

# Understanding pre-service teachers' perceptions of their readiness for teaching practices in the context of higher education

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of readiness among 46 fifth-year pre-service teachers enrolled in the education department of a private university. Using purposive sampling, participants were selected to ensure variation in teaching practice experiences and subject specializations. The study aimed to understand the extent to which these future teachers feel prepared for real classroom teaching. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework was applied to analyze the data. Six major themes were identified: (1) perceived preparedness anxiety, (2) theory-practice disconnect, (3) influence of mentorship, (4) curriculum training gaps, (5) program improvement recommendations, and (6) impact of preparedness on motivation and retention. The findings revealed a noticeable gap between theoretical knowledge and authentic classroom application, particularly in classroom management, inclusive pedagogy, and technology integration. Theoretically, the study proposes a developmental continuum of teacher readiness linking experiential learning and professional identity formation. Practically, the findings highlight the need for practice-embedded curricula, structured mentorship systems, and strengthened school-university partnerships to enhance readiness and teacher retention.

**Keywords:** higher education, pre-service teachers, qualitative research, readiness, teaching practices

## INTRODUCTION

Pre-service teachers often engage in rigorous theoretical coursework, yet many report feeling underprepared for the practical demands of teaching (Preechawong et al., 2024). This disconnect suggested that current approaches in higher education may not sufficiently bridge the gap between pedagogical knowledge and its classroom application. Understanding this gap was essential for improving teacher education programs. The study highlighted key challenges that pre-service teachers encounter during their teaching practice. These include classroom management, lesson planning, and adapting teaching strategies to different learners. Identifying these challenges allows institutions to refine their programs to better support teaching readiness.

A central concern was the mismatch between what pre-service teachers are taught and the realities they face in school settings. This misalignment can negatively impact their confidence, increase stress, and lead to early career dropout. Recognizing these outcomes highlighted the urgency of reforming teaching practice components within teacher education. By focusing on perceptions of teaching readiness among pre-service teachers, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving teaching practices in higher education. The findings aimed to inform more responsive and practical teacher training approaches that equip future teachers for the complex dynamics of modern classrooms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Teacher Readiness Foundations

Research consistently indicates that teacher preparation programs play a critical role in shaping teachers' competencies. However, many student-teachers report feeling unprepared for real classroom challenges (Herut & Setlhako, 2025; Zhang & Tian, 2025). Factors such as the duration of practical training, exposure to diverse teaching environments, and the structure of induction programs significantly influence perceptions of readiness (Du Plessis, 2023).

Insufficient preparation has been linked to early-career stress and higher turnover rates (Herman et al., 2024). Teachers who feel inadequately prepared to manage instructional demands or emotional pressures are more likely to exit the profession prematurely. Similarly, perceived gaps in pre-service preparation—particularly in classroom management, curriculum design, and addressing diverse learning needs—negatively affect teachers' confidence and job satisfaction (Yidana, 2025). These pressures may also contribute to professional exhaustion and burnout among teachers facing systemic challenges in the profession (Appiah-Odame & Frempong, 2025).

Moreover, teacher preparedness is strongly associated with student outcomes. Studies show that teachers' subject knowledge, pedagogical competence, and readiness to handle diverse classroom environments significantly predict student achievement (Basri & Ab Rahman, 2025; Liu et al., 2024). Continuous professional development further strengthens instructional quality and student engagement. These findings underscore that foundational readiness—built through comprehensive training and sustained professional learning—are central to both teacher effectiveness and student success.

Extended professional development opportunities, particularly sustained workshops, deepen teachers' methodological understanding and reflective capacity (Ockerman & Bagui, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Longer, hands-on professional learning experiences provide time for experimentation, collaboration, and contextual adaptation of evidence-based practices, thereby strengthening readiness foundations.

### **Classroom Management Competence**

Classroom management remains one of the most critical yet underemphasized components of teacher preparation. According to Annan-Brew et al. (2024), many pre-service programs prioritize content knowledge and pedagogical theory while neglecting practical classroom management strategies. This imbalance leaves novice teachers underprepared to handle disruptive behavior, establish routines, and maintain structured learning environments.

Inadequate preparation in classroom management contributes to heightened stress, delayed instructional effectiveness, and reduced student engagement. Since effective classroom management directly influences learning environments and academic outcomes, strengthening this component within teacher education programs is essential (Alanazi & Al-Zahrani, 2025). Building competence in behavior management, positive discipline, and structured classroom organization equips teachers with practical tools necessary for fostering productive and inclusive learning spaces.

### **Mentorship and Professional Identity Formation**

Mentorship has emerged as a critical mechanism for bridging the gap between theoretical preparation and classroom practice. Structured mentorship enhances teacher confidence, instructional competence, and professional commitment (Mokoena & van Tonder, 2024). Beginner teachers who receive guidance from experienced mentors demonstrate higher self-efficacy, improved classroom management skills, and greater student engagement.

Similarly, structured mentorship programs significantly improve job satisfaction, teaching efficacy, and retention rates (Preechawong et al., 2024). Through observation, collaborative dialogue, and constructive feedback, mentors support novice teachers in refining instructional strategies and internalizing professional values. This process strengthens professional identity formation, enabling teachers to transition from novice practitioners to reflective professionals.

Self-reflection and peer feedback further reinforce professional identity development. Reflective practices enhance self-awareness and instructional adaptability (Daff et al., 2024; Palacio & Digo, 2024), while peer feedback promotes collaborative learning cultures and shared professional growth (De La Iglesia et al., 2024). Together, mentorship, reflection, and peer collaboration cultivate a resilient and adaptive teaching workforce.

### **Technology and Inclusive Education**

The integration of technology in teacher education is increasingly recognized as essential for preparing teachers to meet 21st-century learning demands. Technology-enhanced teacher education promotes interactive learning environments, differentiated instruction, and improved student engagement (Zhao et al., 2024). Pre-service teachers trained in digital tools—such as learning management systems, virtual simulations, and adaptive technologies—develop greater confidence and competence in technology integration.

Recent studies highlight that teachers' perceived knowledge and technological affordances significantly influence their ability to integrate digital tools into classroom instruction (Maulet et al., 2024). Likewise, teachers' characteristics and technological efficacy play an important role in implementing competency-based curricula and technology-supported instruction (Bekoe et al., 2025). Despite growing access to digital resources, research indicates that many teachers feel digitally equipped but still lack sufficient competencies to effectively integrate technology into teaching practices (Ntow & Kpotosu, 2025). Furthermore, empirical evidence from international contexts suggests that teachers' ICT readiness varies widely depending on training opportunities and institutional support (Danzan et al., 2025).

Equally important is preparation for inclusive education. Research emphasizes that effective teacher training must equip educators with strategies to address diverse learning needs, abilities, and backgrounds (Khattak et al., 2025). Differentiated instruction becomes most effective when teachers receive targeted training in inclusive pedagogy, adaptive teaching strategies, and assessment modifications. Studies on prospective teachers' further reveal that technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) competencies remain a key factor in determining teachers' readiness to integrate digital tools effectively (Amiresheva et al., 2025).

The intersection of technology and inclusive education offers significant potential for personalized learning, collaborative engagement, and equitable access. By integrating digital competence with inclusive pedagogical frameworks, teacher education

programs can better prepare teachers to create equitable and responsive classrooms that support all learners. Additionally, teachers' self-efficacy in interdisciplinary teaching contexts—such as science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics—also contributes to their readiness to deliver innovative and integrated learning experiences (Alanazi & Al-Zahrani, 2025).

### Research Gap

Although existing literature provides substantial evidence on teacher readiness foundations, classroom management competence, mentorship and professional identity formation, and technology and inclusive education, the findings remain largely fragmented. Most studies examine these components in isolation, focusing separately on pre-service training duration, mentorship effectiveness, classroom management skills, or technology integration. However, limited research adopts an integrated perspective that examines how these dimensions collectively shape student-teachers' overall preparedness and early professional experiences.

Furthermore, while prior studies highlight the relationship between teacher preparedness and student outcomes, fewer investigations explore how preparedness is perceived by student-teachers within specific institutional and contextual settings. Many studies are conducted in developed educational systems, with limited contextualized evidence from emerging or resource-constrained contexts. This creates a gap in understanding how structural factors, institutional support mechanisms, and contextual realities interact to influence teacher readiness, professional identity development, and retention.

Additionally, although mentorship and professional development are widely acknowledged as critical for teacher effectiveness, there is insufficient empirical evidence examining how structured mentorship, reflective practices, and extended workshop-based training jointly contribute to strengthening classroom management competence and inclusive, technology-enhanced pedagogy. The intersection among these domains remains underexplored.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of teacher preparedness that integrates readiness foundations, classroom management competence, mentorship processes, and technology-inclusive practices. By examining these interconnected dimensions holistically, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how teacher education programs can be structured to enhance professional competence, strengthen retention, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes.

### Research Objective

To examine the perceptions of pre-service teachers in year five regarding their readiness for teaching practices within the context of higher education.

## METHODS

### Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was utilized to explore the perspectives of pre-service teachers on their readiness for teaching practices. This method enabled the collection of rich, detailed data that reveals how individual backgrounds and experiences influence their sense of preparedness. By focusing on pre-service teachers, the study examined how their training and higher education experiences shape their confidence and competence in applying teaching practices. The qualitative approach provided deeper insights into the complexities of readiness beyond quantitative measures. Overall, this research highlighted the critical role of higher education in preparing future teachers. Understanding pre-service teachers' views on readiness offers valuable guidance for improving teacher training programs and enhancing effective teaching practices.

### Research Design

Pre-Service Teachers in Higher Education often arrive with theoretical knowledge but limited practical exposure. To bridge this gap, the study employed a phenomenological design, focusing on the authentic, lived experiences of student-teachers as they navigated real classroom environments. The study operationalized readiness as perceived competence in classroom management, instructional adaptation, inclusive practice, digital integration, and professional confidence. By centering on these firsthand accounts, the research illuminated key facets of Teaching Practices how novice teachers plan lessons, engage learners, and reflect on their own performance. This methodology enabled a deep dive into the contours of their professional readiness, revealing both strengths and areas needing further support. Additionally, the shared narratives of these pre-service teachers highlighted common challenges and breakthroughs, raising a collective understanding of what it truly means to be prepared for the teaching profession. Such insights offer valuable guidance for Higher Education programs aiming to refine their curricula and better equip future teachers.

### Participants

The sample comprised 46 year four pre-service teachers from the private university's education department during the 2024-2025 academic year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a different range of perspectives regarding their teaching preparation.

### Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pre-service teachers in Higher Education programs to gather rich, contextualized data. This approach allowed participants' insights to steer the discussion, ensuring that core themes around

teaching practices and readiness were thoroughly addressed. By adopting a flexible interview format, the study explored individual perceptions of readiness for the classroom. In doing so, it illuminated how Higher Education experiences shape confidence in both pedagogical theory and hands-on teaching practices. This method raised an open dialogue in which pre-service teachers could reflect on their own preparedness. Ultimately, the semi-structured design provided evidence of how Higher Education pathways influence emerging teachers' readiness and evolving teaching practices.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their readiness for teaching practices. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework:

- (1) Familiarization with transcripts,
- (2) Generation of initial codes,
- (3) Searching for themes,
- (4) Reviewing themes,
- (5) Defining and naming themes, and
- (6) Producing the report.

Interview data were carefully transcribed and systematically coded to capture key insights. Through this process, emerging patterns were identified and organized into meaningful themes. These themes highlighted how higher education prepares pre-service teachers for the challenges of the classroom. Overall, the analysis provided a detailed understanding of pre-service teachers' views on their teaching preparation and readiness, emphasizing the role of higher education in shaping effective teaching practices.

### Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of findings related to pre-service teachers' readiness, member checking was utilized. Participants provided feedback on preliminary results, which enhanced the accuracy of identified themes regarding their teaching practices. Triangulation was employed to strengthen the study's credibility within the context of Higher Education. By cross-verifying data from multiple sources, the research more reliably captured the complexities of pre-service teachers' preparation for classroom teaching. Reliability was maintained through consistent data collection and systematic analysis methods. These processes ensured dependable insights into how pre-service teachers develop their teaching practices and readiness during their Higher Education training. Additional trustworthiness strategies included peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts, maintenance of an audit trail documenting coding decisions, and thick description to enhance transferability.

### Ethical Consideration

In this study involving pre-service teachers, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each individual was fully briefed on the research objective and their rights, ensuring transparency throughout the process. To protect the privacy of participants, all personal information was anonymized. This approach maintained confidentiality in the reporting of findings related to teaching practices and readiness. The study strictly followed to ethical guidelines in research, emphasizing respect for participants within the context of Higher Education. This ensured that the investigation into teaching readiness was conducted responsibly and ethically.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The participants consisted of 46 fourth-year pre-service teachers (coded as ST01–ST46) from the Education Department of a private university during the 2024–2025 academic year. This group included 29 men and 17 women who were nearing the completion of their Bachelor of Education program. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data they provided for the study. A conceptual model of teacher readiness emerged from the findings, illustrating how practical experience, mentorship, and inclusive/digital competence collectively shape readiness, which in turn influences retention and student outcomes.

### Theme 1: Overview of Preparedness

Pre-service teachers voiced anxieties about their readiness for the classroom, primarily stemming from a perceived lack of practical experience. This theme reflects their overall confidence levels and identifies factors contributing to feelings of preparedness or unpreparedness.

- ST02 Although I have learned various teaching strategies, I lack the enough practical experience to apply them in real classroom settings. This uncertainty makes me worried about whether I will be able to teach effectively once I graduate.

This view reflects widespread anxiety among pre-service teachers. Their worry is not merely theoretical but rooted in a lack of direct application, highlighting the limited role of experiential learning in their preparation.

- ST17 I feel like I have been equipped with methods, but I don't know how to adapt them to different classroom situations.

This reinforces disconnect between content knowledge and adaptive skills, a concern that mirrors findings by Herut and Setlhako (2025) about how limited practice affects confidence.

ST22 We had a few micro-teaching sessions, but they were not sufficient. Facing real students is a whole different challenge.

The emphasis on insufficient exposure reveals a pattern of underreadiness, echoing concerns about the balance of theoretical and practical components in teacher education.

ST08 There were no opportunities to try out inclusive teaching strategies in real settings, which makes me feel I might not handle diverse learners well.

The lack of exposure to inclusive settings suggests a major gap in preparing for diversity in the classroom, as seen in Zhang and Tian (2025).

ST31 When I think about student misbehavior, I feel anxious. We never practiced how to respond during our training.

These fears reveal a clear gap in classroom management skills. This gap points to weaknesses in current teacher training practices. As one participant emphasized, training programs require revision to better prepare student-teachers.

ST44 Sometimes I wonder if what I learned can help me in real classrooms, especially in rural schools with fewer resources.

This concern about contextual adaptation of teaching methods supports the need for practical placements in varied environments. The prevalent feeling of anxiety reported by many participants concerning their teaching skills highlights a fundamental lack of confidence stemming from limited direct classroom experience. This resonates with findings by Herut and Setlhako (2025), which highlight the impact of insufficient practical training on pre-service teachers. The study revealed that concern not only affected the participants' confidence but also their willingness to implement innovative teaching strategies, limiting their initial pedagogical approaches.

The qualitative data emphasized that this anxiety wasn't simply about the act of teaching itself, but also about the complexities of managing a classroom and responding effectively to diverse student needs. Several participants voiced fears about their ability to handle disruptive behaviors or cater to students with varied learning styles. This observation aligns with research by Zhang and Tian (2025), which emphasizes the critical role of practical experience in developing these essential skills.

The data highlights the student-teachers' recognition of the gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical application required in real-world teaching scenarios. Their anxiety often centered on the unpredictable nature of classroom dynamics and the need to respond effectively to unforeseen circumstances. The participants recognized the need to develop their adaptive teaching skills to address the different learning requirements of students, signifying an understanding of inclusive education practices. The data showed that they recognized their need for professional growth in specific areas like classroom management and differentiated instruction to improve their overall preparedness.

These concerns also highlight the importance of providing student-teachers with opportunities to practice and refine their skills in a supportive and low-stakes environment. In entirety, the voices reveal a fundamental insecurity stemming from a perceived lack of practical experience and exposure to real-world classroom challenges, which leads to anxiety about classroom management, student engagement, and overall teaching effectiveness. This theme highlights the significant impact of perceived unpreparedness on student-teachers' confidence and highlights the urgent need for teacher education programs to prioritize practical training and real-world experiences to alleviate anxiety and promote effective teaching skills.

## Theme 2: Perceived Competencies

While student-teachers generally felt competent in their theoretical knowledge, significant doubts surfaced regarding their ability to translate this knowledge into effective classroom practice, especially in areas like student engagement and classroom management.

ST46 During my coursework, I excelled in learning about pedagogy and subject content, but when I had to teach a real class, I realized that knowing theories is not enough.

This confession shows the divide between theory and execution. Theoretical mastery alone does not ensure classroom success.

ST18 I know my subject well, but I lack the skills to handle difficult students or make lessons exciting.

This shows a pressing need for training in classroom engagement and behavior management, consistent with Annan-Brew et al. (2024).

ST35 We spent many hours learning theories but had limited chances to practice them in diverse classrooms.

This comment reflects dissatisfaction with the limited scope and diversity of practice environments provided. One participant specifically emphasized concerns about the narrow range of teaching contexts experienced. Overall, the remark suggests a perceived gap in exposure to varied practical settings.

ST12 The real test came during my internship when I had to modify lesson plans and deal with timing. That was not covered in class.

Participants emphasized that logistical realities of real classrooms remain insufficiently addressed in the curriculum. One respondent specifically identified these practical constraints as missing components of teacher preparation. This highlights a gap between theoretical training and everyday classroom demands.

ST21 My assessments were mostly essays and presentations. I wish we had more real-time teaching evaluations.

This highlights the absence of authentic, performance-based assessments in pre-service teacher training. A participant specifically emphasized this gap in the preparation process. The comment underscores the need for more practice-oriented evaluation approaches.

ST43 Theory is important, but the real skill lies in how you connect with students. That is what we were not taught.

The emotional and relational dimensions of teaching are overlooked in the current model, affecting holistic readiness. While pre-service teachers exhibited confidence in their theoretical knowledge, a significant concern emerged regarding their practical application of this knowledge and their ability to effectively manage a classroom. Participants acknowledged their grasp of pedagogical principles and subject matter content. However, they expressed uncertainty about translating this understanding into engaging and effective lessons. This discrepancy between theoretical knowledge and practical application is consistent with Du Plessis (2023), pre-service teachers' perceptions of their readiness are significantly influenced by practical training, the quality of mentorship, and exposure to various teaching environments.

The participants' self-assessment of classroom management skills revealed a significant gap. They expressed feeling ill-equipped to handle discipline issues, motivate students, or create a positive and productive learning environment. Several participants felt that the teacher training curriculum focused more on theoretical aspects and did not provide enough real-life practice in classroom management scenarios. This is consistent with Annan-Brew et al. (2024), who highlight that training programs often fail to prioritize classroom management, despite its essential role in fostering an effective learning environment. These programs typically focus on content knowledge and pedagogical theory but frequently neglect practical strategies for managing different classrooms, addressing disruptive behaviors, and establishing a positive, structured atmosphere that supports learning.

The data suggested a need for more opportunities to practice and receive feedback on their teaching skills in real-world settings. Participants expressed a desire for more hands-on experience, such as micro-teaching sessions or peer teaching opportunities. Pre-service teachers recognized the importance of adapting their teaching methods to suit different learning styles and abilities, implying an awareness of inclusive education practices. The data showed a need for professional growth in specific areas such as differentiated instruction and classroom management to enhance overall readiness.

Participants voiced a desire to develop their personal teaching style. The data showed their realization that theory alone is insufficient for effective instruction. This theme highlights the crucial disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application, emphasizing the need for teacher education programs to bridge this gap by providing more hands-on experience and opportunities for student-teachers to develop and refine their classroom management and instructional skills.

### **Theme 3: Influence of Mentorship**

The presence of a supportive and effective mentor was consistently identified as a crucial factor in bolstering student-teachers' confidence and perceived preparedness, offering guidance, feedback and emotional support.

ST27 At the beginning of my teaching practice, I felt scared and unconfident... my mentor helped me develop my confidence.

Mentorship plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and classroom practice. It supports novice teachers in applying learned concepts effectively. It also contributes significantly to their emotional well-being during the transition period.

ST11 My mentor showed me how to reflect on my teaching and encouraged me to try new methods.

This supports the assertion by Mokoena and van Tonder (2024) that mentorship enhances innovation in teaching practice. It reinforces the idea that guided support encourages reflective thinking. It also highlights the role of mentorship in raising continuous professional growth.

ST34 Mentorship taught me classroom management in way textbooks never could.

Through direct modeling and guided practice, participants developed essential practical skills. One participant specifically emphasized how these approaches strengthened their hands-on competence. These structured supports enhanced both confidence and classroom readiness.

ST06 Without my mentor's feedback, I wouldn't know how to improve my teaching style.

Personalized feedback helps close the gap between learning and actual performance. It strengthens teachers' readiness by supporting continuous improvement. As one participant emphasized, individualized guidance plays a critical role in developing professional competence.

ST19 The few of us who didn't get mentors felt lost during practicum. We needed that guidance.

The disparity in mentorship access reveals structural gaps in the program. One participant emphasized this uneven support. Such inconsistencies highlight the need for program improvements.

ST40 Even just having someone to talk to when I made mistakes made me more confident.

Mentorship also provides critical emotional support, which reduces stress and builds resilience. The presence of a supportive mentor emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing preparedness perceptions among student-teachers. Participants who had the opportunity to work closely with experienced teachers reported feeling more confident and better equipped to handle the challenges of the classroom. Mentors provided guidance, feedback, and practical advice, helping student-teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice. This finding is consistent with research highlighting the significant role of mentorship in teacher development (Mokoena & van Tonder, 2024). They indicated that effective mentorship raises reflective teaching practices, promotes the use of innovative pedagogical strategies, and helps reduce teacher burnout, resulting in improved job satisfaction and retention. Additionally, mentorship encourages collaborative learning among educators, cultivating a culture of continuous improvement and enhancing the overall quality of teaching.

Participants described how mentors helped them navigate difficult situations, provided emotional support, and offered personalized strategies for classroom management and lesson planning. The data also showed that a good mentor helped students to develop their professional identity and encouraged them to reflect on their teaching practice. The absence of such support was often associated with heightened anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, further reinforcing the importance of effective mentorship programs. This aligns with Preechawong et al. (2024), who found that structured mentorship programs enhance job satisfaction, teaching efficacy, and retention rates through collaborative dialogue, observation, and constructive feedback.

Participants emphasized the value of having a mentor who could provide honest and constructive feedback on their teaching performance. The data shows the mentors offered advice on lesson planning, classroom management, and student engagement strategies. Many participants noted that their mentors provided them with emotional support, encouraging them to persevere through difficult times and helping them to maintain a positive attitude. The data indicated that mentors helped them to build confidence in their abilities and to believe in their potential as teachers.

Mentors serve as role models, exemplifying effective teaching practices, and fostering professional development. This theme highlights the critical role of mentorship in shaping student-teachers' confidence, competence, and overall preparedness, emphasizing the need for teacher education programs to prioritize the development and implementation of effective mentorship programs.

#### Theme 4: Training Gaps

Student-teachers identified significant gaps in their training, particularly in areas such as technology integration, addressing diverse learning needs, and managing large classrooms, highlighting the need for curriculum reform.

ST05 I feel unprepared to use technology effectively in my lessons.

Digital literacy is increasingly vital in today's classrooms. One participant emphasized its significance. This trend reflects the need for integrating technology into teaching practices.

ST23 We talked about inclusive education, but we didn't practice how to apply it.

Pre-service teachers often feel unprepared when theory is taught without practical experience.

One participant emphasized that this gap affects their ability to support diverse learners.

Practical application is essential for bridging theory and effective classroom practice.

ST15 There was nothing on how to handle students with special needs.

This reveals a key gap in teacher preparation. It limits readiness for inclusive teaching. One participant specifically emphasized this omission.

ST37 I struggled to maintain order in a class of 60 students. We were not trained for large class sizes.

Participants emphasized the need for practical tools to handle diverse student workloads. This need is especially critical in resource-limited settings. One participant specifically highlighted this challenge.

ST32 Real-time lesson planning was a challenge. I only practiced writing plans in class.

A dynamic approach to lesson planning is essential in real classroom contexts. This need is especially critical in resource-limited settings. One participant emphasized its importance for effective teaching.

ST10 We never received training on how to collaborate with other teachers or parents.

This indicates a need for skills beyond the classroom, such as collaboration and communication. The research findings highlight that the existing curriculum may not adequately prepare student-teachers for contemporary teaching challenges,

particularly in technology integration. While the curriculum covered basic technological tools, many participants felt ill-prepared to effectively integrate technology into their lessons in a meaningful and engaging way. This deficiency is particularly concerning given the increasing reliance on technology in modern classrooms and the expectations placed on teachers to leverage digital resources to enhance learning. This aligns with Zhao et al. (2024), who highlight that technology integration enhances interactive learning environments, facilitates differentiated instruction, and boosts student engagement and achievement.

Beyond technology, participants identified gaps in their training related to addressing diverse learning needs, managing large classrooms, and handling challenging student behaviors. Many felt that the curriculum focused primarily on traditional teaching methods and did not adequately address the realities of today's diverse and complex classrooms. They suggested that there was a need for more practical training in areas such as differentiated instruction, behavior management, and special education. In line with Mokoena and van Tonder (2024), differentiated instruction improves teaching methods to meet the unique needs of each student and proves most effective when educators undergo focused training in inclusive pedagogy, assessment strategies, and adaptive teaching methods.

Participants noted that more training is needed on how to create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. They felt unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students and provide them with the support they need to succeed. The data indicated that existing curriculum is overly focused on theory, with too little emphasis on practical application and skill development. The curriculum should be revised to include more opportunities for student-teachers to practice and refine their skills in real-world settings.

Student-teachers indicated the need for a shift in focus from traditional teaching methods to innovative approaches. This theme reveals significant shortcomings in the current curriculum, particularly in technology integration, inclusive teaching practices, and classroom management, underscoring the need for a comprehensive curriculum reform to address these gaps and equip student-teachers with the necessary skills to meet the demands of modern classrooms.

### **Theme 5: Recommendations for Improvement**

Participants awesomely recommended increased practicum experiences, hands-on activities, and curriculum revisions to bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that teacher education programs better prepare future educators.

ST01 I strongly believe that integrating more practicum-based learning... would produce more effective teachers.

This underscores the importance of providing early and ongoing field experiences. Such exposure is especially critical in resource-limited settings. One participant emphasized how these experiences shape teacher preparedness.

ST14 Micro-teaching should be more regular, not just a one-time activity.

Ongoing practice is crucial for developing mastery. This is especially true in diverse and resource-limited teaching environments. One participant emphasized its importance in real classroom contexts.

ST39 We should have exposure to rural and urban schools to understand different contexts.

Contextual adaptability is essential for thorough teacher readiness. One participant emphasized its importance in navigating diverse classroom situations. This flexibility enables teachers to respond effectively to varying student needs and learning environments.

ST30 Let us collaborate more with in-service teachers so we learn real strategies.

This shows a clear need for practical, real-world mentorship. One participant emphasized its importance. Such experiences are valued for bridging theory and practice.

ST24 Self-reflection journals and peer reviews could help us improve continuously.

Structured self-evaluation promotes professional growth. It encourages teachers to reflect on their practices. This reflection helps identify strengths and areas needing improvement. Palacio and Digo (2024) support this view. Overall, it strengthens both teaching effectiveness and personal development.

ST07 There should be more technology integration, not just PowerPoint slides.

This calls for deeper engagement with digital pedagogy. The study concluded that incorporating more practicum and hands-on experiences into the curriculum could bridge the gap between theory and practice. Participants emphasized the need for more opportunities to observe experienced teachers in action, co-teach lessons, and receive constructive feedback on their own teaching performance. They suggested that workshop experiences should be longer, more frequent, and more closely aligned with the realities of the classroom. The findings align with Zhao et al. (2024), who argue that extended professional development programs, particularly those that include workshops, enable teachers to enhance their understanding of teaching methodologies, engage in reflective practices, and collaborate with colleagues. These workshops offer teachers the opportunity and environment to explore new strategies, refine their skills, and adapt evidence-based practices to suit their specific classroom settings.

In addition to increased practicum time, participants recommended that the curriculum be revised to include more training in areas such as classroom management, technology integration, and differentiated instruction. They also suggested that teacher

education programs should provide more opportunities for student-teachers to collaborate with experienced teachers and learn from their expertise. Furthermore, they proposed that training programs should incorporate more opportunities for self-reflection and peer feedback, which would allow them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies for improvement. In line with Palacio and Digo (2024), who highlight that self-reflection enables teachers to critically assess their instructional strategies, fostering increased self-awareness and ongoing improvement. Their study suggests that when teachers engage in reflective practices, they become more skilled at recognizing both their strengths and areas for development, ultimately enhancing student outcomes.

Participants emphasized the need for curriculum revisions. They suggested including more technology integration. They also recommended training in differentiated instruction. These changes aim to better prepare teachers for diverse classroom needs. Overall, the goal is to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Participants stated that there should be a stronger focus on practical, real-world application, enabling students to learn and grow with actual teaching experience. Student-teachers emphasize the value of learning practical strategies from experienced teachers, such as methods for classroom management and student engagement. This theme synthesizes pre-service teachers' recommendations for program improvement, emphasizing the need for more practical experience, enhanced curriculum content, and collaborative learning opportunities to ensure that teacher education programs effectively prepare future educators for the realities of the classroom.

### Theme 6: Impact on Future Teachers

The study revealed that the perceptions of preparedness significantly impact the motivation, confidence, and retention of new teachers, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive reform in teacher training processes.

ST13 Our teacher preparation program is too theoretical... we feel unprepared for real-life teaching challenges.

Theoretical dominance limits practical readiness, leaving teachers feeling unprepared. This lack of preparedness can reduce their motivation. One participant specifically emphasized this connection between theory-heavy training and low confidence in teaching.

ST36 Many of my classmates are reconsidering teaching due to our bad practicum experiences.

Negative experiences in teaching can lead to higher attrition. This aligns with the findings of Herman et al. (2024). Such challenges highlight the need for supportive interventions to retain teachers.

ST28 I want to teach, but I need more support and training to feel confident.

Confidence is a key to keeping teachers engaged and committed over time. One participant emphasized its crucial role in sustaining retention. Building teacher confidence strengthens both motivation and long-term participation.

ST03 The gap in training can hurt students because we may not deliver quality education.

Inadequate teacher preparation affects classroom effectiveness and student learning. One participant emphasized that this lack of readiness can negatively influence student outcomes. Addressing preparation gaps is therefore essential for improving both teaching quality and learner achievement.

ST41 I don't want to burn out like some of the teachers I saw during my internship.

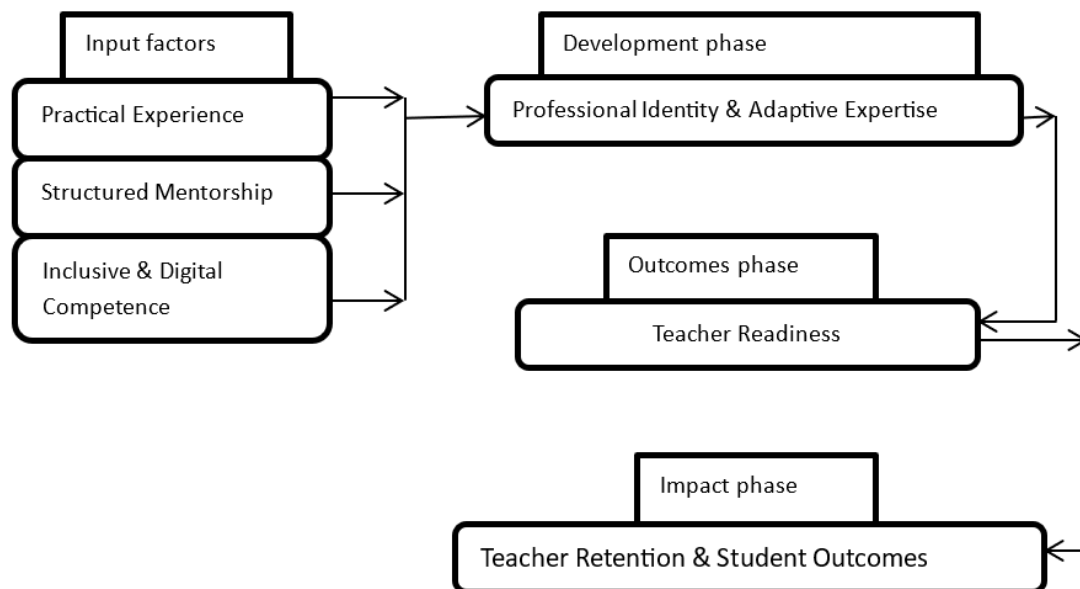
Teacher preparation should integrate stress management and resilience-building. This ensures teachers can cope with classroom challenges effectively. As one participant emphasized, these skills are essential for sustainable teaching.

ST09 Some teachers say they learned more in their first year of work than in last years of study.

This comment encapsulates disconnect between training and actual teaching requirements. The perceptions of preparedness directly impact the motivation and retention of new teachers, highlighting the need for reform in training processes. Participants expressed that feeling unprepared for the realities of the classroom negatively impacted their interest and commitment to teaching. The initial years of teaching can be particularly challenging, and a lack of adequate preparation can lead to burnout and attrition. This aligns with findings by the findings align with those of Herman et al. (2024), who suggest that teachers who feel unprepared to handle classroom challenges, deliver effective lessons, or manage the emotional demands of their profession are more likely to leave the field early. This lack of preparedness is often a result of inadequate pre-service training, limited mentorship, and a lack of professional development opportunities.

Participants expressed concerns that unpreparedness could lead to a decline in the quality of education. Teachers who feel scared and inadequate may be less likely to implement innovative teaching practices, engage with students, and create a positive learning environment. They felt that this not only affected their well-being but also had a negative effect on the students' educational outcomes. The findings do not align with Basri and Ab Rahman (2025), who emphasize that teachers who are well-prepared, particularly those committed to continuous professional development and possessing a strong understanding of their subject matter, are more effective in enhancing student learning outcomes.

The study highlights the importance of addressing the perceived gaps in teacher preparation to ensure that new teachers feel confident, competent, and motivated to remain in the profession. Investing in high-quality teacher education programs that



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of teacher readiness as an emergent construct shaped by experiential, relational, and competence-based dimensions (Source: Author's own elaboration)

provide ample practical experience, mentorship, and ongoing support can significantly improve teacher retention rates and enhance the quality of education for all students. The findings align with Yidana (2025), who suggests that teacher preparation programs often fall short in providing teachers with the practical skills necessary for effective classroom management, curriculum design, and meeting the various needs of students.

Therefore, reforming teacher training processes is crucial for raising a sustainable and effective teaching workforce. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, providing adequate support and mentorship, and addressing the specific challenges faced by new teachers, we can ensure that all students have access to well-prepared and keen teachers who are committed to their success.

The importance of ensuring that new teachers feel supported in their schools is highlighted by the need for the implementation of programs like mentor programs and practical training. The participants want to get better by attending more training and mentoring programs. This theme underscores the far-reaching consequences of perceived unpreparedness, affecting not only the motivation and retention of new teachers but also the quality of education, emphasizing the need for comprehensive teacher training reform to ensure that future teachers feel confident, supported, and committed to their profession.

## DEEPENED DISCUSSION ACROSS THREE ANALYTICAL LEVELS

### Theoretical Level

Based on the study's findings, a conceptual model of teacher readiness is developed, illustrating a developmental continuum that progresses from theoretical knowledge acquisition, through guided practice, to reflective adaptation, and culminating in professional identity consolidation. This model emphasizes that teacher readiness is dynamic and cumulative, shaped continuously by experiential learning, relational interactions, and competence development, rather than being a fixed or static state. **Figure 1** visually represents teacher readiness as an emergent construct, highlighting how practical experience, structured mentorship, and inclusive and digital competencies collectively foster professional growth and effective teaching outcome.

### Teacher Education Curriculum Level

The findings highlight the value of practice-embedded curricula that seamlessly integrate theoretical knowledge with sustained clinical experience. Mentored clinical preparation models, akin to residency-based teacher education, provide structured guidance that fosters both adaptive expertise and the ability to respond effectively to diverse classroom contexts. Such approaches prepare teachers to translate theory into practice while navigating real-world educational challenges.

### Policy Level

Teacher readiness plays a critical role in both teacher retention and the overall quality of education. Well-prepared teachers are more confident, adaptable, and effective in the classroom, which reduces the likelihood of early-career attrition. By strengthening teacher preparation programs, education systems can enhance student learning outcomes while promoting long-term professional commitment, ultimately supporting sustainable and high-quality education across schools.

## CONCLUSION

The study highlights significant gaps in teacher preparation programs, particularly in providing student-teachers with practical experience, classroom management skills, and strategies needed to handle different student needs effectively. Despite excelling in theoretical knowledge, many participants expressed concerns about their ability to apply this knowledge in real classroom settings, primarily due to limited exposure to hands-on teaching practice. The role of mentorship was identified as crucial, with supportive mentors helping to enhance confidence and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Additionally, the study found that the current curriculum does not adequately prepare student-teachers for contemporary challenges such as technology integration and classroom management.

To address these issues, it is recommended that teacher education programs integrate more practicum-based learning, extend mentorship opportunities, and revise the curriculum to emphasize practical teaching skills. Furthermore, more focus should be given to developing competencies in areas like differentiated instruction, classroom management, and the use of technology in the classroom. By adopting these reforms, teacher preparation programs can ensure that future teachers are better equipped to handle the challenges of the profession, improving both their own effectiveness and the quality of education for their students.

To move beyond general recommendations, the study proposes actionable multi-level reforms: at the curriculum level, providing continuous practicum experiences across multiple academic years and implementing structured mentoring documentation, including mentoring logbooks and reflective journals; at the institutional level, strengthening school–university partnerships to ensure coherent clinical experiences and adopting clinical supervision models that emphasize observation, feedback, and co-teaching; and at the national policy level, developing nationally recognized teacher readiness standards and allocating dedicated funding for induction and structured mentoring programs for early-career teachers.

### Study Limitations

This study is limited to a single private university, which may affect transferability of findings. Additionally, the research relied on perceived readiness rather than direct classroom observation of teaching performance. Future research should incorporate observational data and multi-institutional samples.

### Directions for Future Research

Future studies should employ mixed-methods designs to validate the proposed readiness continuum. Longitudinal tracking of early-career teachers would provide insight into how perceived readiness translates into professional retention and classroom effectiveness. Experimental intervention studies testing clinical or practice-embedded models are also recommended.

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