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Navigating Tensions in Designing a Curriculum That Prepares Preservice Teachers for School-Based Learning

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Abstract

A long-standing concern in teacher education is the variability in the quality of practicum experiences afforded to preservice teachers. Although some variability is due to their personal attributes, preservice teachers often find it difficult to connect theoretical insights to teachers' classroom practices. These challenges can be exacerbated when teachers do not explain the reasoning for what they do and why. School closures during the pandemic provided South African teacher educators with an opportunity to address this concern. We participated in developing a national online module that prepares preservice teachers for school-based learning through guided lesson study. This article adopts a self-study approach to account for the curriculum choices in developing this module. Three tensions needed consideration: portraying teaching as an individualised pursuit and/or a social practice, focusing on generic and/or specialised pedagogies, and focusing on the tacit and/or explicit reasoning that teachers do. We account for how we worked within and between these tensions. A module of this nature potentially enhances school-based learning by making the reasoning of teachers explicit to preservice teachers. To achieve this potential and to advance work-integrated learning as a scholarship, the conceptual underpinnings of the module and its curriculum design must be open to reflection and scrutiny.

Keywords: work-integrated learning; curriculum; teaching practicum; pedagogical reasoning; teacher education

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Introduction

Teaching practicum sessions ideally provide preservice teachers with opportunities to observe classroom practices of different teachers and to teach under their guidance. The feedback they receive potentially gives them new insights into teaching practices and how they are enacted in particular contexts. However, if preservice teachers focus their attention on general classroom routines and activities, they may accumulate classroom hours but not necessarily acquire new insights into teaching. Research has established that preservice teachers tend to underestimate the complexities of teaching, which left unchecked may restrict their pedagogic learning (e.g., Hammerness et al. 2005; Hoban 2005; Loughran 2019). To understand teaching as a specialised practice, preservice teachers need to draw together insights from different parts of their teacher preparation programme and their understanding of the school context. Together, these can help them make sense of the reasoning and discretion that underpin teachers' classroom practices. While some see these connections, many others do not (Hoban 2005). As a result, school-based learning offers preservice teachers vastly variable quality of pedagogical learning opportunities. While some of these variations can be attributed to the personal attributes of students and differences in the schooling contexts, how preservice teachers observe and interpret the teaching practices they observe is a significant factor in the value the practicum experience offers.

Decades ago, Calderhead (1988, 78) observed that while school-based learning may be "a process of self-discovery and reflection" for some preservice teachers, it also has the potential to be

> an uncoordinated trial-and-error personal experience, an exercise in modelling and imitation; an accumulation of practical tips on class management, or a cementing of pre-existing conceptions and misconceptions.

Calderhead's observation is relevant to the present South African context. Unevenness in the quality of work-integrated learning poses a "significant threat to the sector" (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2010, 94). This unevenness is partly attributed to the huge variety in the organisation of work-integrated learning (WIL) in different universities (e.g., Deacon 2016; Reddy, Menkveld, and Bitzer 2008; Robinson 2015) and to the quality of mentoring and feedback preservice teachers receive (Borello 2019). Grossman et al. (2009, 2075) argue that to mentor effectively, teachers need "a language and structure for describing practice" without which, they would find it "difficult to name the parts" of their own practices or "provide targeted feedback" on preservice teachers' lessons. When teachers do not possess such concepts and language, their practices are considered tacit and thus difficult to articulate. To see the logics of teachers' work requires that preservice teachers develop conceptual resources and a language of practice to interrogate the *what*, *how* and *why* of teachers' practice and how different priorities, knowledge insights, and preferences come together. Some of the contextual variables that affect preservice teacher learning may be mitigated if they can interpret the pedagogic choices teachers make from a range of possibilities. Their

learning is enhanced when they consider why some choices are more appropriate than others given the learning goals and how these are achieved by responding to factors including the demands of the subject, the needs of learners, policy requirements, and the contextual priorities and possibilities.

School closures during the pandemic provided South African teacher educators an opportunity to address long-standing concerns regarding the variable quality through national work-integrated learning intervention. We were part of a team that designed a module, called *Teacher Choices in Action*, that prepares preservice teachers for school-based learning through guided analysis of recorded lessons. During the module, preservice teachers learnt about pedagogical choices that all teachers make when planning lessons. They see how teachers enact these choices in a variety of authentic lessons recorded in diverse school contexts, and come to understand why some choices are more appropriate than others. The module was developed for dual purposes: to augment WIL when schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer a nationally available curriculum that supports and enhances WIL, which has value well beyond the pandemic. In its first four years, this module was completed by more than 70 000 preservice teachers drawn from 24 South African higher education institutions.

This article considers three tensions that needed consideration in the design process: portraying teaching as an individual pursuit and/or a socially constructed practice, focusing on generic and/or specialised pedagogic choices, and whether to foreground the tacit and/or explicit reasoning that informs teaching. We discuss the implications of these three tensions for learning in school-based placements and show how we have engaged with these tensions in designing the module. Our methodology is thus an interrogation of how we enacted our practice of curriculum design. The self-study of professional teaching practices has grown significantly over the past three decades (Pithouse-Morgan 2022). Critically interrogating one's own practices has "no prescribed methodology", but should "contribute to public debates about improving teacher education for the common good" (Pithouse-Morgan 2022, 2). We see ourselves as what McNiff (2008) calls "knowing subjects" who have drawn on our knowledge, experience, and research in the field of teacher education to develop and design this curriculum, and to make explicit the rationale for choices the design team made.

We begin the article by discussing the enduring challenge of curriculum coherence in teacher education globally and the South African context. We review relevant studies on the challenges and innovations of work-based learning. We then show how the principles from the literature informed our thinking of the three key tensions that our team of curriculum designers considered when selecting and sequencing knowledge in developing the module. Finally, we argue that giving an account of the conceptualisation of a WIL-preparation module and its curriculum design principles creates conditions of possibility for enhancing the rigour of our practices as teacher educators.

Challenge of Curriculum Coherence in Teacher Education

One might expect that preservice teachers should easily learn from observing another teacher's practice when they return to school. After all, they have spent more than a decade watching their own teachers at work, during what Lortie (1975, 62) called an "apprenticeship of observation". However, noticing key aspects of classroom practices is not always self-evident to preservice teachers who are still acquiring specialised insights into classroom practices. During their schooling, their attention is often directed at understanding content and teachers' classroom routines, rather than figuring out what their teachers were doing that enabled or restricted learning. Despite their familiarity with the classroom environment, many of the nuances of why teachers work as they do remain unnoticed. While students entering teacher preparation programmes may have become adept at mimicking their teachers, they do not yet have access to specialised knowledges and skills that enable competent teachers to "purposefully move a group of students from one set of understandings to quite another" (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage 2005, 1). Teachers consider multiple and often conflicting priorities to design and manage a learning process, choosing from many possibilities (Biesta 2015). The logics that inform teachers' choices draw on various knowledge bases, their experience, ethical imperatives, and contextual possibilities, and these may not be readily noticed by preservice teachers. Thus, it is not surprising that when observing lessons, many preservice teachers tend to describe the classroom routines and observable actions of teachers but provide little interpretation of the thinking that informs teachers' practices (Langsford and Rusznyak 2024; Morris 2006).

Numerous studies have analysed attributes of successful initial teacher education (ITE) programmes to understand which curriculum principles contribute to preparing effective graduates. For example, Darling-Hammond (2014) argues that the most effective initial teacher education programmes have three characteristics: there is coherence and integration between different parts of university-based coursework and school-based learning; there are explicit links between theory and practice, and universities have productive relationships with schools that serve diverse students effectively. Conway et al.'s (2009) study of teacher preparation programmes in nine countries indicated similar components. These included having a shared and clear vision of good teaching practice so that students can see the connections between modules that focus on the theoretical foundations of education, methods of teaching, and classroom practices. They included projects that require students to integrate their knowledge through case studies or portfolio tasks. Similarly, in the South African context, Morrow (2007, 85) identifies four fundamental goals of teacher education: first, that preservice teachers should develop a "strongly and properly grounded conception of teaching"; second, that they should have strong subject knowledge and know how to teach it; third, that they should understand the contexts in which they teach; and fourth, that they should have the capacity for making decisions that enable them to organise systematic learning. These scholars stress the importance of teacher education curricula having a conception of

teaching as a principled practice fundamentally connected to knowledge-based insights and enacted in contextually responsive ways.

There is widespread agreement that principles of conceptual depth, coherence, and integration are key curriculum attributes, but it is also clear that these are not easily achieved. As Hoban (2005, 2; italics added) explains,

> A conventional design process starts with nominating the courses to be taught, puts them in order and then places the practicum in a place as to cause minimal disruption. Course instructors tend to work in isolation to each other. … Such a mechanistic approach is fragmented and promotes incoherent teacher education programmes notable for the *absence of links*; *it is left to students to make their own connections*.

There may well be conceptual progression and coherence within each of the courses across the years of the qualification. Still, potential connections between courses are not always made explicit, nor are they necessarily obvious to preservice teachers. Understanding the connections between different parts of an ITE curriculum is crucial to supporting the development of students' professional knowledge for teaching, in particular their pedagogical content knowledge (Grossman 1990; Shulman 1987).

When teacher education curricula are designed around different bodies of knowledge, work-based learning can be regarded as an off-campus activity where students presumably gain classroom experience and knowledge of schooling contexts. Preservice teachers are sent to schools with the expectation that they will be able to apply the theories they have learned and will learn from the experience in an inductive manner, somehow absorbing the tacit understandings of experienced teachers. Yet, connecting theoretical insights and the real-world practices of teachers is neither simple nor straightforward (Gravett, Petersen, and Petker 2014). Given the busyness of classroom life, there are seldom opportunities for teachers to give a detailed and nuanced account of their practice to preservice teachers (Berry, Loughran, and Van Driel 2008; Loughran 2019). Without insight into why particular options are deemed more appropriate than others, preservice teachers may accumulate classroom hours but still gain little insight into how teaching practices are enacted in contextually responsive ways. Our argument is that preparing preservice teachers to notice and interpret the intricacies of different aspects of teachers' classroom practices creates conditions of possibility for connecting insights from different parts of their teacher preparation and enhancing the quality of their work-based learning.

Curricular Coherence and School-Based Learning

Like all education policies in pre-1994 apartheid South Africa, previous teacher education opportunities were segregated in terms of "race" and were unequal in terms of quality (Sayed et al. 2018). Policymakers in democratic South Africa needed to create a more uniform teacher education system that would prepare quality teachers who could "address the critical challenges facing education in South Africa today—especially the

poor content and conceptual knowledge found amongst teachers, as well as the legacies of apartheid" (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2015, 8). The *Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ) specifies five different categories of knowledge that prospective teachers should learn during their teacher preparation programmes (DHET 2015). These are *disciplinary learning* (including educationally focused and subject knowledge), *pedagogical learning* (including both general and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge), *practical learning* (knowledge from observing, analysing, and reflecting on one's own teaching and the practice of others), *situational learning* (knowledge about the diverse contexts in which schooling takes place), and *foundational learning* (general skills that are useful for teaching). Teacher educators are required to ensure that their curricula offer a specified "mix" of these different knowledges.

Because different modules focus on different bodies of knowledge, rarely are insights from subject-specific pedagogies brought into relation with those from educational psychology, inclusive education or an understanding of schooling contexts (Hoban 2005). Packaged as a collection of discrete modules, the insights provided by different bodies of knowledge are often treated as if they operate in isolation from one another. While each module contributes something towards the conceptual, practical or contextual preparation of preservice teachers, the work-based learning components are generally treated as separate from university-based coursework (Deacon 2016; Walton and Rusznyak 2020). Studies on the pedagogic learning offered to students through coursework reveal their tendency to focus on one set of logics rather than understanding how a teacher works within a matrix of concerns, demands, and priorities. For example, studies show how coursework enables students to understand the demands of subject-specific pedagogy (e.g., chemical equilibrium, in Rollnick and Mavhunga [2014]). Others ignore the subject-specific perspectives and focus on how preservice teachers learn to work in differently resourced contexts (e.g., Amin and Ramrathan 2009), or with principles of inclusive education (Walton 2017). However, it still seems that many preservice teachers struggle to integrate insights from different modules in their university coursework with their school-based learning (Henning and Gravett 2012).

Despite MRTEQ's assertion that the policy seeks to "bring the importance of interconnectedness between different types of knowledge and practices into the foreground" (DHET 2015, 10), requirements entrench the idea that teaching is informed by discrete types of knowledge that give rise to different kinds of learning. The policy expects that these knowledges should "fus[e] together … in the moments of practice" (DHET 2015, 9). Still, this expectation underestimates the complexity of integrating different knowledges and recontextualising them into practice-based contexts.

Preparing Preservice Teachers for Teaching Practicum

Recent systematic reviews of research and innovation in teacher education found that various crucial topics (including the conceptualisation of work-integrated learning) remain under-researched (Ananin and Lovakov 2022; Ellis et al. 2023). The existing

studies are characterised by "relatively small-scale studies" using qualitative methodological approaches (Lawson et al. 2015, 392). South African studies on WIL focus primarily on stakeholder perception and experiences (Bertram, Mthiyane, and Mukeredzi 2013; Moodley, Sadeck, and Luckay 2018), school-university partnerships (Gravett, Petersen, and Petker 2014), and preparing students for diverse classrooms (Robinson and Zinn 2007; Walton and Rusznyak 2017). South African reviews of WIL reveal vast variations between institutions (CHE 2010; Deacon 2016; Reddy, Menkveld, and Bitzer 2008).

Preparing preservice teachers for work-based learning in South Africa typically focuses on three aspects (Deacon 2016; Robinson 2015). First, a considerable amount of logistical work goes into placing students in schools and allocating university lecturers to supervise and assess them. Second, preparation ensures that students understand the tasks they are required to complete during work-based learning. For example, students are prepared to understand the instructions for school-based assignments attached to particular modules. Third, there is much emphasis on ensuring students understand conduct expectations. Typically, students are reminded of the code of ethical conduct for educators (SACE 2009) and are cautioned about the consequences of misconduct. While these areas are all important, universities may not sufficiently focus on teaching them how to analyse the lessons they will observe and identify why teachers make certain pedagogic choices over others given their subjects, priorities, student diversities, and school contexts.

Designing a School-Based Learning Preparation Curriculum

If preservice teachers do not understand the logics that inform teachers' work, time spent in school-based learning is less likely to be transformative. The quality of preservice teachers' work-based learning experiences may be significantly enhanced if they are aware of the choices underpinning teachers' practice and are prompted to consider why some options may be more appropriate than others. Attention must be paid to the explicit articulation and integration of the key components of the formal curriculum to understand classroom practices (Flores 2016). Experiential learning in the workplace can be made more intentional and effective if it is carefully scaffolded by making teachers' pedagogical choices more explicit. An essential step to developing preservice teachers' own practice-based judgement is to recognise the options and possibilities in the lessons they observe (Morris 2006). If preservice teachers are better prepared to analyse the lessons they observe, their time in work-based learning can support the development of a more specialised gaze on teaching as "intricate and unnatural work" where "decisions about what to do are not appropriately rooted in personal preferences or experiences but are instead based on professionally justified knowledge and on the moral imperatives of the role" (Loewenberg Ball and Forzani 2009, 500). We support the argument that "fine discrimination does not happen experientially; it has to be framed linguistically through discursive interventions by a specialist-mentor and requires careful planning of a range of instances (in the form of activities) ordered in a

deliberate sequence" (Shalem and Ramsarup 2020, 27). The capacity to notice and infer reasoning in practice builds foundations on which conceptually informed, contextually responsive teaching practices can develop (Morris 2006). Establishing strong foundations to support school-based learning is particularly important considering the vastly diverse educational backgrounds and experiences of schooling of preservice teachers around the country.

The *Teacher Choices in Action* Module

Some suggest that the potential value of WIL is best achieved when preservice teachers work in a nurturing school environment with a supportive mentor who can articulate and interrogate the grounds of their pedagogic choices (Grossman et al. 2009; Hammerness et al. 2005). However, this ideal scenario is not always aligned with the contextual realities of South African schooling. Studies suggest high levels of teacher absenteeism in some schools during WIL (Moodley, Sadeck, and Luckay 2018), with the result that preservice teachers regularly find themselves left unsupervised in classrooms. Although school-based placement may provide value as personal experiential learning, unmediated classroom time is insufficient to promote the integration of knowledges and offer coherence to the developing teaching practices of preservice teachers (Rusznyak and Bertram 2021).

An opportunity to address some of these challenges through a formal practicum preparation curriculum arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2020, South African schools were closed for extended periods during a national lockdown and were partially opened later in that year. Preservice teachers could not undertake sessions of work-based learning as required by their ITE programmes. We were part of a team that drew on our collective knowledge, research, and experiences as teacher educators to address the immediate need for an alternative, authentic form of work-integrated learning. The teacher educators conceptualised a formal work-based learning preparation module, called *Teacher Choices in Action*, during a researchers' bootcamp and developed it in the months thereafter. Although the module offered the possibility of online practice-based learning during the pandemic, it was designed to provide longer-term benefits to the sector. The module makes connections between disparate parts of teacher preparation programmes and classroom practices explicit. During its first four years, more than 70 000 preservice teachers from 24 South African universities completed the module as a part of work-based learning requirements in their teacher preparation programmes.

The module's content is organised around key decisions that all teachers need to make in every lesson they teach (Hugo 2013). The module focuses specifically on the interactions between a triad of teachers, knowledge, and diverse students, depicted at each of the apexes of a triangle in the logo for the module (see Figure 1).

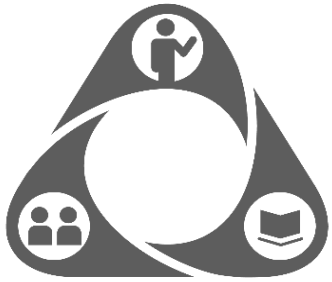


Figure 1: The logo for the *Teacher Choices in Action* module, depicting the work teachers do in managing diverse students and managing knowledge

By considering the same set of key questions in lessons taught in vastly different subjects, grades and contexts, preservice teachers come to see how all teachers organise systematic learning, work with learner and contextual diversities, and manage classroom environments.

The module focuses on teachers' decisions when organising knowledge and managing students and their learning within safe learning environments. In so doing, the module brings together the ways teachers work with subject knowledge, ethics, student diversities, the challenges of multilingual classrooms, policy imperatives for inclusive education, and what is possible within the contextual realities of their classrooms. These themes were developed and connected through the following units:

1. On choosing to become a teacher.
2. Teacher choices in different contexts.
3. Teacher choices that work with knowledge.
4. Teacher choices that promote cumulative learning.
5. Teacher choices for inclusive teaching.
6. Teacher choices to manage learning environments.

The module provides preservice teachers with formal opportunities to observe different teaching practices through structured lesson studies, connecting insights from different parts of their coursework. It brings together a range of resources (including recorded lessons) with various concepts that were selected for being exceptionally useful in analysing teachers' work. The module provides a library of video-recorded lessons of different teachers teaching in a range of schools at various grades and across different subjects. Preservice teachers analyse how these teachers make key decisions about different aspects of practice, such as choices about appropriate modes of curriculum delivery, managing knowledge, managing classroom conversations, learning activities and feedback, and managing time and space in a range of learning environments.

The module makes explicit the range of options available to teachers and why some are more appropriate, given the purpose of the lesson, the learning needs of students, and

the contextual realities of their classrooms. Preservice teachers analyse the choices teachers make in recorded lessons, transcripts of classroom conversations, learning activities, and assessment tasks. By looking at the same choices in different contexts, subject areas, and with different students, preservice teachers see a far greater range of practices than they would in a placement in one school. Through this learning-from-practice approach, preservice teachers draw on concepts from different parts of their teacher education programme, including subject knowledge, subject-specific pedagogies, inclusive education, theories of learning, and the context of schooling in society. They learn why some pedagogical approaches are appropriate in some lesson topics or contexts, but not in others. In this way, preservice teachers are taught to look at teacher actions and the reasoning that informs what teachers do and why. The module provides guided analysis of classroom practice as a support for preservice teachers who find themselves unsupervised. It augments and enriches the feedback that preservice teachers should ideally get from their mentor teachers and university lecturers. In so doing, the module allows preservice teachers to start school-based learning more equitably prepared regardless of their educational histories or their practicum schooling contexts.

Tensions in Curriculum Design Choices

Bearing in mind the key principles of coherence and integration (Darling-Hammond 2014), one of the main purposes of the module design was to enable preservice teachers to make the connections between coursework concepts and the classroom practices of teachers in real classrooms. As curriculum designers, we needed to make choices in selecting and sequencing knowledge to support preservice teachers' practice-based learning. The research on curricula for teacher education tends to focus on dilemmas that arise in context (e.g., Gravett et al. 2017) or broad principles (e.g., Walton and Rusznyak 2017). Very little has been written on how such principles translate into specific curriculum choices (Flores 2016). Our aim here is to present a case of translating broad principles into selection and sequencing choices. We draw on the *Teacher Choices in Action* module to provide an example of what a formal curriculum that prepares preservice teachers for work-based learning could look like, while acknowledging that other knowledge selection and sequencing decisions could have been made.

In designing the *Teacher Choices in Action* module, we considered what could consolidate (but not repeat) what is already offered in university-based coursework. One way of doing this was to make links between different bodies of knowledge, ethical orientations, principles, and policies and how these help to make sense of what teachers do. We began with the assumption that the decisions about selection and sequencing of content are influenced by the purpose of the module, just as choices for school curriculum are informed by the question "what is the purpose of schooling?" (Biesta 2015). Just as school education is a teleological project, so too are teacher education curricula influenced by the vision of the "desired teacher" that would be formed through

them (Österling 2022). The vision of the desired teacher is linked to the conceptions of teaching held by the curriculum designers.

Curriculum Choices and Tensions in the Field

This section highlights tensions about the nature of teaching and the implications that we considered when designing this module. We have framed three of these tensions as: the extent to which teaching is understood as an individual pursuit or a socially constructed professional practice, a generic or specialist knowledge-based practice, and lastly, as a practice that is based on tacit or conscious, explicit reasoning. Although there are many debates in the field of teacher education, these are the ones that generated most discussion and debate within the team of teacher educators when developing the module. The positioning of the module within these tensions was informed by its purpose and national policies. We also drew on our research on the development of preservice teachers and our readings of the field of scholarship over several years. While in some cases, we aligned ourselves with a particular stance in the debate, for others, we addressed tensions through carefully sequenced shifts between positions rather than regard them as irreconcilable. We considered what our stance on the nature of teaching means for designing a process of learning to teach and show how this in turn influenced the choices we made in the curriculum design of the *Teacher Choices in Action* module (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of tensions that needed to be considered and the curriculum choices made in the *Teacher Choices in Action* module

Tension	**Our position**	**Design of module**
1. Understanding teaching as an individual pursuit and/or a social practice	Teaching is a socially constructed practice enacted by individual teachers in ways appropriate to their context.	In Unit 1, preservice teachers first reflect on their experiences and then shift to a guided analysis of recorded lessons.
2. Teaching has generic and/or specialised knowledge bases	Teachers' choices are not arbitrary. They consider factors including subject knowledge, student attributes, ethical priorities, and contextual realities.	Units 2–5 focus on how context, subject, and student diversities inform teachers' pedagogic choices.
3. Whether teachers make reasoned and/or intuitive choices in how they enact their classroom practices	There are key decisions teachers make in every lesson, whether consciously or not.	The module makes explicit the choices that teachers make through their design of lessons and other classroom artefacts.

Tension 1: Teaching as an Individualised Pursuit and/or Socialisation into a Practice

When preservice teachers are placed in schools with minimal scaffolding and little direction about what aspects of teachers' work are noteworthy, they may tend to notice only what they noticed as students during their own schooling. An analysis of preservice teachers' lesson planning and reflections (Rusznyak 2022; Rusznyak and Walton 2011) revealed a tendency for many to provide a narrative account of classroom observations that did not consider the reasoning that may have informed teachers' work. This unmediated learning from experience means that they often see teaching as an individualised pursuit, which relies on the charisma and personality of the teacher. Our curriculum choices emerged from a view of teaching as a professional practice that comprises complex patterns of socially constructed activity directed towards a common purpose (MacIntyre [1981] 2007).

One purpose of the module is to support preservice teachers' socialisation into the practices of teaching. While the module emphasises teaching as a process of socialisation into a practice that is bigger than students' individual experiences, we acknowledge that preservice teachers' practices also shape and are shaped by their personal identity and experiences. We recognise that both aspects are important, as a strong research base highlights how preservice teachers' experiences of schooling and beliefs about the purpose of schooling also shape their classroom practice (Korthagen 2007). Moreover, teacher education initiatives that do not provide students with opportunities to incorporate their personal beliefs, experiences, and identities run the risk of being irrelevant and alienating (Samuel 2009). Since the module intended to shape preservice teachers' professional identity and their socialisation into teaching, we included numerous opportunities for them to reflect on their individual experiences and consider how these shape their priorities, beliefs, and perceptions as future teachers.

Winch (2017, 95) describes the importance of teachers having a "theory" of themselves as teachers in terms of their own capacities, limitations, and potential for change. In this module, we begin with preservice teachers' personal identities and experiences by asking them to reflect on their own journey to teaching. They then need to describe an analogy that fits best with their concept of the work that teachers do. To bring some structure to this task, students are introduced to a triad of the teacher, students, and knowledge. For example, in the sequencing of the activities, the module requires preservice teachers to reflect on their own experiences, beliefs, and priorities before engaging with the new content of the unit. In Unit 5, students are asked to reflect on their own experiences of feeling excluded at school, before considering examples of how resources, access to language, and task activity can lead to exclusion, and how multilingualism and differentiated teaching may support inclusion of all students.

Tension 2: Teaching as Generic and/or Specialised Practices

The tension here is the extent to which teaching practices are understood as generic (that is, applicable in all situations) or specialised to subject content and to context. There are two sub-categories within this debate.

Subject Specialisations

The first is the extent to which teaching practices are specialised to the subject that is taught or whether there are generic strategies that work for any subject or schooling level. The position that we took in the design of the *Teacher Choices in Action* module is that teaching is a principled practice, with concerns and priorities that all teachers share. However, their pedagogies must align with how knowledge is structured in the taught subjects. Morrow's (2007, 69) conception of teaching as the "practice of organising systematic learning" informs our position, as does the idea that the nature of content knowledge has crucial pedagogic significance (Shulman 1987). Therefore, the relations between content knowledge, lesson purpose, and appropriate pedagogic choices are central to the specialised reasoning that preservice teachers need to notice when observing teachers at work. In Units 3 and 4, students' attention is drawn to how teachers set up opportunities for students to master bodies of knowledge and skills, and to provide them with opportunities to express their knowledge in ways required by the subject. They use conceptual tools such as semantic waves (Maton 2014) to study how teachers shift knowledge between simpler, context-dependent meanings and more complex and generalisable ones.

We argue that the essence of teachers' work is to think about what purpose they wish to achieve by teaching specific content to these students in a particular school and classroom context. The module supports this learning with artefacts of practice (such as textbook extracts, examples of teacher feedback on assessment tasks, classroom dialogue transcripts, and recorded lessons) that all students analyse, regardless of their subject or level specialisation. However, when they select other lessons to observe, these need to align with their level and subject specialisation. Students' attention is drawn to how teachers, from a wide range of school contexts, all responded to the same set of principles in their lessons. These include selecting core concepts and familiar examples, conducting classroom discussions to focus students' attention on the main ideas, providing tasks that require students to consolidate and extend their understanding of these ideas, consideration of appropriate feedback given the task, process or product of the learning activity, the design of learning materials that both foreground main ideas and the diversity of students, and the differentiated support needed to support the achievement of all students in the lesson design. In this way, the module provides opportunities for students to move back and forth between concerns that all teachers consider and how these are enacted in subject-specific ways.

Units 3–5 focus on teachers' role as a knowledge-worker, and the last unit in the curriculum focuses on the choices that teachers make when managing time and space in

their classrooms. This sequencing decision emphasises our position that teachers first need to consider the nature of the knowledge to be taught and the appropriate interactions and activities that will engage students productively with that knowledge. Classroom organisation and management decisions can follow once those pedagogic choices have been made.

Contextual Specialisation

The second way in which the generic/specialised tension is enacted is the extent to which teaching practices are understood in terms of their context dependence. The landscape of public schools in South Africa still reflects the unequal resourcing of apartheid policies (Christie 2021). While the post-1994 state has adjusted funding policies to allocate more money to schools in communities with low socio-economic status, inequalities remain entrenched, based now on class rather than only on "race". This was highlighted during the pandemic-related school closures when fee-charging schools, which serve the middle class, were able to continue teaching online as students and teachers had access to devices and the internet. In contrast, most students and teachers at no-fee schools did not have laptops, data or internet connections (Van der Berg and Spaull 2020).

Given the extreme differences in the schooling contexts in South Africa, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which preservice teachers must be equipped to teach in all these very specific contexts usually by doing work-based learning in a range of different contexts (e.g., Amin and Ramrathan 2009; Mukeredzi 2021). The assumption is that the knowledge and skills that preservice teachers need to teach in rural schools, for example, are very different from those required to teach in urban schools and must be acquired in that particular context. Our stance here is that *specialised teacher judgements need to be contextually responsive*. Thus, it is not helpful when teacher education programmes teach preservice teachers generic, one-size-fits-all strategies or maxims (such as using group work in *every* lesson, *always* starting lessons with what students already know, *always* setting a homework task). However, neither is it helpful when teaching is constructed as a completely unique and contextual activity, devoid of overarching principles and logics. The notion that research can tell us unambiguously "what works" is incorrect because something only "works" in relation to a set of purposes and circumstances (Biesta 2015). What is appropriate and possible in one context may be inappropriate or impossible in another (Carrim 2019). We therefore worked with a view that preservice teachers should learn how to make appropriate pedagogical choices depending on the subject knowledge being taught, the learning needs of diverse students, and what is possible and desirable in the context. These judgements depend on a well-grounded contextual understanding and are constitutive of what the teacher seeks to achieve.

Distributive justice is a key principle that informed the design of Unit 4 of *Teacher Choices in Action*. It focuses on the teachers' role in facilitating classroom dialogues, developing worthwhile learning tasks, and providing appropriate feedback in a range of

contexts. In South Africa, uneven learning outcomes strongly correlate with the bifurcated schooling system, which reflects students' "race" and class. Higher student achievement is generally seen in the 20% of schools that charge school fees and thus serve the middle and upper classes (Hoffman, Sayed, and Badroodien 2016). Thus, teachers' role in teaching for social justice and being able to recognise both individual and social barriers to learning is vital. There are ongoing debates about whether *teaching for social justice* is what "good teaching" should be, or if it refers to a specific kind of teaching (Cochran-Smith et al. 2009). While the concept may be ambiguous and vague, it offers a principle that teachers should understand the barriers to learning faced at both an individual and social level. Furthermore, bearing distributive justice in mind, they make pedagogical choices that mitigate the uneven distribution of knowledge and learning opportunities available to learners in their classrooms.

Our stance in the module was to equip preservice teachers to see more clearly the pedagogical choices made by a specific teacher (in a recorded lesson) who was teaching specific content to a class of learners in a particular context. The principle that informed the module design was that there is no one "best" way of teaching that fits every context and grade level. Rather, because of the teleological nature of education, teachers need to make appropriate judgements depending on the purpose of a particular lesson (Biesta 2015), while being responsive to the possibilities and priorities of the context (Carrim 2019). The module sought to make explicit how a range of teachers draw on different bodies of knowledge (content, pedagogical, contextual, ethical) to inform the work they do.

The principled nature and contextual responsiveness of teaching emerge when preservice teachers analyse the same lessons and artefacts from various priorities. They consider how teachers represent and organise knowledge, how they organise and interact with learners, how they support diverse student needs, and how they draw on resources available in their contexts. The 250 lessons included in the Lesson Library were recorded in a wide range of school contexts. While some showed curriculum delivery through online modes, most were recorded live in face-to-face lessons. These included lessons in independent schools, religious schools, and public schools in a range of geographical settings (such as rural, inner city, suburban). Students had the opportunity to observe how teaching practices are enacted in a wide range of contexts.

Tension 3: Examining Teaching as an Explicitly Reasoned and/or Intuitively Enacted Practice

This is the debate regarding the extent to which concepts and pedagogical choices can be made explicit to preservice teachers and the extent to which these will be learned implicitly through experience. Expert teaching, which can appear almost intuitive and effortless, gives rise to a belief that teaching is informed by tacit knowledge acquired through classroom experience. We support the view of Shalem and Slonimsky (2013, 68) that such an approach is "necessary but insufficient" if preservice teachers are to develop "practical wisdom by means of action research, personal observations,

fieldwork and continuous experience in the site of practice". Our position is that a specialised gaze on practice does not develop spontaneously through unmediated classroom experience. Enabling professional learning in the workplace should thus be explicitly scaffolded. Our stance is that *preservice teachers should be inducted into principled grounds that inform teachers' pedagogic reasoning* (Rusznyak and Bertram 2021). We regard pedagogic reasoning as a "specialised way of thinking in which teachers draw on different kinds of knowledge as well as different types of knowledge within contextual realities to make ethical, appropriate, and responsive choices that organise opportunities for learning" (39). Loughran (2019, 526) defines pedagogic reasoning as the "thinking that underpins informed professional practice". Similarly, Horn (2010, 237; italics added) suggests that pedagogic reasonings are the "moments in teachers' interaction when they describe issues in, or raise questions about, teaching practice, and [in which] these descriptions are accompanied by *some elaboration of reasons, explanations, or justifications*". There are specialised knowledge bases that underpin the work of teaching, and this supports our approach, which is that *teachers need to systematically develop the knowledge and insight to be able to make informed choices* in the classroom and to be able to justify these choices. The thinking that informs practice is difficult for novices to access, which is why it needs to be made explicit to them. Making the intentions and reasoning explicit sets up conditions of possibility for preservice teachers to distinguish between classroom busyness and the genuine classroom business of learning.

In the *Teacher Choices in Action* module, we drew on a range of concepts useful for analysing how teachers work with knowledge, learners' diversities and manage classroom interactions. A useful concept in the module comes from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton 2014): *Semantic waves* track how teachers and learners work with knowledge during a lesson. Preservice teachers see how teachers' explanations shift between complex concepts and real-world examples, how complex ideas are unpacked into more understandable parts, and how activities often require learners to repack those ideas back into more complex forms (Maton 2009). Through guided analysis of recorded lessons, preservice teachers can observe these shifts in a range of lessons taught in various contexts. Another set of concepts was taken from Hattie and Timperley's (2007) work on the different types of feedback teachers give students. By analysing different examples of feedback, preservice teachers come to see how, when, and why teachers use feedback that focuses on the process of learning, on the product produced by the student, or on the learners' efforts. Seeing these different types of feedback enacted in different lessons makes the reasoning and intention behind teachers' feedback more explicit to preservice teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Concern about the variable quality of preservice teachers' practicum learning has been partially addressed through developing a formal curriculum that empowers them to observe and interpret teachers' classroom practices. The *Teacher Choices in Action*

module was designed as a bridge between university coursework and school-based learning. Preservice teachers have opportunities to draw together insights from different parts of their university coursework to make sense of the pedagogical choices teachers make in response to the demands of the subject, the diverse learning needs of learners, and the possibilities and priorities in the school context. By considering the same set of key choices in lessons taught in vastly different subjects, grades and contexts, preservice teachers learn to see principles of practice and how these are enacted in contextually responsive ways. We have argued that given the variable quality of school-based learning, a module that guides preservice teachers to analyse classroom practices has the potential to enhance their school-based learning.

Our aim in this article has been to make our curriculum design choices for this module explicit. The curriculum decisions presented here are not offered as universal principles or a normative solution but reflect the curriculum choices made for a module designed for the South African context. In a systematic review of innovation and research in teacher education, Ellis et al. (2023, 8) point out that articles that give a conceptual account of innovation are "missing in action" from research in teacher education. They argue that making "the motives and intentions behind innovations [explicit] … allows such creative contributions to have meaning across contexts and to contribute to a knowledge base for productive change in teacher education". Through giving an account of the curriculum intention, conceptual underpinnings, and design, we open the idea of formal preparation for school-based learning through lesson analysis to further reflection, discussion, and scrutiny within and beyond the South African context.

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