Article

Reflections on Initial Teacher Education and Theoretical Framing of Applied Pedagogical Knowledge with a Context-Consciousness: An International Study

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Abstract: A stable teacher workforce is developed through a combination of quality preparation and tailored support. This study offers different lenses for the development of an in-depth understanding of professional experiences and the implications of professional experiences for initial teacher education (ITE) and early career teachers across international borders. In a globalized education environment, transnational research facilitates the acquisition of an in-depth understanding of the challenges encountered in ITE programs. These programs are frequently criticized for the quality of preparation of prospective teachers for teaching. Teacher preparedness, high expectations, targeted support, leadership awareness, and wellbeing lived experiences are concerns that if left unresolved over an extended period, will influence the confidence of preservice and beginning teachers, with implications for their career decisions. This qualitative study involved preservice and beginning teachers ($n = 151$) and their mentors ($n = 123$) from South Africa, as well as preservice and beginning teachers ($n = 144$) and school leaders ($n = 763$) from Australia. The research design was based on the context-conscious understanding development (C-CUD) theory, as a comprehensive theory to support the reflecting awareness of the context impact on preservice and beginning teachers. The findings unveil preservice and beginning teachers' perceptions about lived experiences during professional learning and the perceived gap between theory and practice. In addition, the findings highlight expectations based on teacher standards and classroom challenges, as well as the realities teachers encounter even before entering the workforce and how these could be overcome.

Keywords: applied pedagogical knowledge; preparing teachers; teacher standards; quality teaching; pedagogical mobility; strategic flexibility; challenging teaching contexts

1. Introduction

"In the school where I did practice teaching, things happen very differently from what we learned in our studies. Quite honestly, I felt lost and am no longer sure that I want to become a teacher".

(Preservice teacher, South Africa)

This sentiment reflects the need to develop preservice teachers' context-consciousness, aligned to theory and practice. Accordingly, in this study, we present preservice and beginning teachers' accounts of their lived experiences during their final professional placement; articulate the relationships between the three pillars of preparedness, context-consciousness, and sound theoretical reasoning; and practice reflecting applied pedagogical mobility. In agreement with the work previously completed by Cosgun and Derin (2021) [1], we identify teachers in the first five years of teaching as beginning teachers.

An unambiguous conceptualization of the problem turns this study's focus to an in-depth understanding of the value of aligning and linking theory and practice to support

the pedagogical reasoning of preservice teachers and early career teachers. The international lenses offered in this paper endeavor to explore opportunities to build a clearer understanding of national challenges within an international reflective ITE space. Additionally, the investigation aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the role professional knowledge plays in preservice and beginning teachers' confidence and preparedness to manage classroom realities.

The expectations regarding quality ITE programs are captured in existing transnational research (Botha and Goosen 2022 [2]; Rowan, Kline and Mayer 2017 [3]) that offers a broad lens on concerns regarding preservice teachers' preparedness. The research also offers insights into how initial teacher education (ITE) programs are expected to shape professional knowledge, teaching capacity, and the accomplishment of policy expectations such as relevant national teacher standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2018 [4]; South African Council for Educators [SACE] 2020 [5]), aligned to theory and practice. Against this background, we argue for the need to develop preservice and graduating teachers' capacity to explore theoretically framed innovative and context-conscious forms of pedagogical reasoning.

In this study, the authors reflect on the link between theory and practice as context-conscious pedagogical reasoning in its role in applied pedagogical knowledge, tailored to students' learning needs. Through three different lenses, a reflective approach is taken to standard frameworks for teachers, expectations, and the conceptualization of teacher preparedness and classroom readiness. The reflective *lenses* offer agency and a voice through the sharing of the lived experiences of preservice and graduating teachers across the international context-consciousness of classroom realities. The awareness of expectations is explored in relation to quality professional experience as expressed by stakeholders regarding the preparation of prospective teachers for the workplace (AITSL 2018 [4]; SACE 2020 [6]). In light of these expectations, the authors turn the focus to the current tension discourse between prospective teachers' preparedness for teaching and the realities in different school contexts. This tension discourse is verbalized as, "employers are dissatisfied with the classroom readiness of beginning teachers" (TEMAG 2014, 30 [7]) and "there are concerns about the gap between preservice and beginning teachers' perceptions of teaching and the reality of classroom demands" (Thiel et al., 2020 [8]). However, the feasibility of these expectations—i.e., that ITE programs can develop graduating teachers as fully prepared and classroom-ready professionals within a period of two to five years—has been questioned (Lee, Akin and Goodwin 2019 [9]). Addressing these concerns, we suggest that applied pedagogical knowledge awareness can be stimulated through close collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs), schools' mentorship and induction programs during ITE, and in-service professional learning; part of this process involves sharing syntax and concepts such as professionality (Tran, Le and Henderson 2021 [10]). In this regard, the Vygotskian (1978 [11]) theoretical framing of teaching, as careful guidance and scaffolded learning embracing mentorship and coordinated induction programs, is still relevant.

Cochran-Smith and Boston College Evidence Team (2009) [12]) emphasized the value of evidence-based knowledge for teaching and teacher preparation; this focuses on incorporating the lived experiences, agency, and actual voices of preservice and beginning teachers into ITE program decision making. The research claiming that ITE has been "largely unsuccessful" in preparing teachers to work with diversity and "difference productively" (Mills 2013, p. 52, [13]) has stimulated the exploration of concerns and questions in relation to classroom preparedness, readiness, and job insecurities among preservice and beginning teachers in Australia and South Africa (ABC News 2022 [14]; Botha and Goosen 2022 [2]; Robinson 2019 [15]; Rowan, Kline and Mayer 2017 [3]; TEMAG 2014 [7]). As part of this body of work in the literature, this study offers empirical evidence from research conducted in the distinct education systems of Australia and South Africa. The aim is to identify the challenges linked to expectations for beginning and prospective teachers' classroom preparedness and sound professional knowledge. These challenges relate to the need for quick-fix, high-impact teaching-ready graduates to address workplace shortages, which

leads to overestimations of the level of professional readiness that can be expected from ITE programs.

In this study, the multi-layered complexities of context-consciousness and preservice and beginning teachers' lived experiences are captured through the two main research questions, which are as follows: (i) how do preservice and beginning teachers experience the link between theory and practice as part of their classroom preparedness? And (ii) how can preservice and beginning teachers be effectively supported so that they do not feel lost and contemplate leaving? This is also the overarching theme captured through the reflections on initial teacher education and theoretical framing of applied pedagogical knowledge with a context-consciousness. The multi-layered lenses were further guided by semi-structured interview guidelines and open-ended survey questions captured via the research sub-questions, for example, (i) how does preservice and beginning teachers' professional knowledge influence their identity, confidence, and lived experiences? (ii) How do preservice and beginning teachers experience their preparedness to effectively enact theory (as presented during ITE programs) in actual practice? And (iii) how can ITE curricula ensure that prospective teachers are teaching-, context-, profession-, workforce-, and workspace-ready?

We argue that in order to facilitate the effective management of contextual incidents that may arise during practice, professional knowledge should be *enacted* and imbued with context-consciousness; success in this regard enhances the knowledge-holder's confidence. This study's theoretical framework offers a new lens on and supports a quest for a deeper understanding of the relationship between teachers' specific contexts, situations, lived experiences, professional knowledge, and hermeneutic principles, including their skills, lived experiences, dispositions, and personal perceptions about teaching preparedness. The focus on context-consciousness embedded in the demonstration of respect for cultural context, awareness of lived experiences within a specific context, analysis of incidents in classrooms and learning environments, connectedness to unique needs, and the integration of knowledge is captured in the respect, awareness, analysis, connectedness, and integration model (RAACI, see Figure 1) (Du Plessis, 2023 [16]).
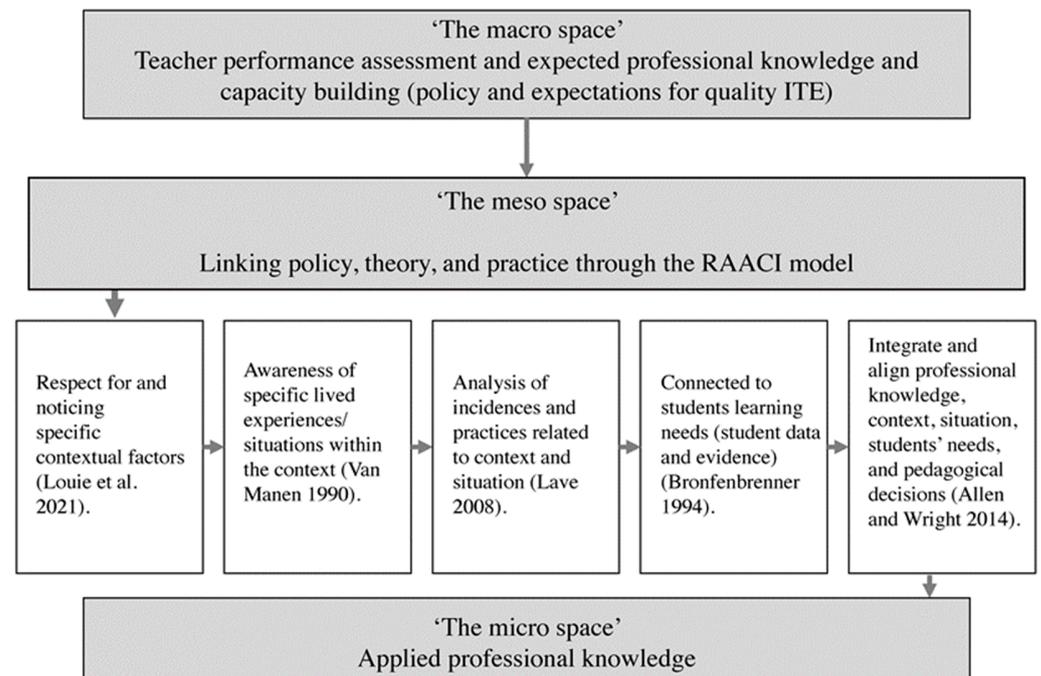
Figure 1. The context-conscious teacher-capacity-building model (RAACI model) (Louie et al., 2021 [17], Van Manen 1990 [18], Lave 2008 [19], Bronfenbrenner 1994 [20]; Allen and Wright 2014 [21]).

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The context-conscious understanding development theory (C-CUD) is a comprehensive theoretical framework for the search for deeper understanding while embracing the value of noticing and respecting the influence of context (Du Plessis, 2019 [22]; 2020 [23]; 2021 [24]; 2023 [16]). The appreciation of the challenges and needs within unique contexts is captured through a context-conscious understanding development (C-CUD) theoretical framework (Du Plessis, 2019 [22]). The C-CUD theory acknowledges the multilayered, complex teaching and learning space and the place that alignment between theory and practice (Du Plessis, 2023 [16]) occupies in learning and teaching spaces. This position is deeply embedded in awareness of (a) the situation or circumstances in which the professional experience phenomenon occurs (Lave & Wenger, 1991 [25]); (b) who and what are influenced by the specific lived experiences related to the professional experience phenomenon (van Manen, 1990 [18]); (c) how professional experiences as socio-cultural phenomena impact quality education (Vygotsky, 1978 [11]); and (d) how an in-depth understanding of the professional experience learning can be substantively and contextually strategized (Gadamer, 1975, 1976/2008 [3,15]) to optimize the preparation, capacity building, and development of professional readiness (Figure 1). The significance of an alignment between context-consciousness and teacher capacity development is captured in concepts such as respect (for context), awareness (of lived experiences), analysis (of incidents in classrooms), connectedness (to needs), and integration (of knowledge) as formulated in the RAACI model (Figure 1) (Du Plessis, 2023 [16]).

This theoretical framework is based on two balancing elements, that of Vygotsky's (1978 [11]) social constructivist theory and the context-conscious understanding development theory (C-CUD) (Du Plessis et al., 2019 [22]) (Figure 1). In agreement with Vygotsky (1978 [11]), we view teaching approaches that stimulate applied pedagogical knowledge development and learning experimentation as serving "an important role by making visible processes that are ordinarily hidden beneath the surface of habitual behaviour" (p. 12). Furthermore, our transnational investigation was undertaken within the ambit of C-CUD theory, which highlights the value of taking specific contexts and situations into account while noticing, knowing, and acknowledging unique circumstances. The theory allows for the development of a sound understanding of and respect for lived experiences linked to a specific context; in this study, the context is preservice and beginning teachers. C-CUD theory has offered us a theoretical lens through which to view participants' perceptions of their experiences and teaching practices, in order to identify the key challenges that they must overcome in their journeys to becoming proficient teachers. This research offers participants a voice and agency to share lived experiences—described as the "breathing of meaning" (Van Manen 2016, 36 [5])—linked to macro-, meso-, and micro-education spaces (Bronfenbrenner, 1994 [20]).

2.2. Methods

Our research design was informed by a synthesis of published research, which acknowledged the shifts needed in teacher preparation programs. The choice of data gathering methods was context-dependent. It reflected the rationale for the need to bring different lenses to major themes through international collaboration in mixed methods research implementation, using unique approaches in the development of a deeper understanding of perceptions and lived experiences impacted by contexts. Reviewing the relevant literature that highlighted the related challenges transnationally, beyond Australia and South Africa, informed the development of the research questions. The rationale was to capture a deeper understanding of previous research findings, lived experiences, and challenges in various contexts to inform the critical analysis of the data and extract insightful conclusions and recommendations. This study elected not to engage in a comparison of education systems; however, it shares lived experience through the lenses of various teaching contexts. These teaching contexts engage with the relevant national standards to assess preservice

teachers' performance during their professional experience placements and early career teachers' performance and development assessments. The education systems in Australia and South Africa are acknowledged as systems with integrated professional standards that are employed to strengthen professional learning and performance relations between higher education and schools and the role of mentor teachers.

In agreement with Beebe's (1995 [26]) rapid appraisal methodology, the researchers committed to stay at some selected schools for a couple of days, which is a proven methodologically sound strategy to collect data and evidence. The data and evidence unveil that preservice teachers in South Africa and beginning teachers in Australia (those in their first two years of teaching and/or preparation) have similar challenges in terms of perceptions of their preparedness for teaching. This was despite the fact that the South African and Australian participants were enrolled in different ITE programs at different institutions and were at different levels of their capacity preparation. We conducted separate studies to examine context-related challenges in the two countries. Through the synthesis of the research and analyzed data, we aimed to determine if such challenges could be more effectively managed so that preservice and beginning teachers' preparation and readiness to teach could be improved through the application of a theoretically informed framework or model. The synthesis of the empirical data allowed a deeper understanding of the gaps that exist between the theory obtained during teacher preparation and actual practice in specific countries, schools, and classroom contexts.

The data collection instruments offered careful guidelines for the preparation of narratives as captured in specific ITE units' assessment tasks, as well as open-ended questions in surveys and semi-structured interview questions. The qualitative research processes were designed in accordance with ethical clearance requirements; they involved gathering data in three phases while drawing on the empirical evidence from large-scale investigations. The initial phase of the qualitative investigation focused on the voluntarily offered narratives of preservice teachers and their mentors and of beginning teachers and their school leaders to explore the nature of their teaching experiences in the final stage of their preparation to become teachers, as well as their perceptions of such experiences. The second phase involved one-on-one interviews with preservice and beginning teachers and their mentors and school leaders to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges they experience and perceive. Van Manen (1990 [18]) claimed that the epistemology of "lived experience has a certain essence, a quality" (36); the lived experiences of preservice and beginning teachers in this study were unveiled through their personal lenses and those of their respective mentors and school leaders. In summary, the research samples, settings, and contextual factors considered in this study allowed us to obtain broad insights into how teacher preparation could be improved (Table 1).

The authors engaged in a thematical analysis; the initial thematical analyses were completed separately to ensure the rigid identification of themes. NVivo software was used after the manual coding of the samples was completed. We employed an inductive thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018 [27]) to offer context lenses on quality, well-structured, and context-conscious perceptions and experiences. Following the separate analysis, the authors engaged in in-depth discussions about the themes identified and highlighted them through the three context-conscious lenses. The findings were integrated to answer the research questions. Our analytic process was adopted from Alhamdan et al. (2014 [28]); this suggests that the first phase (in-depth literature review) should inform guidelines for the narrative writing of preservice teachers and their school-based mentors, as well as the development of the open-ended survey questions. The second phase involved a data analysis through coded and categorized themes. The analysis revealed subthemes and themes in agreement with Kamberelis and Dimitriadis's (2005 [29]) notion of recognizing recurrent themes and thematic patterns as underlying layers of specific themes. The third phase involved critical reflection on the emerging themes and subthemes to examine participants' interpretations of their perceptions of real-life teaching experiences. These insights into the realities encountered by preservice and beginning teachers offered a

combination and comparison of voices about their perceptions, facilitating the construction of new knowledge. This project's broad scope reinforces the usefulness and relevance of its findings and recommendations, which can be applied to a wide range of contexts. The innovative methodology and theoretical framing of this project also facilitates the integration of results from complementary studies undertaken in different countries.

Table 1. Lenses through which context-conscious, well-structured professional experience placements are perceived.

Research Lenses	Participants	Sample of Participants	Context	Demographic Information	Methodology
A South African Lens	Preservice teachers and their mentors	Final-year student teachers completing their practice teaching (narratives received, *N* = 4413; narratives with in-depth reflections and detailed information selected, *n* = 27) and the school-based mentors assigned to support them (narratives received, *N* = 2818; narratives selected with in-depth reflections and detailed information, *n* = 21)	Bachelor of Education (BEd) Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (Senior phase, Further Education and Training [FET]). Preservice student teachers and mentors assigned to support them	Teacher education students; largest distance-education university in South Africa. Around 50% of all the teachers and school-based mentors are or were involved in this university.	Qualitative: narratives of preservice teachers' and mentors' experiences during professional placement
An Australian Lens (WA)	Practicing beginning teachers (within the transition phase to teaching) and their school leaders	Beginning teachers (*n* = 9) School leaders (*n* = 14) Education directors (*n* = 3) Assistant director (*n* = 1) Parents (*n* = 10)	Rural, remote, and metropolitan public and independent schools High schools Primary schools District and regional education offices	Western Australia (WA).	Qualitative: semi-structured one-on-one interviews
An Australian Lens (QLD)	Practicing beginning teachers (within the first 5 years of teaching) and their school leaders	Beginning teachers (survey respondents *N* = 1362; interview participants n = 38) School leaders (open-ended survey questions *N* = 763; interview participants *n* = 9)	Rural and metropolitan public and independent schools High schools Primary schools	Queensland (QLD).	Qualitative: surveys (open-ended questions) and semi-structured one-on-one interviews

3. Findings: Voices from the Field

Some prominent themes emerged from the transnational investigation, such as (i) views about professional knowledge and its link to lived experiences; (ii) perceptions about knowledge developed during professional experience placements; (iii) experiences regarding the gap between theory and practice; and (iv) opinions concerning the gap between the support needed by preservice and beginning teachers and the support they are offered. Beginning teachers were identified as '*B*', and preservice teachers were identified as '*PT*' plus a participant number. In addition, teachers in leadership positions were identified as '*SL*', plus '*Q*' for Queensland, '*WA*' for Western Australia, '*SA*' for South Africa, and a participant number.

3.1. Preservice Teachers' Narratives: Lived Experiences

Preservice teachers were invited to voluntarily participate in this study to engage in critical reflection on their teaching practice, professional knowledge, and lived experiences. Their narratives revealed two main themes, each containing two subthemes. The first

main theme captured preservice teachers' professional knowledge when they engaged in professional teaching practice; the subthemes were perceptions about (i) how defective professional knowledge widens the gap between theory and practice and (ii) how restricted professional knowledge limits effective learning in practice.

The second main theme highlighted perceptions regarding the further development of preservice teachers' professional knowledge during teaching practice, with emerging subthemes that unveiled understandings of (i) how effective mentoring facilitates the development of context-appropriate professional knowledge and (ii) how an enabling school atmosphere/culture enriches and expands preservice teachers' professional knowledge.

3.1.1. Defective Professional Knowledge: Exploring Teaching Practices and the Gap between Theory and Practice

Preservice teachers questioned the appropriateness of the professional knowledge gained during their ITE, through narratives such as: "The school was the exact opposite of the one I attended (PT_SA 21)"; "I did not know that such schools existed" (PT_SA 54); and "Everything I thought I knew was questioned and had to be revised" (PT_SA 123). These practical teaching experiences in different education settings are indicative of perceptions about their preparedness to demonstrate context-conscious and context-ready teaching.

3.1.2. Restricted Professional Knowledge Limits Effective Learning in Practice

"The teacher was talking about flipped classrooms, which I knew nothing about" (PT_SA 9), wrote a preservice teacher, bemoaning the fact that she had limited professional knowledge on which to build new learning. Thus, when professional knowledge is lacking to a degree where teaching practice cannot function effectively, it seems that new learning is inhibited.

3.2. Development of Professional Knowledge during Preservice Teachers' Teaching Practice

3.2.1. Mentoring Facilitates the Development of Context-Appropriate Professional Knowledge

One preservice teacher described the influence of contrasting mentors on her continued development of professional knowledge: "From my first mentor I only learned how not to teach . . . My second mentor was a fountain of knowledge who shared with me how I can teach effectively in a less-resourced school" (PT_ SA 201). This shows that good mentoring can make a significant difference in effectively preparing preservice teachers for the realities of teaching.

3.2.2. An Enabling School Atmosphere/Culture Improves Preservice Teachers' Professional Knowledge

The following narrative from a preschool teacher demonstrates the effect of the school atmosphere/culture particularly well:

"During my first practice teaching, I felt unwelcome and 'in the way'. My second practice teaching was a bit better, but I still felt that I was just tolerated rather than sincerely welcomed. In my third practice teaching, I struck gold. Mrs . . . and everyone in her department created a rich array of learning opportunities. . . for me it was hectic, but boy, it was definitely worthwhile!" (PT_SA 18).

Thus, it seems that a welcoming and enabling school atmosphere is indeed a requisite for the continued development of preservice teachers' professional knowledge.

3.3. School Mentors' Narratives: Preservice Teachers' Restricted Professional Knowledge

The narratives originating from the participating mentors revealed their concerns about the limited and flawed professional knowledge among the preservice teachers placed under their care. The mentors perceived that preservice teachers lacked some important skills that teachers were expected to demonstrate. For example, one mentor/supervisor mentioned time management as follows: "[T]his student finished her IT lesson in less than 10 min and then had nothing planned to keep the learners engaged. [. . .] This is a recipe

for disaster as the learners soon started misbehaving because they were not kept busy" (SL_SA 16). These discourses/narratives reveal tensions between the mentors' view of the requisite skills with which the ITE providers should be equipping preservice teachers and what skills that school-based mentors need to develop in preservice teachers.

3.4. Mentoring "Unsound" Professional Knowledge of Preservice Teachers

In one narrative, an obviously upset mentor, a teacher in a leadership position in a South African school, commented, "[W]hen it came to the lesson strategy, he suggested something that was totally unsuitable for the type of learning envisioned" (SL_SA 4). Another lead mentor/supervisor relayed how a student teacher was adamant about conducting an outdoor lesson but "did not understand the implications of such a lesson on instruction and learning time and student behaviour, thus completing only about one third of the lesson, which was quite chaotic despite the guidelines [she] provided and the possible pitfalls [she] pointed out" (SL_SA 29). A lead teacher also pointed out that "universities should not assign students who do not even have basic knowledge of how to manage learner behaviour as [mentors] do not have the time to impart such basic knowledge to them" (SL_WA 5). Thus, basic, holistic, and integrated professional knowledge seems to be lacking among preservice teachers during practice teaching.

3.5. Linking the Power of Knowledge to a Presence in the Classroom

The data obtained from the interviews with the beginning teachers revealed the following four key concerns: (i) professional knowledge influences their professional identity and presence as "knowledgeable others" in the classroom; (ii) they can access further professional knowledge through collaboration with experienced teachers; (iii) capacity building during their first years of teaching is influenced by quality ITE programs; and (iv) ITE preparation influences their preparedness to engage in a critical analysis and adjust practices and pedagogical reasoning during their first years of teaching (this influence decreases with increasing experience).

3.6. Professional Identity Embedded in a Sound Professional Knowledge Base

Explaining how she perceived her knowledge and skills as insufficient for the teaching situation and context, a first-year beginning teacher shared, "I'm a disaster! I'm pathetic! I sit behind my desk the whole day. I have no friends and no time for my family. I feel worthless in everything I do" (B_WA 1). Against the backdrop of high accountability expectations, the data revealed beginning teachers' need for confidence regarding their knowledge and sound preparedness. A second-year beginning teacher described the complexities that arise when beginning teachers are assigned to positions outside their qualifications, "I don't know what I don't know…." (B_Q 7). Their restricted professional knowledge further complicates already challenging teaching contexts; contrastingly, perceived successes and accomplishments strengthen their identities as effective teachers.

3.7. Professional Knowledge Development beyond ITE through Collaboration

The continued development of professional knowledge does not happen in isolation but is entrenched in workplace collaboration. Beginning teacher participants identified the value of working collaboratively with experienced teachers to improve their professional knowledge. A beginning teacher noted, "My university degree (aside from my practical experience) did not effectively prepare me for teaching" (B_WA 12). He elaborated on the influential role his teacher mentor played, "Having a designated mentor in my first year of teaching was good, but since then, nothing" (B_WA 12). An experienced lead teacher (SL_WA 1) identified the value of continued development of professional knowledge while recommending that beginning teachers "get extra training", especially when they are assigned to challenging contexts. A beginning teacher reflected on her ITE preparation and the realities in schools, "Maybe it's the universities that are failing more than the schools" (B_Q 27).

3.8. Ongoing Teacher Capacity Building

A critical reflection on teaching capacity during the first year of teaching demonstrates this teacher's lived experiences, "It was a constant struggle, and I had the feeling of just "surviving" the day/week/term rather than being able to enjoy the work" (B_SA 13). An experienced lead teacher noticed how an openness to explore adjustments to teaching decisions and a capacity to explore professional knowledge can influence their students' learning, "It's like a web. Everything begins with the [beginning teacher], and then the children get intertwined with it" (SL_SA 11). Thus, beginning teachers' awareness and capacity building enable them to function in diverse teaching−learning environments.

3.9. Critical Reflection on Practices: Implications for further Development of Professional Knowledge

Becoming a reflective teacher during professional placement has implications for the further development of professional knowledge. A beginning teacher reflected, "In the beginning, I just taught the lesson, told the students to write down my questions and answer them, and checked the answers. I later realised that I have to discuss the students' answers more" (B_Q 14).

School Leaders' Reflections: Beginning Teachers' Preparedness and Readiness

An Australian educational leader, in a remote high school in WA, stressed the importance of beginning teachers' preparedness and readiness to collaborate with colleagues: "They [universities] don't think about what the needs of the employers are. We could be a lot more strategic about who gets placement into universities so that a lot of that angst doesn't arise in young grads" (SL_WA 5). Preparing prospective teachers to confidently use, adjust, and develop curricula according to students' needs requires the involvement of all stakeholders. Professional workplace relationships engage students, parents, industry partners, and colleagues; consequently, these relationships can affect beginning teachers' well-being, stress level, self-respect, emotions, lived experiences of being appreciated or underappreciated, and sense of belonging, as well as the level of conflict they face in a specific context (SL_Q 114, 516, 708). School leaders shared that it was difficult to effectively manage the responsibilities involved and time required to build relationships with beginning teachers and monitor their progress (SL_Q 330, 516). Reflecting on detailed screening for teacher candidates' entry to universities, a school leader suggested focusing on the specific qualities required for teaching; additionally, they pointed out that the proposed reasons for wanting to become a teacher will influence management of retention and employment structure:

There are few quality experienced teachers in rural, remote, and indigenous schools (Durksen et al., 2018 [30]). Most of the teachers have less than two to five years' experience. Few teachers have the required skills to mentor and model, and schools often have limited access to the Teacher Relief Scheme [TRS]. The lack of funding restricts teachers after formal-classroom mentoring and training or makes it hard for them to work collegially (SL_Q 379).

A school leader suggested that "some beginning teachers have the view that teaching is a job that one can just pick up and run with" (SL_Q 565); however, some start to realize that teaching is not a 9 a.m.–3 p.m. job, but involves hard work and ongoing efforts to build healthy relationships with colleagues, students, and stakeholders. One beginning teacher reflected on the value of timely feedback from school leaders and its influence on beginning teachers' self-efficacy, confidence, and professional relationships: "The biggest workforce challenges include not knowing if we are succeeding as early career teachers due to the lack of feedback and support, in addition to the lack of knowledge about student reporting, parent interaction and teacher–student relationship management" (B_Q 1276). A school leader shared how the development of a collegiate network model, involving the introduction of beginning teachers as key personnel in the school and beyond, can be implemented to emphasize the value of healthy professional relationships; such an approach has significant positive implications for beginning teachers' careers (SL_WA 19).

4. Discussion

The empirical evidence gathered through this study emphasizes the need for well-structured professional experience placements while it offers different lenses on perceptions and lived experiences to understand and develop appropriate, context-conscious professional knowledge during ITE. The three lenses turn attention to the significant influence an enabling school atmosphere with good mentoring processes can have on building professional knowledge and capacity in the workplace. The discussions share (i) how preservice and beginning teachers experience the link between theory and practice as part of their professional knowledge, application of knowledge, and classroom preparedness, (ii) how preservice and beginning teachers perceive, experience, and can be effectively supported so that they do not feel lost and contemplate leaving, and (iii) the importance of structured partnerships, capacity-building strategies, and their impact on preparedness and classroom readiness.

4.1. Professional Knowledge

The three lenses used by the authors did not aim to compare the different contexts but instead to develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences within various contexts regarding professional knowledge. Professional knowledge empowers preservice and beginning teachers, enhancing their perceptions of their own effectiveness and helping them take ownership of the teaching and learning environment. Loughran (2016 [31]) emphasized professional knowledge as the foundation of quality teacher education and fundamental for a deeper understanding of teaching. Our findings underline that the development of professional knowledge should be appropriate, adequate, and context-conscious; if not, preservice and beginning teachers will feel lost, unprepared, unsure, and inadequately prepared for classroom realities. The empirical evidence demonstrated how restricted professional knowledge leaves preservice and beginning teachers feeling exposed and isolated. As previously quoted, an early career teacher's display of self-doubt as a result of restricted professional knowledge and uncertainty regarding the context started to impact self-esteem, personal, and professional lived experiences, "I'm a disaster! I'm pathetic! I sit behind my desk the whole day. I have no friends and no time for my family. I feel worthless in everything I do" (B_WA 1). These dispositions influence beginning teachers' confidence, professional identity, and skills with respect to engaging in critical, in-depth inquiry to inform teaching practices (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004 [32]).

This study highlights the factors that determine the quality of professional knowledge, which prepare teachers for actual practice; these factors are influenced by both school and classroom contexts. Although contextual influences vary across school systems and sectors, some commonalities were visible: effective mentoring, enabling school environments, collaboration with colleagues, ongoing capacity building, and critical reflection on teaching practices compared to teacher standards.

4.2. Professional Knowledge and an Enabling School Environment

In agreement with McTeer and Wood's (2018 [11]) view that an enabling school environment is vital in the development of professional knowledge, we found that an enabling school culture supports preservice and beginning teachers' confident exploration of their teaching capacity and skills in an emotionally and socio-culturally *safe* environment. The findings demonstrate a disconnect from the needs in the school environment, "...in the beginning, I just taught the lesson, told the students to write down my questions and answer them, and checked the answers", so that the disconnected preservice and beginning teachers then find it challenging to develop and enable a teaching and learning environment. Supportive teaching and learning environments enhance opportunities to develop and acquire an adequate, appropriate, and context-specific professional knowledge capacity.

4.3. Quality Mentoring

The impact of experienced and specialist teacher mentors on the lived experiences and ongoing professional knowledge development of preservice and beginning teachers cannot be over-emphasized. However, the findings demonstrated that most mentors step into an assessing or judgmental role, for example, stating "universities should not assign students who do not even have basic knowledge of how to manage learner behaviour as [mentors] do not have the time to impart such basic knowledge to them". The authors argue that the role, perceptions, and responsibilities of mentors should be further researched to ensure quality preparation for these mentors. Noble and Henderson (2008 [33]) emphasized that ITE needs to demonstrate "awareness of the demands on beginning teachers in relation to personal and professional skill development" (p. 47). We argue for an awareness that involves the identification of relevant concepts and theoretical framing of the different layers of professional knowledge that preservice and beginning teachers need to have in order to successfully work across educational contexts.

4.4. Professional Knowledge and Teacher Capacity Building: The RAACI Model

Demonstrating context-consciousness, and also applying the basic concepts of the C-CUD theory, in the use of classroom students' data and evidence allows this theory to be directly linked to teaching decisions and practice. The theoretical framing of capacity building against the background of a socio-cultural awareness calls on preservice and early career teachers to engage in critical reflection on, and observation of, the classroom to make a difference. Making a difference turns the attention to evidence-informed and adjusted teaching practices that are embedded in respect and empathy for the students' unique learning needs and contexts. The response of a preservice teacher, "everything I thought I knew was questioned", demonstrates the significance for preservice teachers to tie their experiences, perceptions, and lived experience to a theoretical framework to support quality teaching and practice decisions. Preservice and beginning teachers' capacity to develop a *presence* in classrooms influences the classroom culture and atmosphere, creating a safe and healthy environment (AITSL 2018 [4]). The results showed that preservice and beginning teachers' capacity to manage challenging contexts and incidents influences their job satisfaction and career decisions.

Our findings underline the value added to teacher capacity building during ITE and beyond through the strategic planning of a theoretical framing. In this respect, we summarize our findings in a teaching-capacity-building model, framed by teaching and learning theories that embrace context-consciousness and emphasize respect, awareness, analysis, connectedness, and integrated knowledge (RAACI model; Figure 1). This capacity-building model utilizes the following five main strategies highlighted by empirical evidence: (i) noticing the contextual factors in which teaching takes place; (ii) fostering the awareness and differentiation of specific incidents/situations within different contexts; (iii) analyzing incidents and lived experiences as ongoing processes towards deeper understanding; (iv) developing connectedness with the students; and (v) integrating knowledge of context, content, and situations with students' needs to improve learning. These capacity-building strategies improve teaching with context-consciousness. Drawing from the work of Bronfenbrenner's (1994 [20]) ecological system theory as a foundation and supported by the Vygotskian theoretical frame of socio-cultural teaching and learning, the RAACI model offers a framework to support improvement in professional knowledge and graduating teachers' capacity building. The model shows that the synthetic intersection between the macro-contextual space ("macro-space") and the meso-contextual and enacted pedagogical space (the "meso-space", i.e., the RAACI space) is deeply embedded in socio-cultural teaching and learning theory (Vygotsky 1978 [11]) and supported by Van Manen's (1990 [18]) attention to lived experiences; their synthesis culminates in the third micro-space of individual lived experiences and, hopefully, career satisfaction (the micro-space, the final horizontal level, embraces "applied pedagogical knowledge"). In summary, the socio-cultural theoretical framing of the RAACI model incorporates transnational considerations

about applied professional knowledge to inform sound pedagogical reasoning and address teaching and learning needs within specific contexts.

4.5. Professional Knowledge Development: Collaboration/Partnerships

We noted, in agreement with Daza, Gudmundsdottir, and Lund (2021 [34]), that identifying partnerships and relationships contributes to the transformation of teacher preparation. Preservice and beginning teachers admit their reliance on colleagues with expertise to guide professional knowledge development. Smyth (2013) [35] emphasized collaboration between ITE providers and schools for the development of "socially just schools" (p. 114). TEMAG (2014 [7]) recommended ITE providers to deliver "evidence-based content focused on the depth of subject knowledge and pedagogical approaches" (xv) to enable preservice teachers to impact classroom students' learning. Context-conscious professional knowledge, collaboration, and partnerships that are well suited for a specific teaching and learning context support preservice and beginning teachers' capacity to develop close links between policy frameworks, such as standards and curricula, as the foundation of expectations in classrooms. Additionally, the data inform a structure for carefully managing frameworks linked to the reality in classrooms and lived experiences. Importantly, when professional placement units are viewed as separate from the theoretical units in ITE programs, opportunities to develop the theory and practice link with a view on constructing effective applied pedagogical knowledge are negatively impacted. This is an issue of critical importance; as Smith (2012 [6]) contended, the development of preservice teachers' professional knowledge and skills benefits the teachers and also stimulates "professional and community confidence in the quality of institution programs" (p. 45).

5. Limitations of the Current Research

The authors, and therefore this study, were limited through a lack of resources permitting international visits to specific schools and sites.

6. Conclusions

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the value of the applied professional knowledge framed by well-linked theories and well-structured practices to form the foundation for pedagogical reasoning and strategic teaching decisions. As a result of this study, reflection and discussions have taken place about further collaborative research concerning applied professional knowledge, mentoring, and support during professional experience and transition to the teaching profession while maintaining strong links between theory and practice. This study further stimulates the critical analysis of sustained preservice and early career teacher capacity development. That critical analysis of teacher capacity and the needs within the current landscape of teaching stimulates further research in this area, including on the three lenses of reflection on ITE, preservice, and early career teachers and the theoretical framing of applied pedagogical knowledge with a context-consciousness across international borders. This study offers new understandings and contributes relevant results to re-visit the development of initial teacher education, the retention of early career teachers, and tailored mentoring programs.

The current ITE discourse in education places extraordinary expectations on the level of professional readiness that can be produced in ITE programs, without demonstrating awareness of the role of context-consciousness in these challenges. To maximize student learning, it is important to capture and understand preservice and beginning teachers' professional knowledge development and performance expectations based on the proposed standards. There is also a need for experimentation with and adjustment of teaching practices to build preservice and beginning teachers' confidence and improve their professional knowledge for the creation of positive teaching−learning spaces. Bourdieu and Passeron (1994 [36]) suggested that the construction of new knowledge is not only affected by existing knowledge; the specific atmosphere and the way in which information is conveyed also play a significant role. Fundamental change (external influence that modifies

actions) and transformation (modifying beliefs through a natural approach) in classrooms depend on stakeholders' understandings, beliefs, behaviors, and strategies with regard to the purposes of schooling (Cochran-Smith and Boston College Evidence Team 2009 [12]). The modification of preservice and beginning teachers' beliefs and characteristics is often a challenging task. Thus, inquiry approaches are very helpful in building preservice and beginning teachers' professional knowledge capacity through the enhancement in their professional knowledge. ITE programs need to demonstrate an awareness of preservice and beginning teachers' challenges and difficulties in continually reflecting on and reassessing their teaching beliefs, practices, and characteristics; they also need to develop strategies to ensure that preservice and beginning teachers perceive the acquisition of professional knowledge as an ongoing process.

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