings reveal predominantly negative perceptions of support from various role players within the teaching practice system and highlight the importance of structured support from role players such as mentor teachers, teacher educators, host schools, and higher education institutions. Recommendations include practical strategies for pre-service teachers themselves, as well as the aforementioned role players in the teaching practice system, to ensure holistic and sustainable support during and after-school-based placements.

Keywords: teaching practice, holistic support, mentor teachers, pre-service teachers, PALAR

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Introduction

Teaching practice experiences allows pre-service teachers the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in an authentic classroom setting. This helps develop key graduate attributes and essential professional competencies. It is not surprising that in addition to the enriching opportunities that most pre-service teachers report encountering during teaching practice (Agaeva & Urumov, 2023; Flores, 2017), they can also face challenges that hamper their ability to get the most out of these opportunities (Botha, 2020; Botha & Rens, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

During their teaching practice, these potential teachers rely on support and guidance from experienced mentor teachers and other role players in the initial teacher training sphere to navigate challenges. Without adequate support, students may be overwhelmed and could experience fear, anxiety, insecurity, and disappointment that could hamper motivation, undermine professional development (Gorospe, 2022; Yilong et al., 2022), and even impact their decision to pursue this career path (Adebola, 2022). This article examines the needs that a group of final-year pre-service teachers at a South African university have for holistic support during teaching practice placements. The findings affirm that pre-service teachers need more than academic support from their tertiary institutions; they also require emotional support from all role players.

Literature review

Theory–Practice Gap

Research indicates that teaching practice may fall short of fully preparing pre-service teachers for the realities of a teaching career (Botha & Rens, 2018; Faiza et al., 2022). A significant gap persists between what they have been taught at university and the realities they encounter in practice (Ribaeus et al., 2020). Zimmerman (2017) and Jenset et al. (2018) warned that teachers often assume that university coursework will equip them with theories directly applicable or transferable to teaching practice. The assumption exacerbates the theory–practice gap, and as a result, they may feel inadequate and insufficiently prepared for teaching (Napanoy et al., 2021).

McGarr et al. (2017) and Ravhuhali et al. (2020) postulated that the epistemological perspectives of pre-service teachers and teacher educators are contributing factors to the theory–practice gap. These views may differ significantly given that teacher educators often present systematised theory and knowledge to pre-service teachers rather than focusing on practical integration during teaching practice (Yin, 2019). Insufficient partnership and clear communication between schools and higher education institutions might also contribute to the discrepancies between theory and practice and the resulting challenges that pre-service teachers experience. Teacher educators often rely on schools to contribute to learning without communicating specific needs to the relevant mentor teachers. These needs are often not limited to academic requirements but are also relevant to the expectations that pre-service teachers have regarding their teaching practice experiences.

Belief–Practice Gap

Pre-service teachers enter teacher training programmes with their own local knowledge, beliefs, and experience of teaching, which can be deeply ingrained and difficult to alter (Yilong et al, 2022). According to Méndez (2020) and Rodrigues and Cyrino (2023), emotions play a central role in teaching, with school environments being complex spaces where both teachers and pre-service teachers face significant emotional demands. These, often negative, emotions contribute to the belief–practice gap where pre-service teachers' expectations of teaching practice do not align with their actual experiences, leading to self-doubt and uncertainty about their career choices. When pre-service teachers are forced to confront the disparity between their expectations and the reality of teaching practice, they may experience shock, stress, and anxiety that they struggle to manage (Gorospe, 2022). Their expectations seem to be conceptualised around those perceptions and previous emotional experiences rather than on what they have learned at university. A body of literature suggests that this apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) frequently becomes their fallback when uncertain about how to proceed (Gray, 2019; Smagorinsky & Barnes, 2014). Rather than applying new knowledge and skills, they tend to replicate the teaching methods of their schoolteachers and duplicate what they thought teaching entailed. Tertiary institutions rely heavily on mentor teachers to assist pre-service teachers with such regressive behaviour and help them to implement the new skills and strategies they have been taught. However, expectations are often unmet because mentor teachers may reinforce the pre-service teachers' initial perceptions.

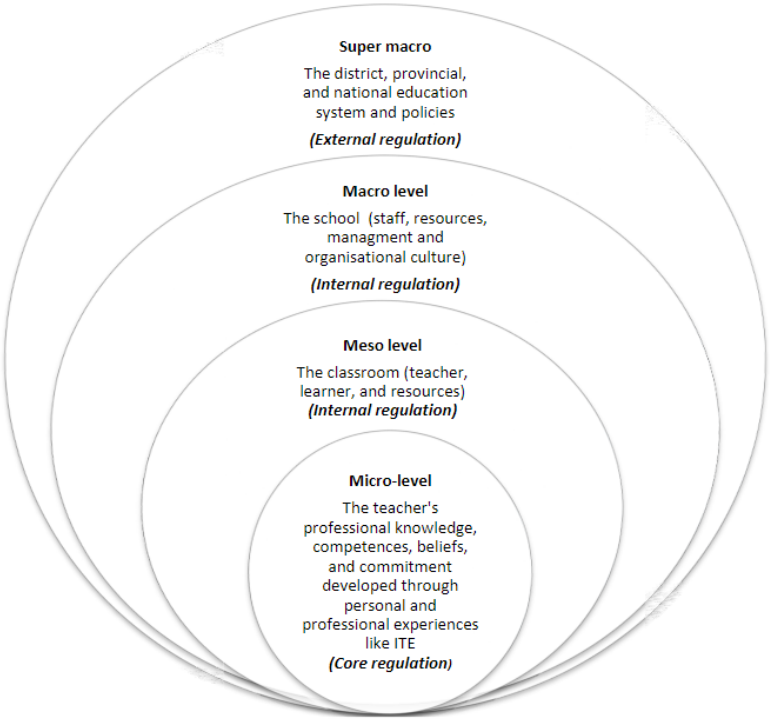
Although a negative perception of both the theory–practice gap and the belief–practice gap seems to be prominent, this state of tension pre-service teachers find themselves in could also be considered as a pedagogically productive habitus. Intentional support and scaffolding could motivate pre-service teachers to reflect, experiment, and adapt their practice to disrupt and bridge these gaps. The persistence of both the theory–practice and the belief–practice gaps as a challenge and as a learning opportunity underscores the significant impact that various role players, such as teacher educators and mentor teachers, have on the potential success or failure of a teaching practice experience. It is also evident that these role players represent various systems within which teaching practice is situated and where the pre-service teacher depends on positive interaction and communication between these systems to ensure that they receive optimal support during teaching practice.

The Inter-Dependability of Systems

Bertram (2023) applied systems theory to examine the various role players and systems within the professional teaching landscape for beginner teachers, and to elucidate the pervasive theory–practice gap that beginner teachers face. She argued that practice and experiences are embedded within four major systems, namely, the personal and professional identity of the beginner teacher, the classroom they work in, the school they are employed at, and the larger South African education system they are part of (see Figure 1). Teaching practice is a microcosm of the reality of teaching as a profession and therefore, it came as no surprise that there are significant correlations between the systems she identified and the role players and systems in teaching practice. The conceptual framework that Bertram suggested can therefore easily be translated and adapted to depict the world of teaching practice. This study considers the experiences of the pre-service teacher as dynamic and cyclical, rather than linear and independent.

Figure 1

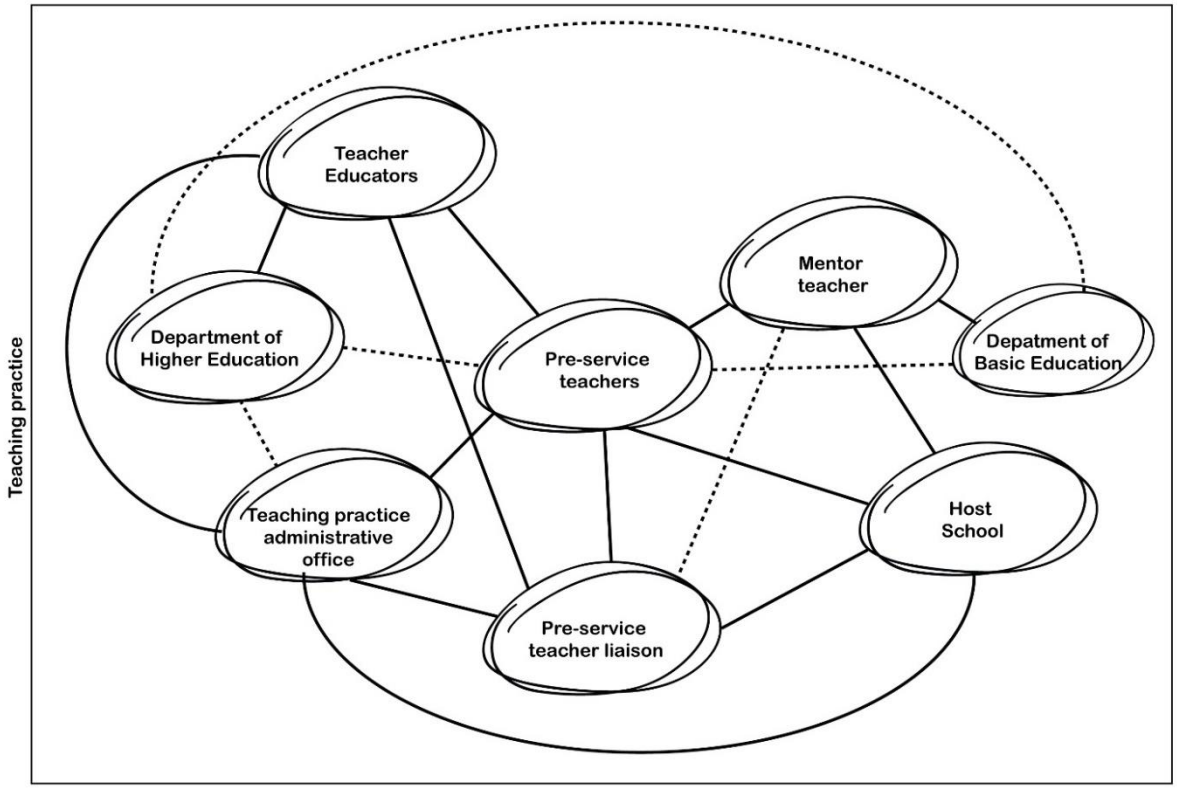
System Levels That Influence and Shape Teachers' Practice and Professional Identity (Bertram, 2023)



Before defining the systems that constitute the teaching practice environment, it is crucial to identify the major role players involved. In this study, a role-player is defined as an individual or organisation that impacts teaching practice, or an entity that pre-service teachers may encounter during periods of teaching practice. Through their findings, Dreyer (2015) and Taole (2020) highlighted certain role players as essential for beneficial teaching practice experiences. The importance of considering various interdependent systems rather than focusing solely on individual role players is emphasised because not all role players are directly connected to schools. Pre-service teachers complete both school-based placements and other academic components to meet the minimum requirements for successful completion of their teaching practice. At the tertiary institution involved in this study, the significant role players are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Role Players and the Systems in Teaching Practice Habitus



The role players in the teaching practice habitus represent a diverse range of institutions and various systems. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) remind us that pre-service teachers may have differing needs and face various challenges when engaging with different role players and systems, and therefore require

different types and levels of support. A more holistic approach to support within the teaching practice environment may be required to ensure optimal support and opportunities for development and growth. In addition, when considering the contextualised impact of the theory–practice and belief–practice gaps, the need for a structured framework capable of providing various levels of both cognitive and emotional support seems evident. The multi-tiered systems of support model offers a practical response to these challenges, making it a suitable choice as theoretical framework to address the complex, dynamic, and multi-layered teaching practice landscape.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

The multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) concept was chosen as a theoretical framework for this study because, unlike a specific practice or theory, MTSS is a framework designed to align systems to better address various needs (States et al., 2017). It is an efficient framework for organising and implementing early evidence-based interventions to enhance student success and a systematic response to their needs (Kern et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2024). In this context, it is a tool for the holistic exploration of the various systems of teaching practice where pre-service teachers might need extra support on an academic, administrative, and socio-emotional level (Foght, 2021). The original MTSS framework is structured into three tiers representing levels of support (universal, targeted, and intensive support), each addressing different levels of student needs (States et al., 2017).

In this framework, support thus extends beyond teaching and learning in the classroom (learning in practice) to include all other campus-based activities (learning from practice) (Botha et al., 2023).

To effectively design holistic and multi-tiered support systems for pre-service teachers, those responsible for teacher training programmes should use the lived experiences of students as a guide for shaping the nature of the support. As proven, pre-service teachers encounter complex and dynamic cognitive and emotional challenges that necessitate holistic support rather than fragmented assistance. A holistic and transformative system, grounded in systems theory and critical pedagogy, is essential. The MTSS framework, with its tiered responsiveness, combined with participatory action learning and action research's focus on collaboration and transformation, offers a relevant framework for exploring these challenges. Guided by these frameworks, the study seeks to explore the following research question: "How do pre-service teachers experience holistic support during and after teaching practice?"

Methodology

Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) was utilised as both the qualitative research methodology and the paradigm for this study. PALAR's epistemology prioritises transformation through equitable participation and shared ownership of knowledge. Zuber-Skerritt (2011) explained that PALAR is more than just a methodology; it embodies a holistic commitment to collaborative and democratic knowledge creation, where participants are valued as co-researchers and lived experience becomes a valid source of inquiry and inspiration for social change. This stance reflects the notion of PALAR being grounded in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), where participants are invited to engage in praxis that challenges

traditional power structures and ultimately transforms both the individual as well as the systems they operate in.

Participants were purposively selected from the population of final-year pre-service teachers at a South African university. Wood (2020) emphasised that participatory action research endeavours should focus on small samples within specific communities. Accordingly, five fourth-year Bachelor of Education students volunteered for this study. Data were generated through three methods and across three research cycles (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Summary of Data Generation and Cycles



Cycle 1

*What **challenges** are pre-service teachers facing regarding holistic support during and after teaching practice?*

Data generation:

Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997)

Use a prompt to take a photograph

Use the adapted SHOWed technique to write an accompanying narrative to explain your photograph

1. Describe the photo. If you were talking on the phone, how would you describe the photo to someone else?

2. Why did you choose this photo? What does the photo tell us about a challenge associated with the support that you have/had during teaching practice?

3. How does it make you feel? Which emotions or memories come to the fore when you look at this photo?

Cycle 2

*What are the **needs** of pre-service teachers regarding holistic support during and after teaching practice?*

Data generation:

Future creating workshop (Brydon-Miller et al., 2017; Raider-Roth et al., 2021).

- Phase 1
- Phase 2
- Reflective group conversations

Phase 1 Critical phase

Participants brainstorm all the challenges and problems they have experienced during teaching practice

Phase 2 Utopian phase

Participants share their dreams, ideals and visions for the future regarding the specific theme.

Cycle 3

*What **collaborative strategies** can be implemented to offer holistic support to pre-service teachers during and after teaching practice?*

Data generation:

Future creating workshop (Brydon-Miller et al., 2017; Raider-Roth et al., 2021).

- Phase 3
- Reflective group conversations

Phase 3 Reality phase

Collaboratively create action plans to address the challenges identified in the critical phase and realise the visions proposed in the utopian phase.

During the reality phase of this study, the participants collaboratively suggested strategies to improve holistic support during and after teaching practice.

In the first cycle, the visual strategy known as photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) was implemented. In this creative, arts-based data generation technique, participants are provided with a prompt and invited to take a photograph that reflects their perceptions or experiences related to a specific topic. The accompanying narrative enabled participants to critically reflect on their lived experiences and the world around them in a more nuanced manner (Treadwell & Taylor, 2017). The second data generation method was a future creating workshop where participants cooperatively shared experiences and developed strategies for social and cultural change (Brydon-Miller et al., 2017; Raider-Roth et al., 2021). This data generation method is suited for a PALAR study where individuals work together towards a shared goal of transformation (Wessels & Wood, 2019). The third and last data generation method was reflective group conversations, a form of a focus group discussion that produces rich and detailed data (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Data gathered from the future creating workshop and the reflective group conversations were transcribed verbatim and analysed using inductive content analysis. To ensure the study's trustworthiness, five validity criteria—outcome, process, democratic, catalytic, and dialogic validity—were employed (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Dialogic validity in particular was reinforced through member checking and iterative feedback loops, where participants were invited to reflect on emerging findings and co-verify interpretations. This ensured that themes were not only derived from inductive analysis but were also aligned with lived experience.

Generating, rather than merely gathering data reflects the intention of using PALAR as a methodology as well as an epistemological paradigm where the process of reflecting on meaning together is in itself a valuable form of knowledge creation and a practical effort towards social transformation and improvement.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the research data gatekeeper at the selected university. Principles of good ethical conduct were adhered to; an ethical agreement was made with participants, including the guarantee of voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any stage. The building of a relationship of trust is essential in a PALAR process and therefore, matters like anonymity and the safe storage of data are collaboratively decided.

Findings

The main themes and sub-themes arising from the findings are illustrated in Table 1 and then discussed in turn below.

Table 1

Findings

Theme 1:	A solitary road
Alone rather than safe and supported	Searching for role players

Theme 2:	They were supposed to be there to catch me
Roles and responsibilities	Wearing a closet full of different hats
	So much to do, so little time.
Theme 3:	This is not what I thought it was going to be (belief–practice gap)
Expectations versus experience	They did not teach me this at university (theory–practice gap)

Theme 1: Alone Rather Than Safe and Supported

A Solitary Road

Participant 5 captured the essence of feeling alone with her photovoice contribution (see Image 1), and in her narrative, she verbalised her experience:

It feels like I am standing alone at the start of a long road . . . and it's like walking on a hot road without any protection from the sun.

Image 1

A Solitary Road (Participant 5)



Participant 2 also experienced a sense of isolation when she was abruptly thrust into challenging situations and had to navigate them on her own. This feeling of loneliness was intensified when she was the only pre-service teacher at the school where she completed her teaching practice.[2]

[2] The university in question has a database with close to 9,000 schools across the country where 12,000 B.Ed. students place themselves for teaching practice experience. Schools can have between 1 and 40 student teachers per teaching practice block.

Both Kaldi and Xafakos (2017) and Gomez Johnson et al. (2020) confirmed that the mentor teacher is a primary source of formal support during teaching practice, while informal support often comes from peers (Zhang et al., 2018). Participants 1, 3, and 4 did not have any peers to seek support from or to spend their free time with at school.

Participant 4 subsequently emphasised the value of peer support in contrast to loneliness in her photovoice contribution of a dying plant (Image 2). She expressed her frustration at not only being the only pre-service teacher at her school but also getting the clear impression that the mentor teacher did not really want her in the classroom. With no social or professional support, she felt vulnerable, overwhelmed, and isolated. These experiences have been confirmed in various studies, including Gorospe (2022) and Méndez (2020). Peer support not only assists pre-service teachers with gaining confidence in their teaching but also fosters critical reflection on their own practices.

Image 2

The Feeling of Isolation (Participant 4)



Searching for role players

The Mentor Teacher

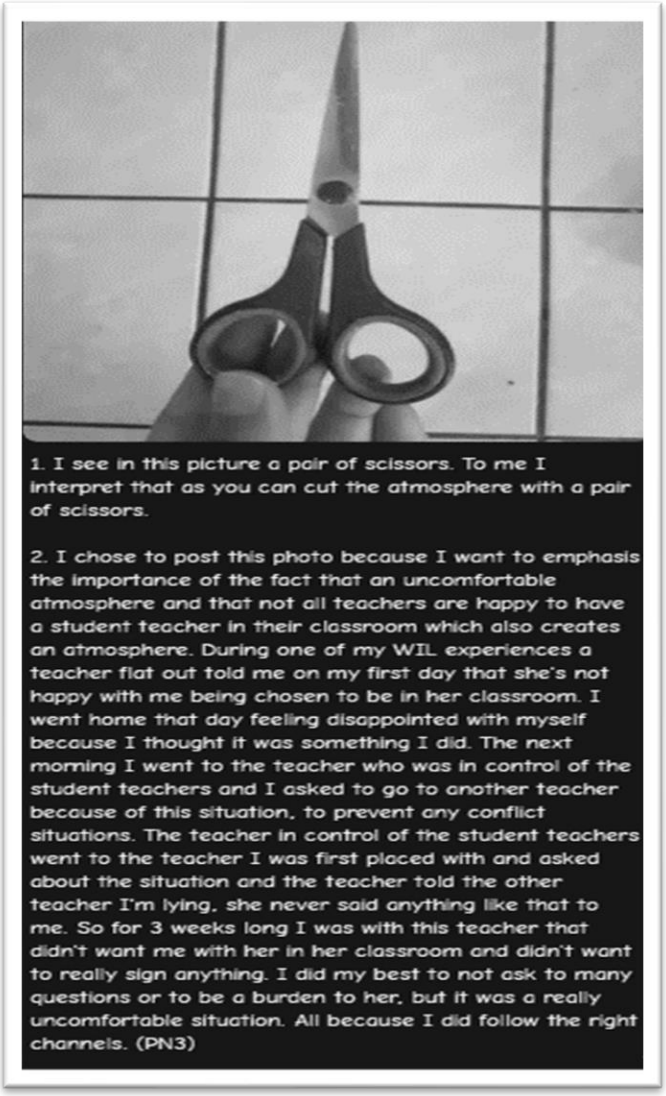
Cronin (2020) and Yoon and Larkin (2018) highlighted that the quality of teaching practice largely hinges on the existence of a positive relationship between the mentor teacher and the pre-service teacher. This is pivotal in shaping and re-shaping the pre-service teachers' identities and practices, as well as their

introduction to the culture of the school (Capello, 2020; Smit & du Toit, 2021). However, Jiyane and Gravett (2019) noted that mentor teachers often do not take this role very seriously or may be ill-equipped to fulfil it. These teachers are frequently appointed as mentors by their principals rather than volunteering. Although tertiary institutions provide schools with criteria for mentor teachers, these are not always adhered to, resulting in pre-service teachers sometimes being assigned to mentors who are also themselves beginner teachers.

Participants 1 and 3 agreed that mentor teachers should support pre-service teachers during teaching practice by involving them in teaching and classroom management, making them feel comfortable, and creating a feeling of belonging in the teaching profession. Pre-service teachers also rely on mentor teachers for emotional support during teaching practice placements. Participant 1 shared an unfortunate incident with her mentor teacher, which had a negative impact on her entire teaching practice period. Her photovoice contribution depicted a pair of scissors as a metaphor for the tension between her and the mentor teacher that she felt could be cut with a knife (Image 3).

Image 3

Relationship With a Mentor Teacher (Participant 1)



Feeling unwelcome and unsafe to ask questions left the participant feeling debilitated and unworthy. Her attempts to seek support from a member of the school management team only intensified the tension rather than alleviating it. Nkambule and Mukeredzi (2017) and Özdaş (2018) have similarly reported that some mentor teachers appear to be uninterested in supporting and guiding pre-service teachers during teaching practice, which exacerbates their need for support. The findings also revealed that although the mentor teacher was the person with whom pre-service teacher spent the most time, there were other role players in their teaching practice milieu to whom they looked for various levels of support.

The Pre-Service Teacher Liaison

At the university in question, teacher liaisons are final-year pre-service teachers who volunteer to act as teaching practice coordinators in schools with more than eight student teachers. Their responsibilities include administrative tasks such as managing attendance lists. As senior students, they also have the potential to offer support to younger pre-service teachers with whom they are placed, but it is essential to note that they do not receive any formal training for this task.

Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 all expressed a need for emotional support from these senior students and felt disappointed when it was not provided. They were not aware that these students were not tasked with or trained to provide holistic support. In addition to expecting more support from teacher liaisons, all the participants, interestingly, expressed the need for more support from the teaching practice administrative office on their campus.

The Teaching Practice Administrative Office

The teaching practice administrative office deals with placement, logistics for formal assessment arrangements, and so on, for all pre-service teachers. In the case of this institution, three administrative staff members are responsible for dealing with the needs of nearly 3,000 students. Participants experienced that staff from this office did not respond to inquiries in a timely manner and they felt the resources and supporting documents provided were insufficient to prepare them for what was expected during their school placements. Interestingly, Participants 3 and 5 expressed frustration that administrative staff were not aware of what was happening in schools.

These opinions made it clear that the participants were not aware of the roles and responsibilities of the teaching practice administrative office, and they seemed to expect academic and even emotional support from them, rather than the administrative support they were tasked with providing. It was evident that the participants not only struggled to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of role players in their teaching practice environments, but that they experienced challenges and required support with their own perceived roles and responsibilities within these systems.

Theme 2: Roles and Responsibilities

They Were Supposed to be There to Catch Me

In alignment with national prerequisites and university regulations, pre-service teachers should always be under the guidance of a mentor teacher and should not be left to supervise learners independently. The

co-planning and co-teaching model implemented by this university requires students to first observe their mentor teacher and then, gradually, over the course of the four-year programme, become more involved and independent in planning and teaching lessons.

According to the participants in this study, regular physical absence of a mentor teacher from the classroom is a frequent occurrence that many pre-service teachers experience during their teaching practice. Jiyane and Gravett (2019) and Moodley et al. (2018) also reported high levels of absence among mentor teachers, who expected pre-service teachers to take responsibility for teaching or taking over a lesson while they were away from the classroom.

Interestingly, Participant 4 indicated that she was more at ease being alone in the classroom because nobody was watching over her shoulder. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the situation enables the pre-service teacher to take responsibility for a classroom, but on the other hand, she misses out on potentially useful and educative modelling and information from the mentor teacher. There are, of course, also various risks involved in being alone in a classroom full of learners. Regardless of her seeming to enjoy being left alone, Participant 4 (with the support of Participants 2 and 5) admitted that disarray usually ensued in the physical absence of their mentor teacher.

I was alone with almost 70 learners in the class, it was absolutely impossible to teach in that chaos. I had no idea how the teacher did that.

Moussaid and Zerhouni (2017) noted that the absence of a mentor teacher often leads to a lack of classroom discipline. This aligns with the experiences of the participants who stated that maintaining classroom discipline is particularly challenging for secondary school pre-service teachers, given their close age to the learners. The experience of the participants aligns with that of Mikulec and Hamann (2020). The close age proximity made it difficult for pre-service teachers to assert control and be acknowledged as teachers because learners in the classroom tended to view them merely as student teachers with limited authority.

Learners do not have respect for you; they constantly remind you that you are just a student and that you are not qualified yet. . . . they test the boundaries all the time. (Participant 2)

Being left alone with these learners and burdened with the additional responsibilities of solo teaching while they are still meant to observe and co-teach creates a desperate need for holistic support. A lack of such support left them feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed, especially in fulfilling all the roles and expectations placed upon them.

Wearing a Closet Full of Different Hats

During teaching practice placement, a pre-service teacher not only embodies the seven roles of a teacher outlined in the Minimum Requirements of Teacher Education Qualifications guiding document (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011), but they must also balance various other responsibilities outside of the classroom. Many pre-service teachers find this very challenging, and the participants in this study also expressed the need for more holistic support in finding a balance between the different hats they had to wear during the teaching practice placement. The participants highlighted the constant struggle of being expected to act as a full-time teacher while simultaneously carrying the academic responsibilities of a student.

Although students are off campus for four weeks during teaching practice blocks, some teacher educators still expect them to complete academic tasks for other modules during this time. Participant 1 shared the tension of having assignments in both her majors because she had to spend her time after school completing her portfolio of evidence linked to the teaching practice module. In addition, she had grading and preparation to do for the lessons she had to present during school days and was extensively involved in extra-curricular activities at her teaching practice school.

My mentor teacher fell ill, and the principal expected me to take over all her classes and responsibilities for two whole weeks. I had so much preparation to do, and I had to make time for my own assignments. (Participant 2)

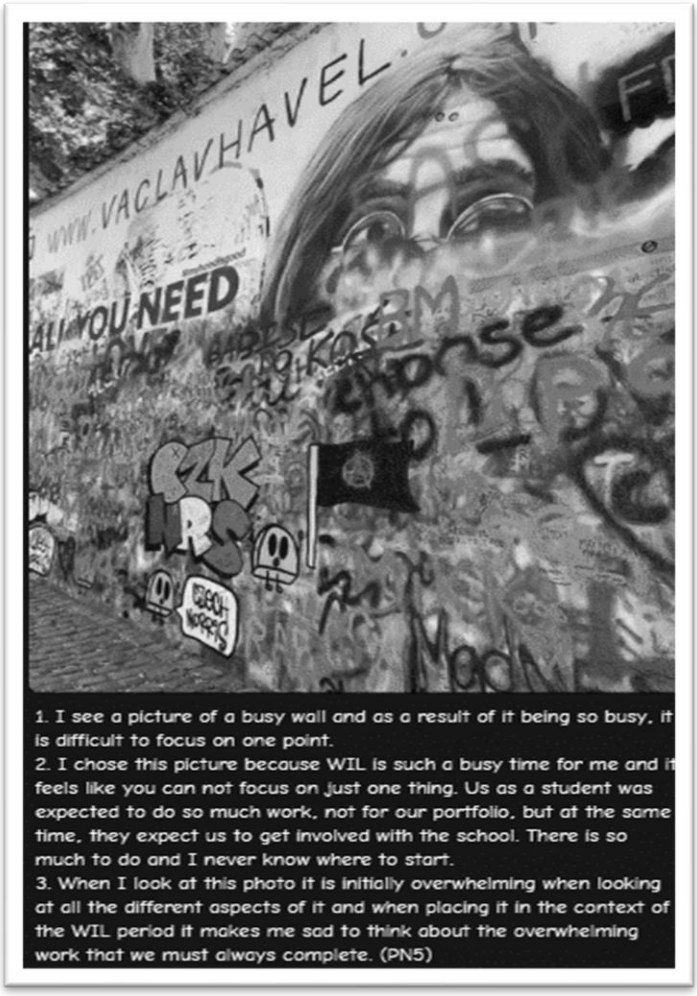
Pre-service teachers are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities during their teaching practice placements. While Participants 1, 2, and 4 acknowledged that they enjoyed being involved in these after-hours activities, they also noted that it added to their time strain.

So Much to Do, So Little Time

There was a consensus among all participants that they required more support with time management and balancing their various responsibilities. Participant 2 effectively captured this conundrum and sense of being overwhelmed in her photovoice contribution (Image 4).

Image 4

So Much to Do, So Little Time (Participant 2)



1. I see a picture of a busy wall and as a result of it being so busy, it is difficult to focus on one point.
2. I chose this picture because WIL is such a busy time for me and it feels like you can not focus on just one thing. Us as a student was expected to do so much work, not for our portfolio, but at the same time, they expect us to get involved with the school. There is so much to do and I never know where to start.
3. When I look at this photo it is initially overwhelming when looking at all the different aspects of it and when placing it in the context of the WIL period it makes me sad to think about the overwhelming work that we must always complete. (PN5)

It was encouraging to observe that, despite acknowledging the stress caused by their numerous responsibilities, participants valued the pressure they were under as a learning opportunity and positive contribution to their professional development. However, it is important to recognise that not all pre-service teachers may possess the necessary coping skills to realise this, and may require additional support to cope during teaching practice.

Theme 3: Expectation Versus Experience

This Is Not What I Thought It Was Going to Be

Findings indicate that participants were often disillusioned by what they encountered during their school placements. It was evident that what they anticipated and foresaw during these experiences did not materialise. Rather than a welcoming and engaged learning experience, participants felt isolated, frustrated, and overwhelmed. Mentor teachers and other role players did not provide the necessary support, forcing them to question their desire to teach. The participants reported a dissonance between their expectations and their experience, which led them to existential questions regarding their identity and career. It is evident that the participants in this study not only experienced a belief–practice gap but also a theory–practice gap.

They Definitely Did Not Teach Me This at University

During teaching practice, pre-service teachers have the opportunity to apply the content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge they acquired during their university training. But Participant 5 admitted that she experienced the theory–practice gap in not relating the theoretical knowledge she obtained to the practice of teaching:

I thought we were going to learn exactly how to teach something like plurals to learners. All I am learning now is these theories that I barely understand and cannot relate to teaching plurals.

The participants appeared to believe they acquired more practical teaching knowledge and skills during teaching practice than in the lecture halls. They struggled to apply theoretical concepts to practice or identify instances where they successfully did so in a non-explicit manner. Participant 5 vehemently professed that she learned more about how it would be to have her own class in the future during teaching practice than she had learned in all her coursework. It seems that these participants did not feel that their coursework (and, by implication, their teacher training programme) supported their teaching practice experience.

Both the belief–practice gap and the theory–practice gap accentuate the importance of deconstructing the apprenticeship of observation and pre-existing knowledge and ideas that pre-service teachers bring to teacher training programmes and teaching practice experiences. Without constructive input from mentor teachers and holistic support from other role players, pre-service teachers enter a state of disillusionment, isolation, and stress, from where they tend to revert to what they knew, rather than what they learnt at university. Even though the aim of teaching practice is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, this is a continuing challenge in teacher training programmes. The participants' experiences in this regard were consonant with the views of several authors who have claimed that what is taught in lecture halls is not applicable in real-life school environments (Botha & Rens, 2018; Napanoy et al., 2021). It is evident that

there is a lack of optimal cooperation between schools and universities in supporting pre-service teachers in applying and integrating theoretical knowledge into their classroom practice.

Discussion

It is imperative for the architects of teacher training programmes to create an inclusive and supportive environment that leverages the expertise of various stakeholders to meet the diverse needs of pre-service teachers, who may require different forms of support (Villarama et al., 2017). The findings in this study indicate that role players from all systems and other interdependent factors (classroom discipline, time management, apprenticeship of observation, etc.) relate to one another and their interactions influence a larger system (teaching practice) and specifically, the experience of the centre of these systems, the individual pre-service teacher. As Bertram (2023) argued, support systems must reflect the dynamic interplay between multiple interdependent systems. The MTSS framework offers a practical structure to achieve this alignment, particularly when adapted to the needs of pre-service teachers (States et al., 2017).

This study highlights that the challenges are clear and varied, but the common thread is the cause-and-effect relationships among systems that exist in cycles. One action in a system, for example, the lack of support due to the physical absence of the mentor teacher, causes another action in the pre-service teacher as a part of the system by creating a feeling of isolation, having to cope with classroom discipline, and not being able to develop a positive teacher identity, and so forth. This finding confirms the experiences of the participants in a study conducted by Gorospe (2022) and Yasar (2019). The lack of support in various systems and interdependent factors influences the whole teaching practice system. This important point is also validated by the notion that students, during times of stress, often revert to familiar teaching practices from their own experiences during basic schooling rather than to what they were taught at university (Botha & Rens, 2018; Lortie, 1975).

The theory–practice gap and belief–practice gap reported by pre-service teachers are enhanced by their perceptions of the roles played by mentors, teaching practice liaisons, and even administrative staff. This aligns with Jiyane and Gravett (2019), who emphasised that mentor teachers are often underprepared or inconsistently trained, resulting in a lack of cohesion between institutional expectations and practical realities. Similarly, Ravhuhali et al. (2020) described administrative disconnects as contributing to student confusion and anxiety during placements.

Evidently, the teacher training institution in question in this study should direct its focus to scaffolding and meaningful integration of theory and practice before and during teaching practice. There should be more engagement with other systems and role players to prepare students to reflect on professional experiences as a way of preparing them to cope effectively with professional pressure. Although this study has a limited scope and its findings are not generalisable, the commonalities between these findings and existing research highlighted in this article suggest that teacher training programmes in general should focus more on providing holistic support during teaching practice.

Recommendations

Drawing on the principles of PALAR, and in keeping with the transformative aims of the study, the participants collaboratively conceptualised practical recommendations for improved holistic support during and after teaching practice. These recommendations validated the literature, for example, a need for improved clarity and communication regarding the roles and responsibilities of all role players, echoing findings by Dreyer (2015) and Taole (2020). Participants also emphasised the importance of selecting and

training mentor teachers and senior peers more intentionally—an issue noted by Jiyane and Gravett (2019)—to ensure these figures are equipped to offer both emotional and pedagogical support. Furthermore, the recommendations pointed to the need for accessible, tiered support structures aligned with MTSS principles (States et al., 2017), including dedicated channels for academic, emotional, and logistical guidance. Reflecting the critical pedagogy underpinning PALAR, participants also stressed the importance of agency; pre-service teachers should be encouraged to seek support proactively and participate in communities of practice that foster shared learning and resilience (Botha & Rens, 2018).

Consistent with PALAR's emphasis on participatory meaning-making, the participants' recommendations were not treated as peripheral but as co-constructed insights that informed the final phase of the study and contributed directly to knowledge generation. Table 2 elucidates practical suggestions for recommendations for holistic support during (and after) teaching practice.

Table 2

Practical Recommendations for Holistic Support During Teaching Practice

Shared effort towards engaged role player engagement	Clarify the roles and responsibilities of all role players, including administrative and academic staff. Provide training and promote accountability for all role players, including pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher educators. Care should be taken when selecting mentor teachers and senior student positions, where applicable. Opportunities should be available for pre-service teachers to evaluate and reflect on the service of these guiding role players.
Acknowledge the existence of the theory–practice gap and belief–practice gap	Consciously adapt teacher training programmes to address these aspects through the implicit and hidden curriculum. Acknowledge the challenges as well as the pedagogically productive nature of these states.
Improve communication between tertiary institutions and pre-service teachers	Use infographics or short videos rather than lengthy manuals and guidelines. Create a dedicated WhatsApp helpline for students in urgent need of immediate assistance. This helpline should be reserved for serious incidents, such as sexual harassment, suicide threats, violence, and similar emergencies, ensuring a rapid response to critical situations. Establish a communication portal that allows pre-service teachers to quickly assess their support needs and be directed to the appropriate person for assistance (refer to Figure 4 for an example conceptualised by the participants in this study).

Pre-service teachers should also take responsibility for seeking support	When in need, pre-service teachers should reach out and seek support rather than expecting their needs to be recognised and addressed by other role players. Acknowledge their responsibility to take ownership of their own learning. Create face-to-face or online communities of practice where they can find support when they feel isolated at school. These groups can even include mentoring from more senior students.
Promote the value of reflective practice during and after teaching practice	Scheduled debriefing sessions after teaching practice can create space for students' voices to be heard and their experiences to be shared. A clear progression over the various years should be evident in portfolios of evidence, and pre-service teachers should be encouraged to reflect on praxis rather than just theory and practice.
Embrace the system theory approach to holistic support	Applying the system theory in a MTSS model, various role players can be seen as systems of support for pre-service teachers during teaching practice. The first tier of support (universal support) is continual support for pre-service teachers on an academic, administrative, and socio-emotional level. The second tier of support, the targeted support, is more strategic for pre-service teachers in need of more support than given in the first tier. Intensive one-on-one support, as the third tier of support, should also be available for pre-service teachers when they express a need for it.

Teaching practice is a dynamic, multi-levelled endeavour that should not be considered in isolation. The success of teaching practice programmes in preparing pre-service teachers for their chosen profession is highly dependent on successful teaching practice experiences where students are prepared and empowered to confront the real challenges in crossing the divide between theory and practice, between expectation and experience.

Pre-service teachers require holistic support from all role players in the various systems of the teaching practice habitus. When they do not feel isolated but rather feel supported, these experiences will foster both flexibility and resilience, preparing them for the challenges they will face as beginner teachers in a highly dynamic national and global education environment. Therefore, support in teaching practice should focus on praxis, rather than on theory and practice. Working from an authentic platform that creates space for the voices of pre-service teachers to be heard should go a long way in acknowledging existing knowledge and in offering opportunities for the joint creation of new knowledge, skills, and values needed for effective teaching in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This study explored the needs for holistic support that pre-service teachers should experience during and after teaching practice. Utilising the PALAR framework and guided by the MTSS model, the findings highlight how pre-service teachers experience significant emotional, pedagogical, and institutional

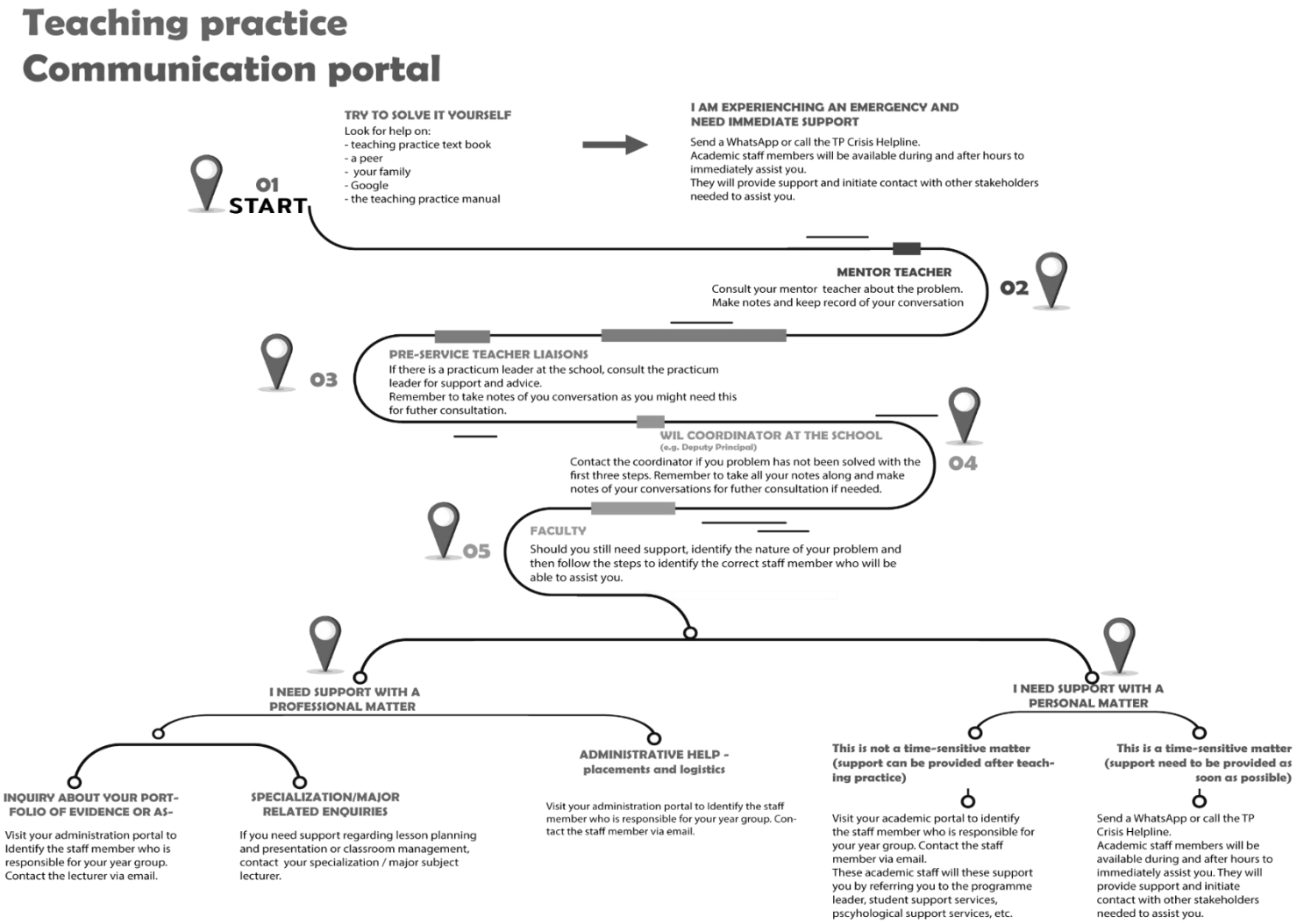
challenges during teaching practice. The subsequent tension resulting from a proposed theory–practice and belief–practice gap seems to be exacerbated by a lack of cohesive support across various systems. However, a PALAR paradigm empowered participants to contribute actively rather than viewing themselves as passive recipients of support, thus this research endeavour demonstrates their ability to develop meaningful, context-responsive strategies for change collaboratively. Through incorporating participant voices, systems thinking, and critical pedagogy, the study offers a nuanced perspective on the inter-dependence of various systems in the teaching practice habitus and highlights how the development of pre-service teachers could be sustained through intentional, multi-tiered, and ethically grounded interventions. Prioritising involvement, reflection, and praxis across the various systems emerges as essential for preparing future teachers for the dynamic realities of the profession.

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Figure 4

Teaching Practice Communication Portal



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