



Examining attributes of preservice teachers' vulnerability: Exploring challenging lived experiences during professional experience placements

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ABSTRACT

In this mixed methods study, the attributes of vulnerability experienced by pre-service teachers (PSTs) enrolled in professional experience placement units were examined. The study's theoretical framing involved a context-conscious understanding of PSTs' applied pedagogical content knowledge, which underpinned the identification of key attributes of their vulnerability. Participating PSTs' vulnerability during their professional experiences was investigated and conceptualised using a mixed-methods approach, which involved document analysis with thematic analysis for the qualitative phase and z-score comparisons and regression analysis for the quantitative phase. The pilot study included PSTs' final professional experience reports for the units identified as appropriate for a pilot project. The focus was on fundamental skills assessment against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and related open comments. In total, 304 completed documents were analysed from 243 female and 61 male PSTs. The vulnerability attributes were examined using the 'standard descriptors' in the reports awarded passing grades (e.g., 'exceeding', 'competent', or 'developing') and the 'carefully considered final grade' (e.g., 'attention needed' and 'not developed'). The duration of the professional experience placements varied between 15 and 20 days. The qualitative findings show that the lower grades pertained to interrelationships, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, differentiation in lessons, behaviour management, inclusive classrooms, school communication, and restricted lesson planning. Additionally, limited engagement with parents/carers and the development of Indigenous knowledge and awareness restricted attention to feedback and its implementation. This article concludes with some implications for local and national higher education policies, with a strategic focus on supporting PSTs.

1. Introduction

In Australia, professional experience placements are a mandatory and high-stakes capstone component of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. These placements often create significant academic, modelling, innovation, emotional, and relational demands for pre-service teachers (PSTs), making them a frequent site of vulnerability (Smith, 2021). The purpose of this study is to examine the

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fundamental skills and standards across subject areas that reveal challenges during professional experience placements. In this article, PSTs' vulnerability attributes are conceptualised as characteristics/behaviours (contextual, emotional, physical, cultural, psychological, and social) that challenge PSTs' capacity to effectively engage in and manage their teaching roles and responsibilities during their professional experience placements. Hay and Fleming (2021, p.548) emphasised that 'student readiness and suitability' for workplace-based professional learning 'was identified as a risk with participants providing multiple examples of student misconduct' and related incidence while on placements. In line with existing scholarship, in this study, vulnerable students in ITE programmes were identified as being 'at risk'—that is, as facing factors or circumstances that increased the likelihood of leaving the programme before completion. These factors include academic struggles, personal challenges, financial constraints, or lack of social support (Ciavaldini-Cartaut et al., 2017; Elliott et al., 2020). Bacova and Turner (2023) identified three categories of vulnerability attributes: vulnerability resulting from questioning one's professional credibility, vulnerability due to the changing dynamics of the development of the PST-supervising teacher relationship, and vulnerability linked to one's pastoral role. However, in this paper, attributes of vulnerability are conceptualised as difficulties in effectively managing personal and professional encounters or challenges caused by specific circumstances and influenced by school and classroom contexts (Dale & Frye, 2009). These attributes demonstrate the perceived reasons for vulnerability in PSTs that lead to the risk of unsuccessful professional experience placements. Additionally, they also reflect the underlying challenges that increase the risk of failed placements.

Collaboration between higher education providers (HEPs) and industry partners can support PSTs facing challenges in their transition to teaching, which has broader implications for education policy and institutional practice. Moreover, a close collaboration between stakeholders can reveal the significant implications of well-structured support systems (at school and university) for PSTs, especially vulnerable ones managing difficult placement environments. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, we argue that microsystem support frameworks need to be closely aligned with the strategic preparation of PSTs for them to successfully transition to the teaching workforce. The theoretical lens of the study is embedded in Bronfenbrenner's theory. However, to capture the spatial complexity of professional experience placements, the researchers emphasise multi-layered expectations PSTs often must manage during professional experience placement and felt compelled to employ a supporting theoretical context-consciousness frame as offered by the context-conscious understanding development (C-CUD) theoretical frame that acknowledge and respect the multi-layered context of a classroom and school.

Industry partners' expectation that ITE providers deliver high-quality placements to enhance PSTs' learning highlights the importance of providing structured and targeted support throughout the placement experience. ITE providers are held accountable by regulatory bodies and departments of education for offering high-quality preparation for classrooms to the next generation of teachers. In the Higher Education Support Act 2003 and the Higher Education Support Amendment (Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023 (2023), it is emphasised that the Australian government is committed to supporting higher education students to enable them to attain success in their studies. For this reason, the government requires HEPs to have support policies in place. Preparing PSTs for the teaching profession necessitates developing their ability to integrate theory and practice through professional experience placements (Higher Education Support Amendment [Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report] Bill 2023, 2023). Improving the quality of professional experience has been identified as a priority: 'Collaborative partnerships between ITE providers, schools and school systems are critical, particularly in the delivery of practical experiences to establish strong foundations and retain great teachers' (Higher Education Support Amendment [Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report] Bill 2023, 2023, p. 7). ITE providers must demonstrate evidence of the quality of support they offer to their students, including PSTs. Given these expectations, we argue that a deeper understanding of the vulnerability attributes of PSTs will ensure stronger career beginnings, as well as time- and cost-effective support. This article asks the following question: How can an in-depth understanding of PSTs' vulnerability attributes inform ITE providers' strategies for delivering timely and high-quality support?

Kelchtermans (2005) emphasised that PSTs' emotions must be comprehended in relation to their vulnerability, which stems from both the structural conditions of teaching and the specific contexts in which they work. In the present article, this view is built upon to highlight the importance of classroom-focused self-understanding and the ability to navigate shifting contextual demands during the process of becoming a teacher. The challenges PSTs face in managing relational and emotional engagement during professional placements are explored, and the issue of how spatial awareness—shaped by structural and cultural contexts—affects their experiences is also considered. Furthermore, how PSTs engage meaningfully with colleagues and students in professional settings is examined, with a focus on the broader political and cultural dimensions that influence their practice.

The professional experience guideline framework of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2024) outlines the characteristics of high-quality professional experience and learning (see also Department of Education, 2023), and it provides critical insights into the attributes of PST vulnerability before, during, and after placements. The aim of offering high-quality and well-structured support to PSTs before, during, and after professional experience placements entails a critical analysis of individuals' needs and vulnerability attributes. Professional experience—which commonly consists of school-based placements, practicums or clinical training—is widely recognised as a critical component of ITE programmes (Fitchett et al., 2018; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Reinhardt, 2017). Despite increasing attention to teacher well-being and support, there remains a paucity of evidence-informed research on the specific vulnerability attributes of PSTs before, during, and after placements. This gap has significant implications for the development of targeted and timely support strategies. In the present study, this gap is addressed to contribute new insights into the nature of PST vulnerability and inform the design of more responsive support frameworks in ITE programmes.

Professional experience has been described as the most important aspect of a PST's preparation (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). Some scholars have also drawn attention to the social dimensions and realities of teaching and classroom engagement (Aprile & Knight, 2020). These social dimensions were underscored by Hubbard-Maniglia and Martensen (2020, p. 126), who argued that classrooms

and pedagogy ‘must now, perhaps more than ever before, be truly transformative if [they are] to offer our students, ourselves and the world around us a way forward’. A well-structured placement provides PSTs with opportunities to explore and enact complex teaching strategies and practices—experiences in which some PSTs may thrive while others may struggle. The importance of organisational socialisation in shaping PSTs’ professional identities and self-esteem has also been highlighted (Amorim & Ribeiro-Silva, 2024).

We argued for a context-conscious understanding when performance standards, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), represent various interconnected and interdependent aspects of teaching practice, knowledge, and engagement (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022) at the graduate level. Call et al. (2021) cautioned that connections between PSTs’ professional learning and APST expectations need to be addressed through appropriate levels of sensitivity. The aim of this article is to emphasise specific attributes of vulnerability that may inform the careful guidance of PSTs’ learning during professional experience placements. Identifying specific attributes to improve support aligns with Goldhaber et al. (2022) focus on the impact of the dispositions and decisions of qualified supervising teachers. In some contexts, they are identified as ‘mentors’, but in this paper, school-based teachers—those who engage in guiding, assessing, directing, and accommodating PSTs in their classroom and school contexts during professional experience learning—are referred to as ‘supervising teachers’. Furthermore, it has been suggested that PSTs who demonstrate higher performance later achieve ‘higher overall clinical evaluation ratings’ and develop more quickly (Goldhaber et al., 2022, p. 1036). In the results of the present study, highly indexed placements emphasise high-impact placements that provide PSTs with in-depth feedback offering ‘specific information about the comparison between a trainee’s observed performance and a standard, given with the intent to improve the trainee’s performance’ (van den Berg et al., 2006, p. 19).

This study was based on the context-conscious understanding development (C—CUD) theory, which allowed for the recognition of the influence of context on PSTs’ vulnerability and its attributes. This theory also enabled the realisation that PSTs’ consciousness of the settings in which they practise their teaching and apply their theoretical knowledge influences their learning. Framing the study based on the search for a deeper understanding of the attributes of vulnerability during professional experience placements in unique contexts (Du Plessis, 2023) demonstrates appreciation of the challenges and needs related to specific school and classroom settings (Du Plessis et al., 2019).

In this article, we argue that different school and Early Childhood centre contexts, diverse students, and differently skilled supervising teachers with varied levels of capacity to offer well-structured feedback have significant impacts on the outcomes of PSTs’ placements. The ability of PSTs to meet teaching standard requirements during placements is influenced by the effectiveness of the collaboration between school systems and HEPs. Effective collaboration provides a platform for potential high-quality, well-structured professional experience opportunities (AITSL, 2022). Scholars have found that poor relationships between stakeholders (employers, teachers, parents, students, universities, and schools) pose challenges for PSTs even before they commence their placements; for example, last-minute placement arrangements offer limited time for PSTs to prepare for a specific context (Department of Education, 2023). The capacity of schools and Early Childhood centres to serve as suitable contexts for PSTs’ professional experience placements is rooted in an ability to provide stability, consistency, high-level collaboration, and high-quality teaching. This ability is often made possible by long-term, experienced supervising teachers and low staff turnover (DandoloPartners, 2021). Appropriate subject specialisation assignments also play a crucial role in determining the quality of PSTs’ professional experiences (Department of Education, 2023). However, despite these factors and challenges having been recognised, few scholars have explored the attributes of PSTs’ vulnerability during their professional experience placements. Hence, there is a gap in the scientific understanding of how this vulnerability affects placement outcomes.

In this paper, we emphasise the demand placed on PSTs to effectively manage internal and external challenges while steering their professional experience placements. Internal challenges include low confidence/self-efficacy (Brevik et al., 2018; Yada et al., 2021), not fitting in the context, feeling disconnected, and placement-related stress and concerns (Matoti & Lekhu, 2016). For example, researchers have demonstrated that PSTs have limited confidence that their skill sets can help them effectively manage diverse student cohorts (Brevik et al., 2018; Cutri et al., 2015; Nepal et al., 2021). Context-related challenges are deeply embedded in pedagogical reasoning and teaching approaches, and the same is true of restricted resources, such as time to prepare lessons, high-quality ITE preparation, and support from stakeholders (Gibbs et al., 2023; Wan, 2017).

Scholars have also discussed the influence of relationships with supervising teachers on PSTs’ experiences during placements (Buckworth, 2017; dos Reis & Braund, 2019). Given this article’s aim of developing an in-depth understanding of PSTs’ vulnerability attributes, which is offered in the sections on the findings and discussion, a critical reflection on PSTs’ challenges and their alignment with the attributes of PSTs’ vulnerability during their efforts to develop and internalise the alignment between theory and practice (Dale & Frye, 2009; Hojeij et al., 2021) is presented. As implied in the main research question, ITE programmes play a critical role in preparing future educators to meet the demands of the teaching profession. However, dropout rates among ITE students remain a concern. A subset of such students has been identified as being at risk of leaving their programmes prematurely. This underscores the need to better understand the challenges and vulnerabilities of PSTs, particularly those at risk of unsatisfactory placement outcomes, placement termination, or attrition in their programme.

This study aims to examine and develop an in-depth understanding of PSTs’ vulnerability attributes to inform and improve ITE providers’ strategies for delivering timely and high-quality support. This focus as research question were guided by a search and data analyses for themes in the data, while the following secondary questions framed the search for a deeper understanding of the contexts of recurring themes:

1. What is the vulnerability discourse during professional experience placements?
2. Which key concepts in the supervising teachers documented feedback highlight the PSTs’ vulnerabilities?
3. Which skill/capacity expectations and standard requirements are the most challenging in ITE?

4. How do fundamental skills and standards reveal challenges related to cultural diversity and sensitivity during professional experience placements?

Considering the ongoing teacher shortages and mounting pressure to facilitate the pipeline into the profession, identifying and addressing these vulnerabilities has significant social, political, and economic implications (Elliott et al., 2020).

2. Methodology and theoretical framing

2.1. Research design

The exploratory, mixed methods approach used in the present study was based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, while the researchers argue that microsystems have a significant impact on the lived experiences of PSTs. This emphasises the impact of these different bio-ecological systems on the support strategies and frameworks in place for PSTs during their placements. Developing a clear understanding of the impact contexts have on PSTs professional experience learning and opportunities to improve teaching practices during placement formed the foundation of strategic preparation of PSTs. The researchers' argument for awareness, focus and timely action regarding PST vulnerability will have a positive effect on transition to the profession and teaching workforce. This argument for development of system and context focused understanding and support is framed by context-conscious understanding development theory (C—CUD theory) (Du Plessis, 2023). Professional experience reports were selected as the dataset for this study because they provide formal evaluations of PSTs' performance within authentic school settings, directly linking university-based program requirements to school-based practice. This source integrates the perspectives of supervising teachers and contextual realities of classrooms, thereby offering a rich and valid basis for exploring the study's research questions. The dataset across two ITE programs and across subject areas and year levels demonstrates awareness of the multifaceted complexities of teaching and learning, as well as the close alignment between context, theory, and practice (Du Plessis, 2023). The focus on context consciousness positions PSTs to identify key contextual factors that influence vulnerability, such as the circumstances of the professional experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991), those influenced by lived experiences linked to the placement (van Manen, 1990), and how sociocultural learning during placements impacts high-quality teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, it emphasises understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders to build a well-structured collection of 'horizons' or perceptions (Gadamer, 1975, 1976), thus optimising preparation, capacity building, and professional readiness.

The aforementioned theoretical framework was based on the following two balancing elements: social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the C—CUD theory (Du Plessis et al., 2019). In Du Plessis and Dreyer (2024) study, attributes of vulnerability linked to context consciousness were highlighted against the background of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework with regard to the impact of context on development and experiences. Paying attention to the lived experiences of PSTs' feelings of vulnerability during professional experience placements supports a deeper understanding of the data. This theoretical framing is based on a sociocultural construct of learning in specific contexts, social spaces, and ecological systems, where PSTs endeavour to align theory with practice (Elliott et al., 2020; Du Plessis et al., 2023).

PSTs' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) is the core of professional learning experience and placement ecological system aligned to Bronfenbrenner and Evans's (2000) theory. This idea acknowledges PSTs as learners and allows observation of their growth in a specific system. Therefore, drawing on Bronfenbrenner and Evans's (2000) theory, we argue that the different ecological systems at play during PSTs' placements influence the quality and interrelated outcomes of their placements. Thus, the considerable tension that can exist between ecological contexts and between theory and practice is examined here in relation to PSTs' unique needs, such as targeted support, systems that nurture confidence, the growth of self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging to their ITE units, placement classrooms and schools, and the teaching profession in general.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Data source, sample, and procedures

This document analysis study was conducted between 2023 and 2024, and it was intended to inform a future large-scale analysis. It received ethical approval (HE13–132) to include archived documents. The final experience reports of 304 supervising teachers (243 identified as females and 61 as males) were examined.

Professional experience reports (PER) consisted of a 37-item APST-aligned scale together with a qualitative section prompting supervising teachers to comment on PSTs' performance, strengths, and areas for development. While these open-ended prompts were structured around the APST items, they also elicited observations that extended beyond the criteria. In presenting the findings, direct comments from supervising teachers are reported as data, while thematic patterns drawn from these comments are identified as the researchers' interpretation. Quantitative ratings were provided for each item—such as '*Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*' and '*Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students*'—using either a 5-point scale (5 = exceeding to 1 = not developed) or a 3-point scale (3 = exceeding, 2 = competent, 1 = developing) depending on the unit.

2.2.2. Program context

Reports included first and second in-classroom placements, which varied across subject areas and school students' year levels. The sample comprised two undergraduate units and one postgraduate unit. The sections of the reports that were used for this study, *fundamental skills for professional experience*, were identical. The Research Project and Professional Experience unit had the highest level

of enrolment, with 47.7 % of the PSTs (145 total; 105 females, 40 males). This was followed by the Teaching Development 2 (EDD236) (86 total; 75 females, 11 males), Teaching Development 3 (EDD326) (58 total; 50 females, 8 males), and Teaching for Cultural Diversity – (TCD) units (15 total; 13 females, 2 males). Placement duration varied across these units. In Teaching Development 2, it was 15 days. In Teaching Development 3 and Research Project and Professional Experience (EDD055), the placement lasted 20 days for all the PSTs. In Teaching for Cultural Diversity – (TCD), most of the PSTs ($n = 14$) completed 20 days, with one participant completing only 12 days.

2.2.3. Data analysis

As discussed in the introduction, some PSTs encounter challenges during placements that put them at risk of failure. In this study, vulnerable PSTs can be categorised as follows: (a) PSTs who experienced challenging and traumatic incidents, (b) PSTs perceived as being at risk who were successful because of support, and (c) PSTs who withdrew from their placements or who were withdrawn by their HEPs or schools. To identify these PSTs, various aspects were investigated, including academic performance indicators and demographic characteristics (e.g., content, personal, and socioeconomic factors), professional identity, attrition, and psychosocial assessments.

The exploratory, mixed methods approach used in this pilot study involved a four-step analysis process: (1) thematic analysis was conducted to identify key challenges and vulnerability concepts; (2) this was followed by NVivo-assisted analysis; (3) quantitative analysis was carried out with IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29) to identify the primary challenges within key teaching domains, as evidenced in the archived professional experience reports; (4) triangulation integrated the qualitative and quantitative findings to ensure alignment and uncover connections between the datasets.

In Phase 1, the qualitative phase, we analysed open-ended comments drawn from 25 placement reports. Two members of the research team independently conducted manual, inductive coding, guided by an open-coding approach consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The expectations outlined in the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022) were used as a reference framework. Each researcher first read through the data multiple times to gain familiarity, then generated initial codes by highlighting recurrent key words and phrases that captured participants' contextual and lived experiences. After independent coding, the researchers met to compare code lists, resolve discrepancies through discussion, and reach consensus. The resulting codes were then organised into categories and refined iteratively into broader themes that captured recurring patterns in the data. This process ensured both rigor and transparency, with inter-coder agreement established through discussion and consolidation of codes, leading to the final thematic structure reported in the paper. We also acknowledge our own positionality as researchers with backgrounds in teacher education, recognising that our professional experiences shaped the interpretive process; this reflexive stance was addressed through independent coding, discussion, and consensus-building.

Phase 2 involved a more in-depth qualitative analysis using NVivo to identify emergent themes related to attributes of vulnerability during the placements and their implications for meeting the graduate level of the APST. In Phase 3, the quantitative phase, a total score for each of the seven key teaching domains was obtained by summing the scores of the relevant focus areas. Depending on the type of unit, focus areas were assessed using either a 5-point grading scale or a 3-point grading scale. As a result, seven numerical variables were generated for each PST, showing their performance across the respective domains. These variables formed the basis for the quantitative analysis, which included mean comparisons, z -score calculations, and regression analysis. Industry partners' expectation that ITE providers deliver high-quality placements to enhance PSTs' learning highlights the importance of providing structured and targeted support throughout the placement experience.

In Phase 4, we used methodological triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to integrate the qualitative and quantitative results to assess the PSTs' performance against the APST (2022). In this phase, we (a) checked whether the qualitative themes matched the quantitative results, and (b) we used the qualitative data to explain the quantitative findings. This approach improved the reliability of our results and clarified how vulnerabilities affected the PSTs' professional performance during the placements.

These questions also guided the analysis of the challenges reflected in the documents. This analysis focused on four sections that covered the main teaching areas: (a) fundamental skills assessment, (b) focused assessment, (c) assessment of the alignment with standard expectations, and (d) context-specific assessment of standard descriptors.

3. Findings

3.1. Qualitative findings

In the first phase of the study, eight key themes linked to PSTs' vulnerability became apparent: (1) teaching strategies practice, (2) well-being, (3) engagement, (4) classroom management, (5) school community and belongingness, (6) capacity to receive and accept feedback, (7) content uncertainty, and (8) professionalism and soft skills.. In the second phase (NVivo coding), five qualitative themes were identified that characterised the PSTs' vulnerability attributes during their placements. These themes also underscored the potential implications for their performance as evaluated against the graduate level of the APST. In addition, to capture the participants' experiences, quotes from the professional experience reports (PERs) were used along with their document codes.

3.1.1. Teaching strategies practice

The support provided by the supervising teachers to increase the PSTs' scaffolding and differentiation during lessons, as well as to enable them to continue implementing active and interactive learning, can empower them to establish appropriate learning goals for their students (PER-28).

3.1.2. *Personal well-being*

The well-being of the PSTs during their placements was influenced by the supportive supervisory environment, external demands, and opportunities for skill development, as reflected in the experiences shared by the supervising teachers. These called before the placements, had face-to-face meetings with the PSTs during the placements, and emailed or called them at the end of the placements to ensure that they felt supported in every way (PER-20). However, the supervising teachers mentioned that external pressures, such as additional assessment tasks, family responsibilities, financial constraints, limited social support, and remote or rural placements, created significant challenges for the PSTs. These pressures diverted their focus from high-quality lesson planning and preparation during the placements; they also intensified their vulnerability discourse and harmed their confidence to engage professionally in instructional settings. Vulnerable PSTs often try to manage multiple special extensions for various assessment tasks, which develop into additional study responsibilities during the placement period, while they should only focus on lesson planning and teaching preparation. These special extensions for tasks and assessment projects have a ripple effect on progress and result in additional (delayed) placements, withdrawals, and unsatisfactory completion. This negatively impacts PSTs, supervising teachers, and/or the placement schools. This emphasises the importance of having an in-depth understanding of, and timely identifying, PSTs' vulnerabilities during placement—regardless of the placement's length. Overall, the themes were evident across datasets, irrespective of practicum duration, suggesting consistency in the types of experiences reported by PSTs. Nonetheless, it remains possible that practicum length influenced how these themes were experienced and articulated, warranting further investigation in future research.

3.1.3. *Teaching and learning engagement*

Another attribute of vulnerability identified in the study was uncertainty around assessment criteria, which made it difficult to determine whether the PSTs were meeting expectations during their placements. A proficient teacher (PER-14) expressed concern about passing a PST without clear guidance. She said, 'I needed a document clearly stating the things students should be doing/displaying to pass the placement, as I was very unsure for a while whether she [a PST] should have been passed or not'. These pedagogy mobility strategies to ensure learning and engagement determine standard achievements mean that PSTs can effectively establish challenging learning goals that are appropriate for students.

3.1.4. *Classroom management: awareness of needs*

Some of the participating PSTs were able to interpret syllabus documents and programmes but struggled with practical classroom management skills and lacked confidence in employing behaviour management strategies, especially at the high school level (PER-13). They did not possess a deep understanding of the complex needs of different students, and they were unsuccessful in making the necessary adjustments to improve learning opportunities through curriculum content accessibility (PER-468). This was particularly evident in special assistance schools, where the PSTs found it difficult to engage with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those who had been unsuccessful in mainstream settings, and students with mental health challenges or other diagnosed disabilities. The participants reported challenges in managing students with significant learning gaps and continuous attendance issues. The PSTs who lacked confidence in addressing the different learning needs of students also had difficulty tailoring their lessons accordingly or using a range of differentiated instruction strategies to engage all learners (PER-347). However, some participating PSTs acknowledged their challenges in developing strategies to manage student behaviour and differentiate lessons to cater to students' learning needs. For example, PER-488 showed awareness of how students learnt and reported their ability to effectively plan and deliver lessons that engaged students. PER-69 quickly developed an awareness of appropriate student use of devices. PER-504 carefully planned their lessons and delivered engaging strategies and activities that enabled their students to extend themselves.

PER-504 considered the timeframe of a professional experience placement insufficient for PSTs to develop an understanding of the various learning strengths and challenges present in a classroom. They added that PSTs also found it challenging to fully commit to and immerse themselves in professional learning opportunities to increase their knowledge of how to apply instructional strategies effectively across various teaching contexts. According to PER-504, this is a skill that must be developed to ensure a smoothly run classroom environment that fosters student engagement and learning. PER-504 also mentioned that PSTs should endeavour to learn more practical instructional approaches and proactively apply them in the classroom, thus enhancing the learning environment for all students. According to PER-387, the participating PSTs had limited awareness of students' learning needs. PER-504 also stated that supervising teachers are highly aware of the ethics and conduct required of the teaching profession and see PSTs' classroom management as a priority. This supervising teacher added that PSTs' engagement in formal and informal tasks, such as providing ongoing feedback to students about their progress while fairly assessing them and offering advice during lessons throughout their placements, shows their self-awareness and reflectiveness. Throughout PSTs' professional experiences, developing an awareness of individual and group learning requirements builds the capacity to plan and teach different lessons for a diverse range of learners.

3.1.5. *School community and feelings of belonging*

The participants identified several issues related to staffing and taking time off from work, including difficulties with staff absences (PER-3), limited numbers of teachers (PER-19), and communication regarding expected arrival and leave times as required by the school (PER-1). PER-3 shared that because of staff absences from professional learning, casual (relief) or supplement teachers often acted as supervising teachers for PSTs. These challenges were particularly problematic because the findings indicate that the effectiveness of placements was aligned with well-structured supervision arrangements. According to PER-160, careful guidance was needed to ensure consistently engaging and innovative lessons that catered to the diverse needs of students. The document analysis showed that the PSTs with a strong sense of self-efficacy regarding their ability to create positive and inclusive classroom environments demonstrated confidence, engagement, and a sense of belonging. These aspects were emphasised in the documents as enabling the

successful linking of theory and practice.

The timing of placements could be problematic if it was after the formal assessment period for all the year groups; when this was the case, there were many revision lessons and assessments, which eroded teaching time (PER-515). As a result, teaching opportunities were restricted. Restricted preparation made it hard to create a positive and supportive classroom environment, a sense of belonging, and opportunities to encourage students to take ownership of their learning (PER-519). The PSTs' disconnect from the school community, planning discussion, and context awareness negatively influenced their commitment to developing and fostering a culture of enquiry, critical thinking, and the inclusion of thought-provoking activities in their lessons (Skall, 2020).

3.1.6. *The capacity to receive and accept feedback*

The PSTs who were receptive to feedback from their supervising teachers regarding content, student management, and the planning of future learning also seemed to be responsive when engaging with parents/carers. They perceived the education process as built on contacting home for both positive and negative classroom incidents (PER-556). As mentioned in the previous section, high-quality feedback was influenced by the timely sharing of lesson plans, and the PSTs who were at risk of delivering unsuccessful lessons because they consistently failed to receive high-quality feedback due to their late submission of lesson plans were unlikely to learn to design good lesson plans and deliver excellence (PER-276). According to PER-571, it was necessary to focus on the development of strategies for dealing with complex cases of behaviour, but this development required time and experience. The findings show that PSTs must carefully reflect on feedback to understand why changes are needed and how to bring them about, and they must discuss with their supervising teachers how to implement the feedback in their lesson planning and teaching practices. However, some participating PSTs paid little attention to feedback and rarely implemented it in their teaching practices. This limited their potential to further develop their teaching practices. As a result, their supervisors' daily feedback on their lesson plans and teaching was quite repetitive. PER-62 adapted their teaching strategies based on the in-depth qualitative feedback they received while continuing to deepen their understanding of student development and how it affects learning so that they could facilitate inclusive learning experiences. Their example shows that PSTs would benefit from further guidance to fully implement teaching strategies that cater to all students. PSTs should continue to seek out and apply a variety of teaching strategies (e.g., inquiry-based differentiated teaching, scaffolded learning, and direct instruction) to motivate students to fully participate in classroom activities. Maintaining a high level of organisation when planning lessons and implementing learning programmes can help PSTs overcome hurdles and challenges in the classroom by reflecting on their teaching practices and embracing feedback (PER-480).

3.1.7. *Content uncertainty and lesson planning*

PSTs who are uncertain about the subject content, are not well organised, and struggle with time management will probably be unable to share their lesson plans in a timely manner and submit sufficiently detailed lesson plans, resulting in missed opportunities for feedback (PER-276). These PSTs will not have valuable opportunities to ask questions about all areas of the curriculum, classroom strategies, learning engagement, and how to implement procedures. PSTs need a thorough understanding of the subject content and the required materials and resources in a timely and scaffolded manner. They are expected to have their lesson plans with them while they are teaching and to be aware of the time allocated for the lessons to be taught and consolidated. Failure in these areas can result in incomplete lessons and can create confusion for students.

The qualitative findings show that the PSTs who obtained lower grades (e.g., 'developing' or 'attention needed, not developed') in the reports experienced difficulties with pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, differentiation in lessons, behaviour management, creation of an inclusive classroom, and school communication. They also exhibited restricted lesson planning. A supervising teacher said that they had told PER-62 on numerous occasions that their lesson plans needed attention in terms of being age appropriate, meeting achievable expectations, and managing student behaviour. They were also told to delve into the standards and actively utilise them in planning and guiding their professional learning journey. The supervising teacher also told them to focus on applying their learning effectively to their teaching practices to improve student learning outcomes and to continue to familiarise themselves with teaching practices and ensure complete adherence to them to foster a safe and conducive learning environment. They were also told to hone their skills in fostering a collaborative and trusting relationship with parents/carers, respecting their confidentiality, and working sensitively while their understanding was still developing. They should also work on creating more cohesive lesson plans that employ teaching strategies appropriate for the subject content to enhance the students' learning experiences and avoid compromising the lesson outcomes.

PSTs who are uncertain about the content sequence often deliver lessons that are confusing to students, disjointed, or without good flow (PER-515). The supervising teachers shared that it was concerning when they had to interject and give tips to PSTs during class. When this happened, lesson plans were mostly bullet points written on a piece of paper, without in-depth insight into the content. The PSTs in question were encouraged to spend some time writing detailed lesson plans, which should be broken down into sections of between 5 and 10 min and include what they would do after entering the room and how they would get the students organised and ready to learn more quickly. The lessons had already lasted 20 min before the students got to the point of learning content; sometimes, this was due to behaviour issues, as the pupils were given too much time to transition and settle down (PER-515). PSTs' ability to prepare detailed lesson plans in a timely manner for feedback purposes was identified as a challenge, but also as a key aspect of success and a crucial factor influencing PSTs growth. It offered opportunities to ask questions about all areas of the curriculum, classroom strategies, learning engagement, and procedure implementation (PER-517).

3.1.8. *Preparation for the placements, professionalism, and soft skills*

PER-74 commented that the impact of oral language, body language, and tone needed to be positive when delivering a lesson to

engage students and ensure that the lesson was inclusive. This positive impact enables all students to achieve and experience learning, regardless of their abilities. PSTs often find it difficult to become valued members of a school. However, in this study, the supervising teachers mentioned that committed PSTs are seen as future staff members, especially if they demonstrate a strong passion for teaching and approach the career's challenges with enthusiasm (PER-571). PER-52 identified these PSTs as those who have the 'it factor' of teaching. The compassion and ethical approaches of the participating PSTs were particularly evident in their interactions with students with mental health challenges. According to PER-52, PSTs would benefit from the opportunity to work with a variety of students, including those with diverse linguistic, religious, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Our findings show that in inclusive classroom settings, respectful and culturally responsive approaches help students learn and build stronger relationships with their families. Therefore, creating an environment where all pupils feel valued and included is important for promoting equity and encouraging active engagement.

3.1.9. Responsibilities and engagement: supervising teacher and liaison officer support for PSTs

The results highlight the importance of communication, structured engagement, and in-person visits from university liaison officers to schools and PSTs. They also emphasise the need for more consistent and meaningful professional experience liaison officer (PELO) support for placement school staff. The need for face-to-face support was widely recognised (PER-3, PER-5, PER-10, PER-12, and PER-20). An assistant principal who acted as supervisor (PER-3) commented that visits from PELOs were beneficial for vulnerable PSTs. The findings show that a high satisfaction level resulted from effective communication, particularly in terms of timeliness, collaboration, and ongoing engagement, throughout the placement process. A university academic (PER-1) highlighted the value of consistent communication for vulnerable PSTs, especially when a HEP liaison officer communicated with both the supervising teacher and the school placement coordinator before and during the placement. This was important because it helped develop a full understanding of PSTs' vulnerability and established mutual connections between the parties (coordinator, HEP liaison officer, supervising teacher, and PST) relevant to the placement and related processes.

Recommendations were also made for increased engagement between universities and schools to identify the attributes of vulnerability of PSTs in placements. A highly accomplished teacher stated that discussions between schools and HEPs could enable the two parties to develop better relationships. Teachers were willing to talk to universities and help in this regard (PER-10). Regular engagement and collaboration among HEPs and industry partners throughout placements were also seen as beneficial in addressing PSTs' vulnerabilities in a timely manner. An experienced teacher (PER-19) expressed the need to '[check] in more regularly with students [PSTs], possibly at the beginning and midpoint or the midpoint and end'. Similarly, PER-8, a department head, noted the influence of 'quick informal meetings/phone calls to ensure that all the parties involved are getting the best out of the placement'.

3.2. Quantitative findings

All the reviewed final reports documents included the same focus areas for evaluating PSTs, and a two-level grading scale was used across the chosen ITE units with embedded professional experience placements for this pilot (pseudonyms were used for the units). Regarding Teaching Development 2 (EDD236) and Teaching Development 3 (EDD326), the supervising teachers assessed the PSTs' performance using a 5-point grading scale with standard descriptors that ranged from 'exceeding' to 'not developed'. In contrast, the final reports for the Teaching for Cultural Diversity – (TCD) and the Research content and Professional Experience (EDD055) unit included assessments of PSTs' performance that used a 5-point and a 3-point grading scale (the latter with the descriptors 'exceeding', 'competent', and 'developing'). In addition, due to the varying numbers of items in each key domain (ranging from 4 to 7) and the grading scales across the units, z scores were used to standardise the data for accurate analysis and comparison.

First, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to assess internal consistency in the domains, all of which showed strong reliability. The domain 'knowing students and how they learn' (6 items) had excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.926$), while 'knowing the content and how to teach it' (6 items) showed strong consistency ($\alpha = 0.880$). 'Planning for and implement effective teaching and learning' (7 items) and 'creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments' (5 items) also demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.899$ and 0.888 , respectively). 'Assess, provide feedback, and report on student learning' (5 items) had excellent consistency ($\alpha = 0.902$). The domains 'engaging in professional learning' (4 items) and 'engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community' (4 items) showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.897$ and 0.849 , respectively). Overall, the 37-item scale demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.980$).

The analysis of the mean (M) z scores across the seven domains revealed notable variation in the PST's performance during the placements. The lowest mean scores were observed in the domains 'engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community' (mean $z = -0.927$) and 'engaging in professional learning' (mean $z = -0.854$), which indicates significant challenges in these areas. The domains 'assessing, providing feedback, and reporting on student learning' (mean $z = -0.243$), 'knowing the content and how to teach it' (mean $z = -0.116$), and 'creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments' (mean $z = -0.041$) also fell below the overall mean, though to a lesser extent. In contrast, the PSTs demonstrated stronger performance in 'knowing students and how they learn' (mean $z = 0.609$), with the highest scores found in 'planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning' (mean $z = 1.585$). These findings highlight these areas as key strengths.

Given the non-normal distribution of the dataset, a bootstrap method was employed instead of parametric tests. Multiple regression analysis revealed a highly significant model that accounted for 78.6 % of the variance in 'engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community' with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community', $F(6, 287) = 175.96$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.786$, which indicates this domain as the main placement challenge in this study. This challenge was significantly predicted by three teaching domains: 'knowing students and how they learn' ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < .001$), 'creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning

environments' ($\beta = 0.276, p < .001$), and 'engaging in professional learning' ($\beta = 0.282, p < .001$). The 95 % bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence intervals for these predictors excluded zero, which confirmed the stability and reliability of their effects. Conversely, 'knowing the content and how to teach it' ($\beta = -.047, p = .487$), 'planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning' ($\beta = 0.041, p = .570$), and 'assessing, providing feedback, and reporting on student learning' ($\beta = 0.105, p = .070$) were not statistically significant, suggesting a negligible influence on 'engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community' in the model.

At the level of individual teaching focus areas, the quantitative findings show a range of challenges encountered by the PSTs during their professional placements. The following were significant difficulties: 'engaging parents/carers in the educative process' ($M = 3.7898, z \text{ score} = -1.56$), 'strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ($M = 3.8339, z \text{ score} = -1.32$), and 'reporting on student achievement' ($M = 3.8407, z \text{ score} = -1.30$).

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore concepts of attributes of vulnerability to ensure the timely identification of PSTs at risk of dropping out and examine their biggest challenges and reasons for feeling vulnerable. Early identification allows for targeted interventions to support these kinds of students and mitigate dropout risks. Predicated on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, the findings from this exploratory mixed methods study provide insight towards the multi-layered and context-conscious factors that impact PSTs attributes of vulnerability during professional experience placements. More specifically, this work highlights inherent challenges in professional experience placements suitably preparing PSTs to develop and exhibit the characteristics of high-quality learning and practice and evidencing the requisite graduate standards for teachers (AITSL, 2022). Study findings suggest that graduate standards related to knowing how to teach content, planning and implementing effective teaching and learning, creating and maintaining safe learning environments, and engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community were the strongest contributors to PSTs attributes of vulnerability. Broadly, the qualitative and quantitative outcomes of this study represent an in-depth understanding of PSTs attributes of vulnerability that can inform ITE providers' strategies for providing timely and high-quality support and improve the quality of professional experience placements.

4.1. PSTs' vulnerability discourse in relation to professional experience placements

In this study, we identified attributes of vulnerability discourse and procedural strategies occurring before, during, and after placements that supported vulnerable or at-risk PSTs. We also unveiled what timely support looks like in real placement contexts, particularly in situations where various 'at-risk' incidents happen during professional experience placements. The quantitative findings show that 'engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community' was the most challenging domain of the APST that contributed to PSTs' vulnerability discourse during professional placements. The qualitative results confirm this finding, and they highlight how timely collaboration, the sharing of information, and the clarity of the guidelines provided by HEPs can turn challenging professional experience placements into valuable learning opportunities. Similarly, Du Plessis and Razmjooee (2025) reported that during placements, PSTs experienced stress and anxiety due to limited face-to-face communication and delayed responses from ITE providers. The results of the present study also show that the detailed, targeted, and tailored support offered by the HEPs through their offices for professional learning, in collaboration with the unit and course coordinators, was productive, and impactful. However, clear communication with and from the ITE providers was identified as a key challenge for PSTs (Du Plessis & Razmjooee, 2025). The authors acknowledge that the varying lengths of practicum placements may have shaped some of the findings, particularly around engagement with parents and carers, as such relationships require time to develop. Although the themes and challenges were evident across datasets regardless of practicum length, practicum duration remains a contextual factor that warrants further consideration. The themes were evident across datasets regardless of practicum length, suggesting consistency in the kinds of experiences reported by PSTs. Nonetheless, it remains possible that practicum duration influenced how these themes were experienced and articulated, and this warrants further investigation in future research.

The findings also highlight that face-to-face visits by PELOs were particularly beneficial for vulnerable PSTs, and they provided opportunities for early intervention and individualised support. This shows that the relationship between a vulnerable student and a tertiary liaison officer influences placement satisfaction and the communication between the industry partners involved in the professional experience placement, such as the liaison officer, supervising teacher, school leadership, and PST. Other aspects whose impacts should not be overlooked include the evaluation of HEP engagement and awareness of workforce challenges, improvement of the placement-offer process, supervision of teacher support and school needs during placement engagement, and healthy partnership processes. It is often said that it takes a village to raise a child; we emphasise that it takes a village of industry partners to produce profession-ready PSTs. As mentioned earlier, context-conscious microsystem support frameworks must be established and implemented in a consistent and timely manner. The findings show the vital role of collaboration between HEPs and industry partners for PSTs who face unique challenges while preparing for their teaching careers. They also have broader policy implications for HEPs and the education industry regarding well-structured support systems for PSTs, especially vulnerable PSTs managing challenging placement environments. The policy focus on microsystem support framework development aligns with the strategic preparation of PSTs for a successful transition to the teaching workforce.

In addition, the quantitative findings indicate that 'engaging parents/carers in the educative process' was the most challenging focus area of the APST. This result was supported by the qualitative data, which showed that limited attendance at and few contributions to parent-teacher interviews impeded growth in PSTs' ability to engage parents/carers in the education process during

placements (PER-28). Moreover, developing respectful relationships with parents/carers is a skill that needs to be carefully honed and guided (PER-304).

The future of PSTs is impacted by the commitment of supervising teachers to guide them in applying their academic content knowledge during their placements and successfully aligning theory and practice, thus reducing their vulnerability discourse and supporting their professional confidence (Dale & Frye, 2009). Awareness of the challenges in PSTs' development of subject-specific confidence will enhance targeted support during placements. In addition, the interpretation of teaching standards by experienced supervising teachers and the expectations and commitment of the wider school and educational community mould PSTs' skills in effectively linking theory with practice, which are argued to be fundamental to strong beginnings (Du Plessis et al., 2023).

The qualitative findings show that external stressors, such as additional assessments and family responsibilities, negatively affected the PSTs' well-being and increased their vulnerability discourse during the placements. Other studies (Masood et al., 2002; Schwarzer et al., 2023), PSTs mentioned schools' high expectations of them (beyond the relevant standards), the financial stress linked to transportation, and the time spent commuting to and from the placement school as aspects intensifying the above-mentioned challenges. In addition, our study's quantitative data indicate a high proportion of female PSTs with family responsibilities, as well as individuals with diverse learning needs and restricted social support, which can hinder their ability to persist in their programmes. The need to balance academic demands with work commitments or caregiving responsibilities may lead one to feel overwhelmed and stressed (Castleman & Meyer, 2019; Cook, 2021). Personal health issues and financial concerns (e.g., tuition costs, living expenses, or debt accumulation) can also pose significant barriers to PSTs' persistence by exacerbating feelings of vulnerability among at-risk PSTs. Worries about financial stability may distract students from their academic pursuits and prevent them from focusing on their studies. For PSTs undertaking placements in remote or rural schools, the geographical distance from current employment locations, the pressure of family commitments, the ability to acquire accommodations, the necessity of travelling long distances for the placement, and the fact of missing familiar lifestyle settings represent hurdles that must be overcome (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018).

In addition, the findings show that the difficulty of completing coursework or meeting academic expectations often left vulnerable PSTs struggling with their academic duties, including staying on track with assessment tasks. These challenges may stem from inadequate prior preparation, mismatched expectations, or difficulty adjusting to the academic rigour of ITE programmes (Kim & Ko, 2017). As a result, special extensions for tasks often pushed the submission of these assessments in the placement period. These extensions resulted in additional delays that impacted the PSTs, supervising teachers, and placement schools due to divided attention and time pressures. Based on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023 (2023), the Australian government directs HEPs to establish processes for identifying PSTs who are at risk of not completing their studies and provide support to them to avoid this outcome.

Capacity building and high-quality teaching during professional experience placements are acknowledged as the core aspects of learning during ITE. PSTs' uncertainty about their suitability for the teaching profession or their alignment with programme goals and values can influence their confidence, self-efficacy, and professional identities as teachers. At-risk placements that eventually lead to successful programme completion because of a fit-for-purpose support plan are positive outcomes, but they do not indicate that students do not need further support after their placements. PSTs at risk of dropping out may grapple with questions of professional identity and purpose, doubting their suitability for the teaching profession or their ability to meet programme expectations. Furthermore, uncertainty about their career paths or prospects can contribute to feelings of disillusionment and disengagement (Huang et al., 2022). PSTs whose placements are terminated by the schools or centres need careful guidance to reflect on the specific challenges that emerged during their placements. Careful analysis and awareness of oneself and of being a teacher do not come naturally to all PSTs, who often need to be guided to become reflective teachers.

At-risk ITE students may experience psychosocial difficulties, such as impostor syndrome, low self-efficacy, or feelings of not belonging and isolation (Elliott et al., 2020). A lack of social support networks or mentorship opportunities can exacerbate these challenges and further undermine student confidence and resilience (Kong & Wong, 2022). Emotions experienced during placements show that deeply held beliefs and transformation strategies often impose normative beliefs and trigger intense feelings of disconnect and resistance to unsatisfactory working conditions (Kelchtermans, 2005). Feelings of isolation or loneliness can deprive at-risk ITE students of a sense of belonging and heighten their vulnerability (Cook, 2021). These feelings develop because of limited social support from peers, faculty members, or mentors. Thus, connection is crucial for student well-being and persistence in ITE programmes (Magaldi et al., 2018).

The findings of this study show the influence of school community, feelings of belonging, communication, collaboration, PSTs' capacity to receive and accept feedback on specific school contexts, and how this feedback is implemented.

4.2. Understanding PSTs' vulnerabilities through the feedback of supervising teachers

The results show that the level of engagement with feedback of the PSTs influenced their professional development. Those who accepted the constructive feedback of their supervising teachers enhanced their skills in lesson planning, classroom management, and parent engagement. However, some PSTs paid limited attention to feedback, and this harmed the development of their teaching practices, which resulted in repetitive mistakes. In addition, effective feedback is linked to timely, reflective communication with supervising teachers. To enhance professional development, PSTs require ongoing feedback that facilitates reflective practice (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2024).

4.3. Cultural sensitivity and diversity challenges in professional experience placements: insights from fundamental skills and standards

The quantitative findings show that ‘strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ were the second most challenging focus area for the PSTs. The quantitative results also indicate that diverse cultural backgrounds and ethnicities were attributes of vulnerability (Basit et al., 2007; Cutri et al., 2015; Shim, 2020), especially when context, culture, habit, country, and space were experienced as different and unwelcoming. The education and training of teachers is an issue of national concern, especially because ethnic minority teacher trainees withdraw from initial teacher training courses. However, not all diversity-related phenomena can be categorised as racism. Awareness of the impact effective implementation of diversity and inclusion, as well as perceived racism have on PST draw attention to related vulnerabilities. In-depth understanding of barriers during placements, the role of professional identity and experiences of discrimination such as racial mistreatment play on success or failure during placements can inform the organisation of well-structured placement (Banaji et al., 2021; Cutri et al., 2015). The influence of professional socialisation (Amorim & Ribeiro-Silva, 2024) and professional identity development during the scaffolding of attention to contextual factors (e.g., the classroom climate, school culture, and teacher performance standards) necessitates a deep understanding of context-conscious pedagogical decisions.

Regarding other influencing factors are heavy workloads (Danyluk et al., 2021), disruptive student behaviour, large class sizes, and out-of-field teaching placements (Du Plessis, 2023). In the literature, it is emphasised that PSTs’ placement preparation must begin well ahead of their arrival at their placement schools (AITSL, 2022). PSTs’ concerns include lack of remuneration (Australian Education Union Victorian Branch, 2022), student appraisals, classroom management, preparation and implementation of lesson plans, and differentiation in lessons (D’Intino & Wang, 2021; Matoti & Lekhu, 2016; Shelton et al., 2023). Regarding differentiation in lessons, given the current emphasis on inclusivity, PSTs are expected to possess practical skills to implement student-centred differentiated approaches to curriculum enactment, instruction, and assessment in order to meet the needs of individual pupils (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022; Whitley et al., 2019). According to Ure et al. (2017), ITE providers have a limited capacity to impact how placement schools engage with ITE, either in the enactment of expectations regarding performance standards or in the identification of supervising teachers who are prepared to direct and assess the performance of PSTs during placements. Thus, at-risk PSTs may feel uncertain about their career prospects or job opportunities in the teaching profession. Concerns about job market competitiveness, salary prospects, and job satisfaction can contribute to feelings of vulnerability and apprehension about the future among at-risk PSTs (Cook, 2021).

5. Limitations

This study has two main limitations. First, the analysis was restricted to report documents from four teaching units; therefore, the results may not be generalisable across all teacher education programmes. Second, the study was conducted within a limited time frame, from 2023 to 2024, which constrained the number of documents that could be reviewed.

6. Conclusion

Understanding the concepts, challenges, and causes of vulnerability among ITE students at risk of dropping out is essential for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance student persistence and success (Cook, 2021). By addressing the academic, personal, psychosocial, and professional identity difficulties faced by at-risk ITE students, educators and policymakers can help foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment that promotes student retention and graduation (Aliazas et al., 2023). The findings of the present study offer a deeper understanding of why ITE students might repeat or withdraw from placements or why their placements might be terminated by schools. There will be an additional cost to ITE providers when vulnerable students leave a course because the providers fail to identify vulnerability in students in a timely manner and thus fail to support them.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Anna Elizabeth Du Plessis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Joshua Matthews:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Casey Mainsbridge:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Maryam Razmjooe:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Darin Gorry:** Conceptualization.

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