

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 819-835 March 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.3.35>
 Received Oct 19, 2025; Revised Feb 5, 2026; Accepted Mar 17, 2026

Pedagogical Reasoning and Preservice Teacher Capabilities in South Africa: A Capability Approach from Policy to Practice

Emma Priscilla Barnett*  and Wiets Botes 

Sol Plaatje University,
 Kimberley, South Africa

Abstract. The development of pedagogical reasoning is a critical component of preparing preservice teachers, particularly within South Africa's diverse and socially complex educational landscape. Classrooms are characterised by learners from varied cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds, requiring teachers to adapt their pedagogical practices to foster inclusive and socially just learning environments. Without explicit emphasis in initial teacher education, limited pedagogical reasoning can constrain effective teaching and learning. Guided by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications policy, which underpins teacher preparation in South African higher education, this study employs a critical conceptual analysis grounded in the Capability Approach. A systematic synthesis of literature on pedagogical reasoning, teacher education, and education policy is undertaken to interrogate how pedagogical reasoning is conceptualised and enacted in preservice teacher education. The conceptual analysis, based on a desktop review, indicates that pedagogical reasoning practices informed by contextual sensitivity, adaptive decision-making, and reflective engagement are central to supporting equitable teaching. These dimensions enable preservice teachers to respond meaningfully to learner diversity while aligning pedagogical choices with ethical and social imperatives. The findings suggest that embedding ethically grounded and socially responsive pedagogical reasoning within teacher education programmes can strengthen preservice teachers' capacity to promote inclusion and social justice in classrooms. The study contributes to ongoing debates on teacher educational design and policy by offering conceptual insights that support the development of more responsive and effective preservice teacher training models in South Africa.

Keywords: Pedagogical reasoning; preservice teachers; capability approach; teacher education policy; South Africa

*Corresponding author: *Emma Priscilla Barnett*; emma.barnett@spu.ac.za

1. Introduction

Preservice teachers (PSTs) should have the skill to integrate various forms of knowledge they are trained on and use that to pursue pedagogical reasoning. Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (RSA-DHET, 2015) requires that PSTs draw on their knowledge base to teach effectively. PSTs are defined as individuals who are teachers in a teacher training programme, to graduate and become teachers (Quinn, 2023). PST teacher draw on their knowledge base to "have a sound subject knowledge", "know how [their learners] learn", "communicate effectively [...] to mediate learning", "be knowledgeable about the school curriculum", "identify learning or social problems", "assess in reliable and varied ways", and "reflect critically, in theoretically informed ways" (RSA-DHET, 2015, p. 62).

The MRTEQ states its focus is on "professional educators and teachers for the schooling system" (RSA-DHET, 2015, 7). Still, it does not clearly specify how to develop PSTs' pedagogical reasoning during initial teacher training. The policy aims for novice teachers to "apply their learning in schools in varying contexts" (*ibid.*, p. 20). Shulman (1987) argues that [t]he goal of teacher education ... [is] to educate teachers to reason soundly about their teaching, as well as to perform skilfully. Sound reasoning involves a process of thinking about what they are doing and an adequate base of facts, principles, and experiences to support the reasoning process. Arguably, PSTs must be able to use their knowledge base to provide the grounds for choices and actions. A profession requires a knowledge base to enable pedagogical reasoning in practice (Shulman, 1987). As such, this pedagogical reasoning unlocks options for preservice teachers to make professional judgments in situations.

Pedagogical reasoning (PR) refers to the invisible cognitive work undergirding determined teaching, which Loughran (2019) described as the thinking that underpins informed professional practice. PR, also referred to as instructional reasoning (Tiilikainen et al., 2019), is the process through which teachers connect their instructional actions to the purposes that guide them. Such reasoning is inherently contextual, as instructional intentions arise in response to particular dilemmas sitting at the nexus of teachers, students, content, and context, including the broader teaching environment (Shulman, 1987; Tiilikainen et al., 2019).

Consequently, PR involves observation, reflection, ongoing formative evaluation, and assessment as a part of a process of understanding, judgment, and actions, which lead to pedagogical decisions. As such, PR involves the complex cognitive processes teachers engage in when making instructional decisions. Furthermore, fostering pedagogical reasoning is central to preparing teachers who are not only skilled practitioners but also transformative agents in their communities.

The Capability Approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen (1987) provides a framework for understanding the development of PR. Sen posits that education is intrinsically valuable and "future-oriented" (Saito, 2003, p. 27) as education offers the opportunity to expand horizons and to live the lives they value. Central to the CA, Sen (1992) argues that "for a person to achieve what he values or has

reason to value, we must look at the extent of freedoms a person has to achieve functionings he or she values". Sen (1987, p. 36) refers to "functionings as an achievement, whereas capability is the ability to achieve. "Functionings are more directly related to living conditions, and capabilities are notions of freedom that relate to real opportunities to have wellbeing. Arguably, functionings are the actual achievements and capabilities, the fundamental freedoms or opportunities to achieve those functionings. Nussbaum (2000) further advances the CA by articulating a list of central human capabilities, inter alia, practical reasoning, imagination, affiliation, and control over one's environment, which are relevant to PR. Nussbaum (2011) argues that education plays a vital role in developing capabilities to be able to critically reflect and make reasoned decisions, which is foundational to PR.

The development of PR in preservice teachers must be regarded as a skill, one that allows future educators to think critically about their practices, respond appropriately to learners' needs, and make instructional choices that are fair, inclusive, and empowering. Therefore, PSTs' training programmes should not only build knowledge and skills but also cultivate pedagogical reasoning through flexible curricula, reflective opportunities, and exposure to diverse, real-world teaching environments. Both Sen's and Nussbaum's perspectives confirm that developing pedagogical reasoning in preservice teachers should not be merely a technical or cognitive task, but a profoundly human and ethical pursuit, vital for promoting social justice and equity in education.

Unfortunately, despite the expectations outlined in the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ) (RSA-DHET, 2015), PSTs often struggle to integrate the diverse forms of knowledge acquired during their training into coherent pedagogical reasoning that informs effective classroom practice (van der Merwe, 2022). While MRTEQ mandates that PSTs draw meaningfully on their disciplinary, pedagogical, and contextual knowledge bases, limited attention is given to how this integration is developed, supported, and assessed within initial teacher education programmes. This gap constrains PSTs' capacity to make informed, context-responsive pedagogical decisions, particularly in diverse classroom settings, thereby undermining the quality and inclusivity of teaching and learning.

With this in mind, we pose the following question: "What are the pedagogical reasoning capabilities needed for preservice teachers in their educational practices?" Given this research question, the study aims to conceptualise the pedagogical reasoning capabilities required for PSTs through the lens of the Capability Approach. The significance of this study lies in demonstrating how pedagogical reasoning can enhance teacher preparedness, align with national standards, and promote quality education in training PST in SA. The following section examines the Capability Approach (CA), which will be utilised as the study's theoretical framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Capability approach (CA), as indicated by Amartya Sen (1992), involves two normative claims linked to freedoms and opportunities. The first assumption is that the freedom to achieve well-being is of moral importance, and the second is that this freedom must be understood in terms of people with capabilities. In other words, their real opportunities to do and be what they value. The CA thus places importance on the opportunities and freedoms that individuals have to achieve the beings and doings they see as valuable. Sen (1999) believes that freedom can directly enhance people's capabilities. Freedom is linked to an individual's ability to make choices that enable them to support themselves and others (Schwartz & Cheek, 2017).

Furthermore, it concerns the extent to which people are free, or able to use resources available to them to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value. In the context of this study, salient factors that might hinder individuals from achieving their desired goals are the available resources. Capabilities refer to a people refer to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to succeed (Schwartz & Cheek, 2017). The capabilities indicate to which a person has real opportunities or abilities a person has to choose valuable options in life. A capability is thus the ability to achieve, and a functioning is an achievement (Sen, 1987).

Having such capabilities implies that a person has the freedom to achieve valuable functionings as an active agent (Kimhur, 2019). Capability is thus crucial because an individual may have better opportunities available to them than what they are currently achieving. As such, the CA emphasises the freedom individuals must use their agency to expand their capabilities, which, in turn, can lead to greater agency (De Klerk & Barnett, 2020), and for Sen (1999), capabilities align with agency in enabling individuals to make reasoned choices and act accordingly.

The promotion of agency requires individuals to look beyond themselves and their flourishing and engage with collective action and social good (Murray, 2024). An individual's well-being can be improved by having more choices. The CA assumes that even if a person already had access to their chosen option, having more options can still enhance their well-being (Sen, 2003). Importantly, agency for the CA means obligations (Sen, 2009) and responsibility (Sen, 1999). Since individuals bring about changes deliberately, these changes are the result of sustainable reasoning, preferences, and choices; agents are responsible for those changes. Concerning the study, the CA will provide the lens for understanding and supporting the development of pedagogical reasoning in PSTs.

The CA emphasises the fundamental freedoms and opportunities that individuals have to achieve valued functioning, and concerning this paper, PSTs can make informed, ethical, and contextually responsive teaching decisions. Pedagogical reasoning involves interpreting learner needs, applying subject knowledge, and making adaptive instructional choices. From the CA perspective, PSTs' training programmes are not merely tasked with transmitting knowledge but with expanding the capabilities of PSTs to act with agency in diverse educational

contexts. Arguably, PR must emerge from contextually responsive judgment and must be understood not merely as individual cognitive activity but as socially situated knowledge production that requires democratic participation (Biesta, 2017).

3. Literature Review

3.1 An overview of the concept of Pedagogical Reasoning

Pedagogical reasoning (PR) has been widely recognised as central to professional teaching. Shulman's (1987) foundational work positioned pedagogical reasoning at the core of teachers' practice, emphasising their capacity to transform subject matter knowledge into pedagogically meaningful representations. While this model foregrounds the cognitive dimensions of teaching, subsequent scholarship challenges its implicit abstraction. Shay (2013) argues that pedagogical reasoning cannot be detached from context, as it is always enacted in relation to specific artefacts, incidents, or moments of judgment. This shift highlights an essential tension in the literature between viewing PR as an internal cognitive process and understanding it as a situated, socially mediated practice.

Recent studies increasingly conceptualise pedagogical reasoning as emerging through pedagogical dilemmas. Kavanagh et al. (2020) identify dilemmas, professional judgment and professional development as integral components of PR. Dilemmas arise when classroom events or external pressures disrupt teachers' existing practices, compelling them to act under conditions of uncertainty (Hall, 2023). Windschitl (2002) categorises these dilemmas as conceptual, pedagogical, cultural, or political, underscoring that pedagogical reasoning extends beyond instructional technique to encompass ethical and social considerations. In contrast to prescriptive models of teaching, Lampert (1985) and Harvey et al. (2020) argue that dilemmas often involve equally compelling alternatives, requiring teachers to reason with themselves rather than apply predetermined solutions. From this perspective, uncertainty is not a deficit but a defining feature of professional practice.

Pedagogical judgment (PJ) further foregrounds the ethical and relational dimensions of pedagogical reasoning. Horn (2019) defines PJ as teachers' sense of responsibility toward learners, communities, curricula, and institutional expectations. However, judgment is not value-neutral. Chen et al. (2021) demonstrate that teachers' decisions are shaped by personal motivations, cultural narratives, and dominant ideologies of "good teaching." Lampert (1985) conceptualises pedagogical reasoning as the continual drawing on professional judgment to navigate ongoing dilemmas, while Krist and Shim (2022) show that teachers' moment-to-moment decisions, such as whether to prioritise efficiency or learner sense-making, are reasoned responses to contextual constraints. These findings complicate deficit interpretations of teacher decision-making by highlighting its interpretive and ethical foundations.

The literature further suggests that pedagogical reasoning is developmental rather than static. Hatano and Inagaki's (1986) distinction between routine and adaptive expertise reframes teaching as a practice requiring flexibility and

responsiveness to novel challenges. Adaptive expertise is closely linked to reflective practice and experiential learning, positioning pedagogical reasoning as a capability that evolves. However, research cautions that such development depends on enabling environments, including opportunities for reflection, mentoring and participation in communities of practice (Caspari-Gnann & Sevia, 2022). The Capability Approach (CA) offers a normative lens that strengthens this developmental perspective. Rather than focusing solely on competencies, the CA emphasises individuals' freedoms to achieve valued ways of being and doing (Nussbaum, 2011). Applied to teaching, pedagogical reasoning can be understood as a capability that enables teachers to exercise agency in ethically and contextually responsive ways.

Walker and Unterhalter (2007) argue that such freedoms enhance both professional functioning and wellbeing, particularly in unequal educational contexts. Biesta (2015) similarly frames teaching as an ethical and agentic practice, resisting technicist accounts that reduce teaching to procedural compliance. Within this framework, pedagogical dilemmas become sites where teachers exercise judgment, align practice with values and develop professionally (Korthagen, 2017).

Collectively, the literature positions pedagogical reasoning as a contextual, ethical, and developmental practice that is central to effective and socially responsive teaching. While policy frameworks such as the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications emphasise the integration of multiple knowledge forms, the literature reveals limited consensus on how PSTs are supported to develop the capability to reason pedagogically in complex, diverse contexts. This gap suggests a misalignment between policy expectations and the lived realities of preservice teacher preparation. In response, this study aims to conceptually interrogate pedagogical reasoning through the lens of the Capability Approach, foregrounding contextual sensitivity, professional judgment, and agency as key dimensions. By doing so, the study seeks to inform teacher education programme design and policy in ways that better support PSTs' capacity to navigate pedagogical dilemmas and promote equitable learning environments.

3.2 Pedagogical Reasoning: A Policy Perspective

The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (RSA-DHET, 2015) is the policy that governs the design, structure, and implementation of teacher education programs in South African higher education institutions. MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015) positions teaching as a knowledge-based profession that requires integrated and applied competence. The knowledge mix of MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015) includes both general pedagogical knowledge (learners, learning, curriculum, and assessment strategies) and pedagogical content knowledge (transforming subject content for diverse learners). Beginner teachers are expected to draw from this knowledge base to plan, sequence, and pace content according to learner needs, to tailor teaching appropriately, to use resources effectively, and to employ assessment results to improve learning (RSA-DHET, 2015, p. 62). Furthermore, the Basic Competencies of a Beginner

Teacher (RSA-DHET, 2015, Appendix C) expect teachers to "know who their learners are and how they learn," to understand learner diversity in the South African context, and to "display appropriate values and conduct themselves in a manner that befits, enhances and develops the teaching profession." This emphasis reflects the MRTEQ's (RSA-DHET, 2015) view that teaching is a profession requiring theoretically informed, knowledge-based preparation.

Pedagogical reasoning, as Shulman (1987) explains, requires teachers to make judgements in uncertain and varied contexts. MRTEQ (DHET, 2015) acknowledges the need for teachers to "apply their learning in schools in varying contexts" (p. 20) and situational learning is highlighted as part of professional competence expect teachers to "know who their learners are and how they learn", "to understand the needs of the learners", "to understand diversity in the South African context to teach in a manner that includes all learners" and to "display appropriate values and conduct themselves in a manner that befits, enhances and develops the teaching profession.

Part of this professional preparation involves the capacity for pedagogical reasoning and judgement, which, as Shulman (1987) argues, enables teachers to make sound decisions in uncertain contexts. While MRTEQ specifies that teachers should have strong subject knowledge, know how to teach their subject(s), and engage in reflection to adapt practice (RSA-DHET, 2015, p. 62), it does not explicitly articulate pedagogical reasoning as a mandated competence. However, MRTEQ indicates that preservice teachers should be provided with a knowledge base and suggests that the "fusing of different kinds of knowledge" should be applied in practice (RSA-DHET, 2015, p. 9). MRTEQ emphasises that "time spent in the actual workplace is significant" (RSA-DHET, 2015, p. 18), mandating a specific duration of WIL for the PSTs.

Arguably, acknowledging that authentic learning contexts are essential in training preservice teachers' PR development. WIL serves as the integrative space where learning from and in practice converges, encompassing observational learning from experienced practitioners alongside autonomous teaching experiences that require preservice teachers to prepare, deliver, and reflect upon their own pedagogical decisions. Learning from practice encompasses analytical engagement with teaching through "discursive resources to analyse different practices across a variety of contexts, drawing from case studies, video records, lesson observations", and similar tools that enable preservice teachers to "theorise practice and form a basis for learning in practice" (RSA-DHET, 2015).

This dimension develops critical analytical capabilities through systematic examination of teaching practices, fostering the reflective habits necessary for ongoing professional growth. Conversely, learning in practice involves direct engagement with "teaching in authentic and simulated classroom environments," where theoretical understanding meets the unpredictable realities of student interaction and contextual demands (RSA-DHET, 2015). MRTEQ positions this practical learning as "an important condition for the development of tacit knowledge, which is an essential component of learning to teach" (RSA-DHET,

2015), recognising that professional expertise includes embodied, intuitive dimensions that can only emerge through sustained engagement with the complexities of authentic teaching contexts.

Although MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015) emphasises knowledge, reflection, and competence, it does not explicitly recognise the centrality of pedagogical reasoning and professional judgement. Shulman (1987; 1998) and Morrow (1996) highlight that professionalism in teaching lies not only in possessing knowledge, but also in the ability to make context-sensitive judgments. Without an explicit focus on pedagogical reasoning, the MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015) policy risks reducing teaching to the implementation of predetermined competencies, thus overlooking the "bridge" that enables teachers to apply knowledge flexibly in diverse contexts. Mafugu et al (2023) empirical study indicates that challenges in teaching often stem from unfamiliarity with instructional strategies, inadequate classroom management, insufficient professional commitment, time management issues, and unsupportive environments.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Zondo and Ado (2024) reported a gap between theory and practice as student teachers failed to integrate theoretical knowledge with practice. This research argues that understanding how beginner teachers engage in pedagogical reasoning and which knowledge bases they draw on is critical for assessing the effectiveness of PST programmes. Teaching and learning are thus embedded in social, cultural, and physical environments, and effectiveness depends on the ability of a teacher to perceive, interpret, and respond to these environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

South African education is marked by inequality and exclusion, and PSTs must be prepared to engage with these realities (Barnett & Teise, 2024; Christie, 2018). Consequently, MRTEQ's vision of situational learning presupposes that beginner teachers should be able to work reflexively and flexibly across varied learning environments. This places the responsibility on PST curricula to cultivate contextual awareness and critical reflection intentionally, which encompasses pedagogical reasoning.

4. Methodology

This paper employed a desktop research approach to explore the relationship between pedagogical reasoning and the skills required of PSTs in contemporary educational settings. Desktop studies involve a systematic review and synthesis of existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and policy documents, rather than collecting primary data (Jaakola, 2020). This approach was deliberately chosen to develop theoretical coherence around the specific intersection of the CA, MRTEQ, and PR, requiring conceptual foundation building rather than systematic empirical review (Grant & Booth, 2009). The methodology aligns with established approaches for conceptual policy papers that prioritise theoretical depth over breadth (Jabareen, 2009). This study employs a critical conceptual analysis grounded in the Capability Approach. A systematic synthesis of literature on pedagogical reasoning, teacher education and education policy is undertaken to

interrogate how pedagogical reasoning is conceptualised and enacted in preservice teacher education.

This methodology is suitable for critically examining existing knowledge, identifying gaps, and proposing new conceptual insights. The methodology for this conceptual paper includes reviewing existing literature and data sources to address the complex issue of PR in PSTs' training. The primary sources of data were peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy frameworks, and curriculum guidelines relevant to initial teacher education. Key documents included foundational texts on pedagogical reasoning and recent literature on teacher capabilities within the CA (Sen, 2003, 1987; Nussbaum, 2011; Walker & Boni, 2020).

The synthesis followed an interpretive approach, seeking conceptual connections and tensions rather than statistical aggregation (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Although theoretical papers do pose a methodological limitation in that they are not reliant on empirical data, this study maintains rigour through a systematic, transparent and theoretically grounded synthesis of peer-reviewed literature, supported by established policy frameworks and a coherent analytical lens. This approach enables robust conceptual insight and scholarly contribution.

5. Findings and Discussions

This section discusses the study's findings through the perspective of pedagogical reasoning (PR) capabilities and examines their significance for preservice teacher education. The discussion centres on three interconnected capabilities: contextual sensitivity, adaptive decision-making, and self-reflection, each of which fosters the development of freedoms and professional skills across diverse educational settings.

5.1 Contextual Sensitivity as an Element of Pedagogical Reasoning

Contextual sensitivity emerged in PR as an essential capability for PSTs as they will be engaging with diverse learners. Contextual sensitivity refers to increased awareness of how socio-economic disparities, language diversity, and cultural differences impact learner participation and engagement (Ngcoza & Southwood, 2021). From a CA perspective, contextual sensitivity aligns with Nussbaum's (2011) notion of affiliation, which refers to the ability to live with and show concern for others, recognising their humanity and right to flourish.

PSTs should demonstrate a commitment to inclusion and interactive pedagogies (Waghid & Davids, 2021). PSTs should be made aware during their training of diversity to accommodate all learners better, ensuring that all learners can meaningfully engage with learning regardless of background. PSTs will engage in such experiences during the teaching practices. Contextual awareness refers to the ability to recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to the complex social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts that shape teaching and learning experiences (Gay, 2018).

MRTEQ (RSA, 2015) emphasises the importance of applied competence and situational understanding and acknowledges that teaching and learning occur within diverse learning environments. This implies that teachers should understand the learners and communities they serve. However, while contextuality is strongly implied, MRTEQ does not provide a detailed framework for how PSTs should develop contextual awareness or how teacher education programmes should prepare them to address structural inequalities and social injustices in practice. Therefore, we argue that through exposure to real-world teaching contexts, PSTs will develop the sensitivity required to enact socially just and responsive pedagogies, essential for fostering inclusive learning environments in post-apartheid South Africa (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2020). If PST is trained on how to foster inclusive environments where diverse identities are recognised and valued, it expands their freedoms (Spaull & Jansen, 2020).

PST will thus be able to design and implement pedagogical strategies to respond to learners' lived experiences, thereby cultivating contextual sensitivity during their training (and during their profession) that supports teachers and learner wellbeing (Sayed et al., 2021). These findings align with work done by Sahlberg (2015) and Toom et al. (2017), where contextual sensitivity is similarly foregrounded as central to teachers' professional judgment in diverse classrooms. Research from Finland emphasises teachers' strong professional autonomy and deep contextual awareness as enabling adaptive and inclusive pedagogical decision-making (Sahlberg, 2015; Toom et al., 2017), while UK-based studies highlight how sensitivity to socio-cultural and linguistic diversity supports learner engagement and equitable classroom participation (Alexander, 2018; Francis et al., 2020).

5.2 Adaptive Decision-Making as an Element of Pedagogical Reasoning

Adaptive decision-making is recognised as a vital PR capability that enables PSTs to respond effectively to classroom settings. It involves the capacity to make informed and responsive choices by blending theoretical knowledge with contextual awareness (Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2022). Such decisions are not solely reactive but often involve synthesising theory and context. Consequently, teachers utilise professional judgment to address challenges like learner diversity, resource limitations, and unforeseen disruptions (Khoza, 2020).

Arguably, adaptive reasoning is the ability to modify teaching approaches, curriculum content, and assessment methods based on ongoing feedback, changing circumstances, and emerging insights from participatory processes. Adaptive decision-making aligns with Nussbaum's concepts of "senses, imagination, and thought," emphasising critical and creative engagement. This process exemplifies professional agency, empowering teachers to exercise autonomy amid uncertainty (Kim & Asbury, 2020). It also diminishes reliance on rigid routines, fostering innovative, learner-centred approaches.

MRTEQ requires that PSTs demonstrate competencies such as tailoring teaching to learner needs, sequencing and pacing content appropriately, and using assessment results to improve education (RSA, 2015, Appendix C, p. 62). These

competencies point to the need for adaptive decision-making in the classroom. However, MRTEQ frames the competencies as outcomes to be demonstrated rather than as complex, situated acts of professional judgement. What is not explicitly recognised is the underlying pedagogical reasoning that allows teachers to make context-sensitive decisions in uncertain or evolving circumstances (Shulman, 1987). In this sense, adaptive decision-making is expected but not named as a professional competence.

According to MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015), an integrated knowledge base informs professional judgment. The ability to make sound pedagogical decisions within a specific context is fundamental for translating theory into meaningful practice. Furthermore, this capacity broadens the agency of both teachers and learners, supporting a more democratic and responsive classroom environment. Enabling PSTs to make pedagogical choices through adaptive decision-making promotes a more democratic and responsive classroom culture where teachers and learners have the freedom to co-construct meaningful learning pathways (Ramrathan, 2022).

Developing agency in PSTs through adaptive decision-making fosters their confidence to engage effectively with diverse learning needs. Such agency, according to Schön (1983), empowers them to assess their classroom situations critically, ensuring that their teaching strategies are not only relevant but also responsive to the dynamic nature of the learning environment. As they refine their decision-making skills, PSTs can better facilitate discussions and collaborations among students, thus enhancing the learning experience for everyone involved. Furthermore, this process encourages a culture of continuous reflection and improvement, where both educators and learners actively participate in shaping their educational journeys (Biesta, 2015).

Ultimately, the emphasis on adaptive decision-making lays the groundwork for a more inclusive, innovative, and engaging educational framework that benefits all stakeholders in the classroom. Globally, it has been found that teachers' professional autonomy and reflective judgment are central to responding to classroom complexity. Finnish studies emphasise adaptive expertise and informed professional discretion as key to navigating uncertainty and learner diversity (Sahlberg, 2015; Toom et al., 2017), while UK research highlights teachers' capacity to adapt pedagogy in response to accountability pressures and heterogeneous classrooms (Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta et al., 2017).

5.3 Self-Reflection as an Element of Pedagogical Reasoning

Self-reflection is recognised as a key factor in fostering growth in both pedagogical competence and personal insight. Structured activities such as reflective journals, feedback sessions, and collaborative debrief provide PSTs with opportunities to critically examine their teaching practices, beliefs, and values (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This introspection often results in increased confidence, a clearer sense of professional identity, and a deeper understanding of their roles as ethical and socially responsible educators (Khoza & Biyela, 2020). The development of self-reflection aligns with Nussbaum's concepts of practical

reason and bodily integrity, which emphasise the importance of agency and the autonomy to shape one's life course.

In the context of teacher education, self-reflection empowers PSTs to make ethical decisions, build emotional resilience, and find personal fulfilment in their work (Moodley & Mathews, 2023). It supports their well-being by fostering a sense of purpose and moral responsibility. Participants who engage deeply in reflective practice demonstrate a stronger ability to articulate their educational philosophies and align their teaching with broader goals of equity and transformation (Le Grange, 2018).

MRTEQ emphasises reflection, observing that PSTs should be "able to reflect critically, in theoretically informed ways ... to improve [their practice] and adapt it to evolving circumstances" (p. 62). Reflection is positioned as part of the "integrated and applied competence" required of teachers (p. 8-9). However, reflection in MRTEQ is framed mainly as a tool for improving practice, rather than as a means of cultivating broader critical consciousness about education's role in addressing inequality and promoting social justice (Carrim, 2019). According to MRTEQ (2015), this ability relates to that of the PSTs, which highlights personal and professional growth. Through reflection, PSTs learn to see themselves as lifelong learners who continuously assess and refine their practices in response to changing educational challenges (DHET, 2015; Sayed & Ahmed, 2024). This capacity for critical self-awareness strengthens their professional integrity and enhances their contribution to inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Together, the abilities of contextual sensitivity, adaptive decision-making, and self-reflection illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of pedagogical reasoning and the holistic development of PSTs. These skills are not merely technical; they are deeply connected to fostering professional autonomy, ethical responsibility, and relational care. They enable PSTs to navigate the complexities of teaching in diverse and unequal contexts, helping them create meaningful learning experiences that uphold the dignity and agency of all learners. Integrating these capabilities into initial teacher education aligns with both Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and the policy goals outlined in MRTEQ. This integration positions PSTs not only as curriculum implementers but also as thoughtful, contextually aware professionals who can contribute to the broader transformation of the education system (Barnett & Botes, 2022).

The findings of this study highlight the need for teacher education programs to transcend instrumental models of teacher preparation. Instead, these programs should prioritise the development of professional dispositions that promote human flourishing, educational justice, and democratic engagement. By doing so, they prepare teachers who are not only competent but also deeply sensitive to the ethical and social dimensions of their work. This argument aligns with international research on teacher self-reflection. Studies by Darling-Hammond (2017), Korthagen (2017), and Priestley et al. (2015) emphasise structured reflection as a means of developing teachers' professional identity, autonomy and moral responsibility. UK research, by contrast, highlights reflective practice as

essential for sustaining resilience and critical consciousness in complex, accountability-driven systems (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Korthagen, 2017; Priestley et al., 2015). Looking back, one can confirm that self-reflection is a globally recognised dimension of pedagogical reasoning that supports adaptive professionalism and socially just teaching.

6. Conclusion

The study highlighted the importance of pedagogical reasoning as an essential capability for PSTs. Through the synthesis of literature and the CA lens, we argue that contextual sensitivity, adaptive decision-making, and self-reflection should be foregrounded as essential professional capacities for pedagogical reasoning. These capabilities will enable PSTs to navigate the dilemmas, exercise professional judgement, and assist them in creating equitable learning environments. Cultivating these abilities not only helps teachers become more effective in their classrooms (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2003) but also supports their overall well-being and the well-being of their learners. It's about creating the freedom to think critically, to be acknowledged for their contributions, and to engage with purpose in varied educational contexts.

This study highlights that initial teacher training should go beyond just technical know-how. It must foster deeper professional attitudes that empower future educators to thrive and assist others in doing so. The findings emphasise how pedagogical reasoning skills empower PSTs to handle the diverse realities of the classroom with empathy and ethical awareness. Contextual sensitivity nurtures inclusion, adaptive decision-making sparks creativity and independence, and self-reflection strengthens personal identity and moral clarity.

Such capabilities are not merely teaching skills (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009); they embody fundamental freedoms that help develop educators who can think critically, act justly, and respond compassionately. Implementing WIL in South African schools faces significant challenges, including limited resources, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of coordination between tertiary institutions and schools (Mthembu & Ndlovu, 2024). These implementation challenges highlight the critical role of pedagogical reasoning in preparing PSTs to navigate complex institutional environments and to model deliberative thinking processes that enable sound pedagogical decisions across diverse school contexts.

The findings indicate that MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015) supports contextuality and adaptive decision-making but does not articulate them as central professional competencies. The reflection is more clearly articulated, though it is framed narrowly in terms of practice improvement rather than transformative awareness. This reveals a gap between MRTEQ's vision of teaching as a "knowledge-based profession" and the competencies it prescribes: the crucial "bridge" of pedagogical reasoning and judgement that connects knowledge to action across diverse contexts remains underdeveloped. Fostering contextuality, adaptive decision-making and reflection as essential elements of pedagogical reasoning is thus vital to preparing the next generation of teachers to succeed in an ever-evolving educational landscape. Importantly, such development will enable PSTs and in-

service teachers to support all learners' growth and contribute positively to transforming the education system. 0722838603

Advancing pedagogical reasoning in teacher education is both a practical and moral necessity. It will ensure that preservice teachers are equipped not only with knowledge and skills but also with the empowerment needed to serve as agents of change in a democratic and socially equitable society. The theoretical paper suggests that teacher education policy, such as the MRTEQ, should more explicitly articulate pedagogical reasoning, particularly contextual sensitivity, adaptive decision-making and self-reflection, as core professional competencies rather than implicit outcomes.

In practice, initial teacher education programmes should design structured learning experiences, such as work-integrated learning, guided reflection and context-responsive pedagogies, that intentionally cultivate these capabilities in PSTs. With this being said, it should be noted that this theoretical study is limited by its conceptual design and reliance on policy and secondary literature. The latter restricts insight into how pedagogical reasoning capabilities are enacted and sustained in classroom practice. Future research should therefore employ empirical and longitudinal approaches to examine how these capabilities develop across PSTs' training and how they influence teaching practices and learner outcomes in diverse educational contexts.

7. Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the use of the ChatGPT AI Tool in the writing of this paper. This tool was used to help improve the language and grammar in the paper.

8. References

- Alexander, R. (2018). Developing dialogic teaching: Genesis, process, trial. *Research Papers in Education*, 33(5), 561-598. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2018.1481140>
- Barnett, E., & Botes, W. (2022). Transformative pedagogy adoption by Natural Sciences preservice teachers in a South African university. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(4), 1290-1305. <https://doi.org/abs/10.3316/informit.805963503744097>
- Barnett, E. P., & Teise, K. (2024). Initial Teacher Education for Social Justice in South Africa: A Higher Education Policy Perspective. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 6(1), 72-89. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2024.5>
- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge journal of education*, 39(2), 175-189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252>
- Biesta, G. (2015). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Routledge.
- Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2017). Talking about education: Exploring the significance of teachers' talk for teacher agency. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(1), 38-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1205143>
- Caspari-Gnann, I., & Sevian, H. (2022). Teacher dilemmas as sources of change and development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 112 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.10362>

- Chen, G. A., Marshall, S. A., & Horn, I. S. (2020). 'How do I choose?': mathematics teachers' sensemaking about pedagogical responsibility. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 29(3), 379–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1735497>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teaching for Social Justice: Resources, Relationships, and Anti-Racist Practice. *Multi-cultural Perspectives*, 19(3), 133-138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1335039>
- De Klerk E.D, & Barnett, E.P. (2020). Continuing the debate on teacher autonomy: A capabilities perspective. *Journal of Education*,81(1), 99-117. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i81a06>
- Francis, B., Mills, M., & Lupton, R. (2020). Towards social justice in education: Contradictions and dilemmas. *Journal of Education Policy*, 35(4), 437–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1596962>
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers. College Press.
- Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, 26(2), 91-108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x>
- Gravett, S., & Petersen, N. (2022). *Future-proofing teacher education*. Routledge.
- Harvey, S., Pill, S., Hastie, P., & Wallhead, T. (2020). Physical education teachers' Perceptions of the successes, constraints, and possibilities associated with implementing the sport education model. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 25(5), 555-566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2020.1752650>
- Hatano, G., & Inagaki, K. (1986). Two courses of expertise. In H. Stevenson, H. Azuma, & K. Hakuta (Eds.), *Child Development and Education in Japan* (262–272). Freeman.
- Horn, I. S. (2019). Supporting the development of pedagogical judgment: Connecting instruction to contexts through classroom video with experienced mathematics teachers. In *International Handbook of Mathematics Teacher Education: Volume 3* (pp. 321–342). Brill Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004419230_013
- Jaakola,E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: four approaches. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*,10(3),1-9.<https://doi.org.10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0>
- Jabareen, Y. (2009). Building a conceptual framework: Philosophy, definitions, and procedure. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(4), 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800406>
- Kavanagh, S. S., Conrad, J., & Dagogo-Jack, S. (2020). From rote to reasoned: Examining the role of pedagogical reasoning in practice-based teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 89, 102991. <https://doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.tate.2019.102991>
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2017). Inconvenient truths about teacher learning: Towards professional development 3.0. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 23(4), 387–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1211523>
- Khoza, S. B., & Biyela, A. T. (2020). Decolonising technological pedagogicalcontent knowledge of First-year mathematics students. *Education and Information Technologies*, 25(4), 2665–2679. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-019-10084-4>
- Kim, L. E., & Asbury, K. (2020). 'Like a Rug Had Been Pulled from Under You': The Impact of COVID-19 on Teachers in England during the First Six Weeks of the UK Lockdown. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(4), 1062–1083. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12381>
- Kimhur, B. (2019). How to Apply the Capability Approach to Housing Policy? Concepts, Theories and Challenges? *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37, (3): 257- 277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2019.1706630>
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2017). Inconvenient truths about teacher learning: Towards Professional Development. *Teachers and Teaching*, 23(4), 387–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1211523>

- Krist, C. & Shim, S. (2023). Which ideas, when, and why? An experienced teacher's in-the-moment pedagogical reasoning about facilitating student sense-making discussions. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 61(3): 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21908>
- Le Grange, L. (2018). What is (post)qualitative research? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32 (5),1–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/32-5-3161>
- Pitsoe, V., & Letseka, M. (2020). Applying Freire and Ubuntu to humanising higher education leadership. In E. Sengupta, P. Blessinger, & M. S. Makhanya (Eds.), *Developing and Supporting Multiculturalism and Leadership Development: International Perspectives on Humanizing Higher Education* (pp. 145-158). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2055-364120200000030012>
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Loughran, J. (2019). Pedagogical reasoning: The foundation of the professional knowledge of teaching. *Teachers and Teaching*, 25(5), 523-535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1633294>
- Mafugu, T., Mafugu, F. & Makwara, C. (2024). Exploring the Challenges faced by Preservice Teachers in Executing Science Lessons during Work Integrated Learning in Rural School Settings *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(13),2191-2205. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202451315>
- Murray, R. (2024). The Capability Approach, Pedagogic Rights and Course Design: Developing Autonomy and Reflection through Student-Led, Individually Created Courses. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 25(1),131-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2023.2261856>
- Ngcoza, K., & Southwood, F. (2021). Teacher education for linguistic and cultural diversity: A capabilities perspective. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(2), 56-72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135602.2016.12123>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Harvard University Press.
- Quin, K. M. (2023). *Attitudes about inclusivity among preservice educators: A mixed methods approach (Doctoral dissertation)*. Molloy University.
- Ramrathan, L. (2022). Rethinking initial teacher education in South Africa: Toward enabling responsiveness to societal and educational needs. *Journal of Education*, 88, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/t1908>
- RSA- DHET Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2015). *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications*. Government Gazette. No. 38487. Government Printer.
- Sayed, Y., Badroodien, A., Salmon, T., & McDonald, Z. (2016). Social cohesion and initial teacher education in South Africa. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 5(1), 54-69. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2016/v5i1a4>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Schwartz, B., & Cheek, N. (2017). Choice, Freedom, and Wellbeing: Considerations for public policy. *Behavioural Policy*, 1(1),106-121. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2016>
- Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality Re-examined*. Harvard University Press.
- Sen, A. (1993). Capability and wellbeing. In M. Nussbaum & A. Sen (Eds.), *The quality of life* (pp. 30–53). Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (1987). *On ethics and economics*. Blackwell.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Education Review*, 57(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.17763/K7M9R5X2P>

- Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.
- Spaull, N., & Jansen, J. (2020). *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality*. Springer.
- Tiilikainen, M., Toom, A., Lepola, J., & Husu, J. (2019). Reconstructing choice, reason, and disposition in teachers' practical theories of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 79, 124-136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.12.011>
- Toom, A., Pyhältö, K., & O'Connell Rust, F. (2017). Teachers' professional agency in contradictory times. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 23(6), 635-654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1237471>
- Van der Merwe, D., 2022, 'Preparing preservice teachers to guide and support learning in South African schools'. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1), a1163. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1163>
- Waghid, Y., & Davids, N. (2021). *African democratic citizenship education revisited: A Capabilities Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Walker, M. (2018). Failures and possibilities of epistemic justice, with some implications for higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 59(3), 263-279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1234494>
- Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Windschitl, M. (2002). Framing Constructivism in practice as the negotiation of dilemmas: An analysis of the conceptual, pedagogical, cultural, and political challenges facing teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(2), 131-175. <https://doi/pdf/10.3102/00346543072002131>
- Zondo, S. S., & Adu, E. O. (2024). Dynamics of teaching practice in South Africa: A nexus between theory and practice. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 6, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2024.vol6.06>