



Research paper

School-based mentor teachers as boundary-crossers in an initial teacher education partnership

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ABSTRACT

Teacher educators are constantly challenged to collaborate across organizational boundaries between higher education and schools. This study examines a school-university partnership in Norway where school-based mentor teachers are co-employed in short-term contracts as joint faculty, collaborating on subject development, co-planning, and co-instruction. The study is based on interviews with 11 school-based mentor teachers co-employed as joint faculty. A reflexive thematic analysis elicited three main perspectives on the participants' experiences: (a) professional dissonance; (b) professional contribution; and (c) professional growth. The analysis identified some of the complexities from working across organizational boundaries, as well as opportunities for innovation and professional growth.

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1. Introduction

The traditional method of organizing initial teacher education (ITE) is based on the assumption that pre-service teachers will translate the academic knowledge provided at the university level smoothly into meaningful pedagogical practice in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Korthagen, 2001). Pre-service teachers are thus often left to themselves, searching for meaningful connections between various sources of knowledge (Postholm, 2016; Zeichner et al., 2015). However, for decades, ITE has been criticized over a perceived deficit in teacher qualifications (e.g., Zeichner, 2010, 2021). A key question in this debate has focused on which competence newly qualified teachers should have to meet classroom needs (Korthagen, 2010; Morrison, 2016). A general consensus exists that pre-service teachers make little use of educational theory, with newly qualified teachers reporting that they are not sufficiently prepared for situations they encounter in everyday work (Korthagen, 2001; Zeichner, 2010).

One of the most significant challenges for ITE seems to be the facilitation of authentic learning activities with subsequent reflection on the underlying theories that govern professional choices. Darling-Hammond (2006) referred to this lack of connection

between university courses and practical training as the “Achilles’ heel” of teacher education. Thus, teacher education institutions are challenged in how they collaborate with schools to create more coherence for pre-service teachers in their professional practice (Daza et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2016). Still, it is fair to say that universities continue to have hegemony over ITE development (Zeichner, 2021). Zeichner et al. (2015) argued that teacher education, as currently organized in higher education, is fundamentally undemocratic and, to a large extent, incapable of strategically accessing the expertise located in schools.

To meet these challenges, ongoing reform work in many countries aims to establish more collaborative and less hierarchical partnerships between universities and schools (Burroughs et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Lillejord & Børte, 2016). For instance, in the Norwegian context, the strategy report Teacher Education 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2017) emphasizes strengthening partnerships through mutual commitment to ITE program development and research. The purpose of partnerships is to develop more effective teacher education in which resources, expertise, facilities, and decisions are shared to achieve mutual goals (Lillejord & Børte, 2016; Zeichner et al., 2015). In recent years, increased interest has been placed on making better use of competence that already exists in schools, particularly school-based mentor teachers' expertise (Burroughs et al., 2020; Ellis & McNicholl, 2015), thereby tying mentor teachers more closely to

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decision making in ITE programs beyond facilitating clinical experiences in pre-service teachers' professional practice (Zeichner, 2021).

However, despite these efforts and decades of widespread discourse examining different partnership models (Williams et al., 2018), numerous scholars have voiced concern that university-school partnerships remain too weak and ineffective (e.g., Lillejord & Børte, 2016; Zeichner, 2021). Thus, more research on innovative partnership models is needed in which expertise is utilized across institutional boundaries (Andreassen et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2016; White et al., 2020). This study reflects on practical applications of policy mandates and theoretical conceptualizations of initial teacher education partnerships, constructing less hierarchical and more sustainable collaborations (Daza et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2021). The vast majority of the literature has focused on mentor teachers and university faculty forging boundary-crossing partnerships in the school context that are related mainly to the ITE practicum (Daza et al., 2021). This inquiry builds on a small body of research on teacher practitioners crossing institutional boundaries and how their situated knowledge and expertise can be combined with the expertise of university faculty (Allen et al., 2010; Badali & Housego, 2000; Many et al., 2012; Risan, 2022).

Several studies have argued that these types of partnerships can fuse the expertise of academics and practitioners (Allen et al., 2010; Fisher & Many, 2014; Risan, 2022), provide opportunities for teachers' professional development and career opportunities (Jeffery & Polleck, 2010), achieve reciprocity and trust, and transform the culture of teaching (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015; Russell & Chapman, 2001; Tsui & Law, 2007). Participating teachers have also reported improved mentoring competence and a better understanding of the connections between theory and practice in professional learning (Jeffery & Polleck, 2010). However, there are also inherent challenges, such as tensions due to issues of hierarchy and power imbalance (Risan, 2022) and the risk of being marginalized (e.g., Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Research on mentor teachers expanding their roles and responsibilities to the university ITE setting is lacking. This is particularly the case in partnerships emphasizing close collaboration between these teacher educators, including joint planning, co-teaching, and the evaluation of the teaching university's ITE courses (Holbert & Fisher, 2017). There is also a lack of knowledge of different stakeholders' perspectives, especially regarding the benefits of the school-based partners.

With this background in mind, this qualitative study aims to examine the experiences of school-based mentor teachers co-employed as joint faculty in ITE. The participating mentor teachers have been released from parts (20%) of their primary or lower secondary school positions' duties to collaborate and co-instruct with university faculty. This study addresses the following research question: *How do mentor teachers experience crossing institutional boundaries as joint faculty in an initial teacher education partnership?*

2. Theoretical background

In initial teacher education, a key challenge is for pre-service teachers to access expertise from two organizational systems that operate with different norms, interaction patterns, rules, and reward systems (Zeichner et al., 2012). Engeström (2003) developed the concept of *horizontal expertise* to increase understanding of how expertise is distributed across activity systems in which participants share common goals, but work in different organizational contexts. To achieve shared goals, professionals from various domains help expand existing practices by combining their domain-specific expertise to create hybrid solutions (Engeström, 2001). Horizontal expertise, as opposed to vertical (high and low

status), recognizes that professionals make an equal contribution to collective activities (Zeichner et al., 2015), collaborating on a "shared meeting ground" (Engeström & Toivainen, 2010, p. 35).

This third-generation activity theory emphasizes how an expansive form of learning can take place through forms of collaboration in which one is allowed to examine contradictions, structural tensions, and conflict-filled spaces (Engeström, 2001; Tsui & Law, 2007). In ITE partnerships, schools and universities are expected to gain a shared understanding of how pre-service teachers develop their professional competence. Simultaneously, these professional competencies represent a field of tension between the two activity systems, which have contradictions in their varying objectives (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015). The university aims to educate candidates who can engage in critical thinking through academic socialization. However, schools prepare pre-service teachers to deal with classroom realities (Tsui & Law, 2007). Therefore, a fundamental principle is what Engeström (2001) defines as *expansive transformation*, in which new activity patterns are established through collaboration, and shared objectives are articulated to create new meaning. These boundary objects serve as focal points and driving forces that facilitate connections and provide direction and purpose for the partnership (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007; Engeström, 2001).

Furthermore, Zeichner et al. (2015) called for a democratization of teacher education, entailing a collaborative space in which educators from higher education and schools cross pedagogical and institutional boundaries, working together to improve teacher education. In this collaborative space, both school-based mentor teachers and university faculty must relate to practice and theory, challenging existing power relations and reducing ownership of a knowledge domain (Lillejord & Børte, 2016). One way to organize this partnership is by developing "boundary crossing" teacher educator roles in which professionals transcend traditional institutional boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Clark et al., 2005; Many et al., 2012). School-based mentor teachers are in a unique position, through their knowledge of both learning contexts in ITE, to co-mingle practical craft knowledge with research-driven knowledge, providing credibility to teaching through "fresh" classroom experiences (Allen et al., 2010; Kubiak et al., 2014; Russell & Chapman, 2001).

3. Research context

In the Norwegian context, initial teacher education recently has undergone a series of reforms. Most significantly, the government introduced a five-year master's degree for primary and lower secondary teacher candidates, and has strengthened the emphasis on school-university partnerships (Ministry of Education, 2017, 2020). Within this policy context, the empirical setting for this study is a three-year ITE partnership comprising one mid-size university in southern Norway and 13 primary and lower secondary schools in two regional municipalities (Andreassen et al., 2022). The Ministry of Education funded the partnership model, which contracted school-based mentor teachers as joint faculty (20%) to co-instruct university courses in ITE (2018–2021). The backdrop for this funding is the perceived need for program reform in ITE that provides classroom-ready pre-service teachers with professional digital competence for their future school careers (Kelentrić et al., 2017, Ministry of Education, 2017 Olofsson et al., 2021).

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and procedure

The present study employed a qualitative methodology using

semi-structured interviews with 4 primary and 7 lower secondary school-based mentor teachers (N = 11), among whom 8 were female and 3 were male (32–51 years old). The participants were co-employed as joint faculty in an ITE partnership project and, thus, purposely selected for their extensive knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The participants had at least five years of experience each as schoolteachers and experienced mentor teachers in the ITE practicum. The recruiting of mentor teachers to the partnership project was a collaboration between two partnering municipalities and university stakeholders, following a comprehensive application process. The mentor teachers maintained their status as school district employees and joined various university departments connected to teacher education (e.g., English/foreign language, Norwegian, pedagogy, mathematics, or natural sciences) as faculty one day a week (20%). All interviews were conducted in person, and each lasted 40–60 min. The research question was formulated broadly and aimed to be explorative in nature; thus, the interview questions were open, with an opportunity to ask clarifying and in-depth questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), to examine mentor teachers' experiences as joint faculty. Particularly, the interview questions explored how the mentor teachers perceived their role and contribution to the partnership. Furthermore, the interview guide also included questions about their experiences with collaboration between their school and the university in this partnership. To protect the participants' identities, the interviewees were assigned a pseudonym used in the Results section. Some quotes were edited for readability (i.e., filler words, repetitions, and hesitations were deleted). Although the quotations were originally in Norwegian, they were translated into English and subsequently proofread by a native English professional language service.

4.2. Data analysis

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, imported, and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12. Reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken as the data contained elaborations on individual experiences, understandings, and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis originates from Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodological approach and is developed further as a flexible method of identifying patterns and latent themes representing rich descriptions of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021). The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step framework: 1) data familiarization; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) writing the report. Analyzing a complex set of data is not a linear process; consequently, I moved back and forth between the phases. I read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the entire body of data and made initial notes on my early impressions. I organized and condensed the data using line-by-line coding during the second phase. In an interactive and reflexive process, initial codes were generated across the data set. Through these analytical steps, I gained a better understanding of the collected data and was able to search for patterns. By grouping codes, what had become extensive data material was reduced to a search for recurring themes that represented shared meaning and fit as central organizing concepts to address the research question. For instance, an overarching theme of "professional dissonance: *balancing two different worlds*" was formed from codes such as *distribution of power, bureaucracy, and shared common core*. The theme "professional contribution: *making the pieces fit together*" was constructed from codes such as *theory and practice, critical reflection, and shared contribution*, while the theme "professional growth: *expanding the*

knowledge bank" was formed from codes such as *reflective practice, teacher educator identity, and teacher development*. Finally, I read the data associated with each of the three themes and assessed whether they provided a coherent and distinct representation of the individual interviews and the data set as a whole.

The research design is inductive because the data direct coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006), reflecting mentor teachers' perspectives in joining university faculty. However, my positionality functioning in a dual role as researcher and project leader of the partnership, as previously outlined in the research context section, should be noted. An active and deliberate involvement in a dual role required walking a fine line between ethical considerations and awareness of research validity (Leavy, 2017). As a project leader, I was invested professionally and personally in the conceptualization, design, and implementation of the partnership project. However, an insider perspective could make it difficult to separate personal experiences from those of the informants, which could cloud perceptions in the process of interviewing and data analysis (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I also had some concerns over power issues because the participants were accustomed to dealing with me as their project leader, in which I played a central role in the hiring process, as well as in ongoing follow-up during the project. I am aware that my dual role may have contributed to informants modifying or withholding information (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Before the interviews, I addressed my dual role to reassure the participants that their participation was fully voluntary. Furthermore, I reassured the joint faculty that I sought "unfiltered" insight into their experiences, i.e., they should not hesitate to reveal any information that could put themselves or their faculty colleagues in a "bad" light.

Still, a dual role provides a unique insider perspective through which to examine the participants' social and cultural contexts (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This insider researcher role could be viewed as a core quality that strengthens the results' validity, as long as long as the researcher is aware of any personal biases that could influence perspectives (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), e.g., ensuring that the data analyses did not overemphasize experiences that were shared with the informants, while deemphasizing experiences that were discrepant. Braun and Clarke (2021) describe this notion of a reflexive researcher as being an analytical resource that needs to be acknowledged and outlined transparently. Adding to this, Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that the contextual insight can contribute to a greater analytical sensibility in which the researcher can interpret data in ways that lift the analysis beyond the semantic content to reflect on the latent meaning of the informants' perspectives. As a partnership project leader, I established trusting relationships with the participants over a two-year period, which may have provided me with legitimacy as a researcher, allowing the participants to view the research environment as trustworthy and "safe." Consequently, due to an assumption of shared distinctiveness, the participants indicated interest in expressing themselves and sharing their experiences, both positive ones and experiences that testified to more challenging collaborative relationships.

The Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) granted ethical approval, requiring informed consent and anonymization of participants. All participants were asked to read and sign a consent form, which included an option to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason. In the data analysis, I invited a colleague to take a critical look at my transcript notes, the development of codes, and the overall themes. Once the final themes were established, member checking was conducted to ensure that the participants' experiences were depicted accurately and to verify my interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Some distance was

thus gained from the project and the informant' reflections, which may have been particularly important in light of research ethics due to my dual role as a researcher and project leader. In this process, I received no feedback suggesting that my analysis and interpretations were biased or that my dual role contributed to unbalanced representations of the informants' experiences.

In the results section below, I follow recommendations on reflexive thematic analysis, balancing between quotations that represent the main themes and analytical comments on the concepts behind the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participant quotes were selected based on their clarity, balanced with the need for a broad representation of participants. Furthermore, a thematic map was prepared as part of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (cf. Fig. 1).

5. Results

This study's findings fell into three broad themes: (a) professional dissonance: *balancing two different worlds*; (b) professional contribution: *making the pieces fit together*; and (c) professional growth: *expanding the "knowledge bank."* The themes are presented from a descriptive analysis level using accompanying illustrative quotes on a more interpretive analysis level in which individual quotations are commented on in more detail to highlight analytical points.

5.1. Professional dissonance: balancing two different worlds

A recurring theme among the participants was their experiences working in an organizational context in which structures and cultural norms are severely different from what they experienced as school employees. Crossing these institutional boundaries posed obstacles and barriers that challenged the partnership's sustainability, and the mentor teachers needed time to adjust. One of the participants, Clara, described her experiences as *balancing two different worlds*, contributing to a feeling of being an outsider in the partnership. The observed discrepancies included how power and control are viewed and used, reward structures, and calendar issues. These issues are embedded deeply in the organization's norms and structures, and must be made visible and negotiated to create a well-functioning and longstanding partnership. The participants were uniquely positioned to acknowledge these issues and advocate for a collaborative partnership. Several teachers experienced the hierarchy as different from what they are accustomed to at school, as one of the participants, Melanie, noted:

I hear a lot of talk about the status of different job types, titles, and merits. It is unfamiliar for me as a schoolteacher and challenging to keep up with.

The hierarchy is more visible and ubiquitous at universities than in schools, which are more egalitarian, although a hierarchy remains present. Several of the participants mentioned power issues that still exist between schools and the university, reinforcing the notion of a hierarchy. For Lucas, this hierarchy was made visible through university terminology and concepts used in day-to-day communication:

University faculty can perceive themselves with a higher status than teachers, reflected in their language. Faculty often use a complex language, not because they have to, but because they can, creating some distance. I must fully concentrate in many meetings to understand what it is all about. Dialogue can sometimes be demanding when faculty do not strive to share a common language.

Thus, "academic" language can be a significant factor in generating and maintaining barriers between the partnering educators. Some of the mentor teachers observed that traditional power structures still exist, with the perception that the university "ranks higher" than schools. Traces of uncertainty and a sense of disempowerment were present because their professional knowledge was not fully acknowledged. Sophia perceived herself as an outsider and expressed self-doubt about her ability to contribute in this setting:

It's a very academic environment, and I sense that: "I only work as a schoolteacher." How do I know what works here? I do not necessarily have as much agency to contribute to making significant changes here.

Most of the participants also noted that implementing changes in the higher education context occurs more slowly than in the school context, and they expressed feelings of disempowerment due to bureaucratic structures, lack of knowledge on how systems work, and a perceived lack of influence. Thus, accessing unfamiliar organizational routines and practices posed significant challenges, as Lucas noted:

There is a lot of bureaucracy here. Things take time, and it is frustrating that someone "can't just fix it." New ideas must go through numerous instances and people before anything is done.

The participants experienced university collaborations that differed from their daily work at school. Fewer day-to-day issues at the university required immediate attention and there were more opportunities for planning of teaching and in-depth concentration. Traditionally, university faculty have more control over their time than schoolteachers. Thus, thriving as joint faculty was highly dependent on balancing collaborations and taking the initiative. Anna elaborated on her experiences:

I am used to working independently as a schoolteacher, but we are much more used to working in teams, sharing, planning together, and doing things quite similarly. I have been given some tasks at the university, but then I'm basically left to myself. That makes it difficult for me to know where to start.

As joint faculty members, the mentor teachers established

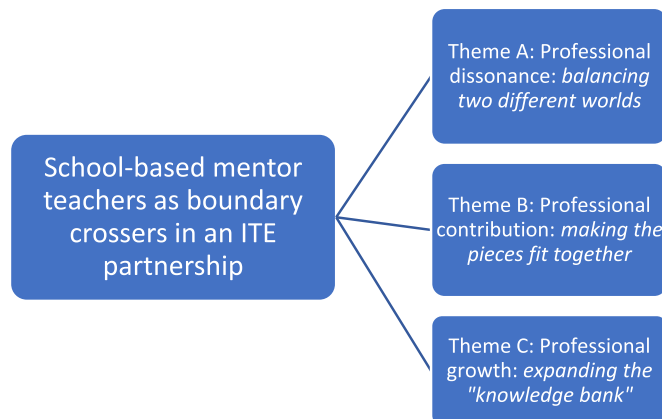


Fig. 1. Thematic map.

collaborative relationships and constantly negotiated their roles and shared objectives, which seemed necessary for them to thrive in their role. A recurring theme woven throughout the findings was the need for shared clarifications and specificity about the collaboration's objectives. In this partnership project, the overarching aim was for pre-service teachers to develop professional digital competence to inform their future classroom practice. Allison appreciated the partnership's specificity:

We have explicitly worked toward specific tasks to develop pre-service teachers' professional digital competence, making the collaboration much more targeted.

The collaboration's specific content varied greatly, as the overall theme for the partnership had to be linked to various departments' local contexts and their subject-specific needs. The fact that the partnership had a focal point with a common core was crucial so that the mentor teachers could create meaningful links across organizational boundaries. For Oliver, this specificity around a central theme affected how knowledge was co-constructed and how the hierarchical relational patterns were deconstructed:

I think it's helpful that it is a very concrete topic for the collaboration because it makes my contributions more apparent. It makes it easier for me to understand why I am employed in this position and not anyone else. I know I can contribute.

Several teachers identified the need for clarification on the collaboration regarding the partnership vision, practical work tasks, and mutual expectations. Working with a specific development initiative shaped the relationships, the trust between participants, and the mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, development of a shared commitment evolved as the partners spent time together, and through this process, they engaged in new initiatives.

5.2. Professional contribution: making the pieces fit together

The mentor teachers expressed a growing appreciation of the various roles and expectations associated with the two workplaces. Through a boundary-crossing partnership, practicing teachers' professional skills and dispositions were utilized through faculty collaborations and co-teaching. Negotiating languages, philosophical perspectives, and competing views have the potential to bring working practices into closer alignment and support innovation and higher levels of professional thinking. When the relationships withstood critical conversations about university teaching practices, John noted that his expertise became more relevant in the collaboration:

I have gradually become a sparring partner who can ask some critical questions: "Can this really work in a school classroom?" "How will our students respond to this?" Then I feel that my skills are being utilized. We are making a significant leap in quality for the collaboration between schools and the university.

Effective collaboration requires trust and clear communication, and this level of trust takes time to develop. However, it is necessary to work through difficulties. As the relationships formed, Melanie reflected on how the partnership offered opportunities for reflective conversations, making it easier to withstand a critical examination of university teaching practices:

Faculty staff have their goals, but lack an understanding of what the pre-service teachers encounter in school. We have spent a

lot of time discussing university teaching, and we do not always agree about choices and priorities. At times, these discussions have been frustrating for both of us, but they are still necessary.

This intermingling of personnel has the potential to benefit both university faculty and partnering schools. University teaching is more up-to-date on school practices, and pre-service teachers are better prepared for professional practice. Sophia described the different forms of knowledge as complementary:

Our communication is excellent, and I feel we complement each other. I share my experience from the classroom, and faculty share their theoretical expertise. Somehow, we manage to make the pieces fit together.

A vital development area in ITE, and a recurring theme among the mentor teachers, was the ability to understand and use theory and research to inform professional practice. Amid their uncertainty about joining university faculty, the mentor teachers' extensive knowledge and "fresh" narratives from their teaching practice to operationalize theoretical concepts provided credibility as teacher educators. As Victoria noted:

Pre-service teachers are thrilled to meet someone who knows the school classroom's realities. As teacher education is quite heavy on theory, my role, in a way, is to "rewrite theory" and model how it can be practiced in the classroom.

Participants found that conversations and questions about practice were particularly relevant to the pre-service teachers in their efforts to integrate coursework and the practical context of the classroom. Differentiating themselves as school-based teacher educators by providing specific examples, demonstrations, and clarifications about teaching roles seemed to be a source of confidence and a motivator in their boundary-crossing role. School-based mentor teachers were perceived as "in touch" as experts on school-based practices; therefore, great value was placed on their co-teaching. For instance, Oliver described how the pre-service teachers responded to his participation in campus teaching:

Pre-service teachers are curious and appreciate my role, as I teach every day in school classrooms, not because they do not have good subject teachers at the university. I know they do, but because I have fresh firsthand experience. Together, we work specifically with didactics and teaching methods relevant to the classroom.

Several participants in this study pointed out that an increased emphasis on classroom practice is essential to developing teacher education. The participants cultivated a deep knowledge of campus coursework, which, combined with their extensive practical knowledge, enabled them to support and empathize with pre-service teachers. Anna described a "shift" in her attitude toward theory's role in her teaching practice:

I have, in a way, had an "aha" experience that the connections between theory and practice are closer than I thought. It is often difficult for pre-service teachers to see these connections.

Clara describes how pre-service teachers asked a range of questions about the *specifics of teacher duties not explicitly found in textbooks*. These practical and often under-emphasized aspects of teachers' daily work involving individual learners captured her attention through her involvement in teaching. Thus, the findings

indicate potential in co-teaching sessions between mentor teachers and university faculty in which they explicitly articulate their differing responsibilities and expertise. Pre-service teachers then are better able to recognize the actions involved in the teaching profession and connect these actions with relevant theoretical perspectives. The pre-service teachers also brought their own experiences from their ITE practicum, which was used more intentionally in university teaching. Victoria appreciated the pre-service teachers' contributions:

The pre-service teachers present their practical examples, and my university colleague and I help connect their experiences to the educational theory at the university. I really enjoy engaging pre-service teachers as active learning partners.

To connect knowledge sources, it was not sufficient merely to employ mentor teachers as joint faculty. As teacher educators from universities and schools, the partnership provided opportunities to explore how to participate in a community that respects shared expertise and knowledge-making across institutional boundaries. Oliver found that teacher education faculty *ask questions, and they are genuinely interested in my thoughts and contributions*. Thus, the university takes a more open and inclusive stance toward its school-based partners, relinquishing some of their traditional control over course content and practices. The mentor teachers could not simply bridge the two knowledge domains by entering the university and instead negotiated their contribution by mutually sharing their expertise. Negotiating their shared contribution also represents an attack on simplified assumptions about university faculty as theorists, and teachers as practitioners. For Oliver, a prerequisite for collaboration is recognizing that faculty and mentor teachers both need validation of their strengths and expertise:

I acknowledge that my university colleagues have better subject knowledge than I do. However, I know a lot about how we apply this in the classroom. Then we may be able to find ways to unite. I find that my contributions have been much appreciated at the university.

A vital part of the partnership was to claim more inclusive and responsive roles for the mentor teachers, thereby deconstructing school-based partners' traditional outsider roles. These power structures must be acknowledged, negotiated, and managed to develop a mutual partnership. Victoria felt that she was recognized for her expertise and specifically referenced the mentorship of the professor who co-coordinated the partnership:

We probably met on some level where we felt respect for each other. I was very nervous before our first meeting, but how she approached me made the distance disappear. She (said): "We will work together; we are both experts in our field." This mutual respect created a strong foundation for our collaboration.

Victoria shared how differences in expertise were viewed as an asset in the collaboration. The partnership had the potential to challenge and reduce power imbalances in respectful ways and consequently make existing hierarchies more transparent.

5.3. Professional growth: expanding the "knowledge bank"

The third and final overarching theme constructed through the data analysis is related to professional growth as an essential

benefit of the partnership. The participants challenged their self-perceptions as teachers of both students and pre-service teachers, and they were challenged to expand their professional knowledge. Teachers are more than technicians, and joining faculty gave the participants a chance to develop as reflective practitioners, thereby challenging them to reorganize their existing knowledge, as was the case for Emilia:

Working hands-on in school for years, I have limited time or opportunities for professional renewal. I enjoy this opportunity to dig into my "knowledge bank" and update with new research.

The professional development of teacher educators can be a slow process, requiring the acquisition of new professional knowledge and skills. The mentor teachers who participated in the study reflected on their role and development as teacher educators as they transitioned from school to university. Working collaboratively as a joint faculty member, Sophia emphasized her growing identity as a school-based mentor in ITE practicum:

Pre-service teachers now meet a more motivated mentor teacher. I recognize the mentoring role more than I did before. I am more connected to the university, and my voice and opinions are taken seriously. My new experiences have made me identify more as a teacher educator.

Straddling the fence between school and university worlds gave the participants new insights as school-based mentor teachers, recognizing that pre-service teachers also move between the two spaces. While adapting to new ways of teaching and learning, John described how he has gained a renewed understanding of himself as a teacher educator:

I have become much more aware of my profession and what it means to be a teacher and teacher educator. It is one thing to teach my students, but it is different to share what I do in ways that contribute to pre-service teachers' development.

Thus, the mentor teachers added to their already-established professional identities as teachers as they grew professionally. Professional development through collaboration also can contribute to their development in their school workplace. A closer connection to the university, according to Sophia, not only has affected her individually, but also her school's growing collective understanding as a place of teacher preparation:

Mentor teachers with "one foot in each camp" are an important step in the right direction for teacher education. I believe schools are increasingly recognizing their shared responsibility in preparing teachers.

The participants were concerned about the partnership's potential to strengthen the links between the school and university, thereby being mutually beneficial. For the partnering schools to take advantage of these opportunities, the teachers reflected on how their school leadership supported their dual role. Lucas received support from his school employer:

The school leadership values what I bring back to my workplace. I share my new experiences with colleagues and contribute to new teaching strategies.

Participants believed that the mutual commitment between partnering institutions strengthens in-service and pre-service

teacher development in ways that shape new practices and support students' learning. Oliver noted:

The school management is genuinely interested in my work at the university and how the school can take advantage of this opportunity.

However, some of the teachers expressed frustration over a perceived lack of commitment and interest from their school employers. Emilia wished for a more receptive attitude toward her new professional understanding when she returned to her school:

There is little collaboration. My principal knows that I work here, but I would prefer more involvement in what I am doing and more investment in my new experiences.

When such attitudes persist, schools lose the opportunity to create long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships with universities for future exchanges of expertise. For some participants, the lack of leadership support from their school employer was a weakness that reduced the potential for their professional growth.

6. Discussion

This study's purpose was to gain a more profound knowledge of school-based mentor teachers' experiences crossing institutional boundaries as joint faculty in an initial teacher education partnership. The general findings suggest that boundary-crossing roles in ITE are challenging in terms of balancing the school and university contexts. Nevertheless, the mentor teachers found the partnership beneficial in merging educational theory with teaching practice and fostering their professional growth.

Similar to previous studies, these participants confirmed the importance of establishing authentic relationships in which professional expertise is acknowledged mutually (Akerman & Bakker, 2011; Risan, 2022; Zeichner et al., 2015). Considering that this partnership was initiated and located within the university domain, participants stressed their dependence on co-partnering university faculty including them in unfamiliar territory and showing interest in their perspectives as experienced teacher practitioners. The results indicate that the collaborative processes, for the most part, were inclusive, and that the mentor teachers were recognized as full-fledged partners and co-teachers. However, tensions from being outsiders in unfamiliar territory remained. Daza et al. (2021) classified these tensions into two groups: relational tensions and tensions over power relations, including valuing different knowledge discourses. The joint faculty keenly observed how these tensions affected their roles through culturally embedded language, power relations, and purposes. For instance, participants mentioned the faculty's "academic" language as a subtle display of power, causing miscommunication and reinforcing a feeling of being unqualified. Agreeing on a common language that facilitates effective and respectful dialogue takes time and effort (Allen et al., 2010). Consequently, the nature and time constraints of partnering as joint faculty, while first and foremost being a schoolteacher, could prolong the process of establishing effective and mutually respectful communication. Thus, boundary-crossing mentor teachers are required to have the skills and dispositions to maneuver the complexity of integrating these professional and personal connections despite the partnership's structural limitations (Burns & Baker, 2016; Passy et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2014).

A prerequisite for successful collaboration – and also identified as a source of tension – was establishing a climate for addressing and maneuvering in the span between theory- and practice-based

knowledge sources. Several studies have found that higher education faculty do not always respect school practitioners' expertise (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Smith, 2016; Zeichner, 2010), which may impede productive partnerships with shared responsibilities (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020; Lillejord & Børte, 2016). Still, these tensions are a natural part of continual negotiation among participants and across institutions, and they need to be managed in a way that continually levels the hierarchies and develops horizontal expertise (Daza et al., 2021; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Thus, these reported tensions can be viewed as obstacles, but participants still emphasized how these negotiations of knowledge sources provided the basis for improved learning opportunities among pre-service teachers (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007). Thus, mutual reconciliation of academic and practical knowledge can generate new pedagogical opportunities for expansive learning (Beck, 2020; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Engeström, 2001; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019).

To facilitate the process of merging these knowledge sources, the mentor teachers emphasized how co-constructing a shared understanding of objectives provided opportunities to reshape practices through specificity and a common language for dialogue (Daza et al., 2021; Wilson, 2004). The backdrop of the partnership reported in this study was for pre-service teachers to develop their professional digital competence. Several studies have made a case for merging academics and practitioners' knowledge in ITE by integrating digital technologies (Daza et al., 2021). Ertmer (2003) found that collaboration between university faculty and in-service teachers to plan and implement technology-integrated lessons created a natural framework for modeling and leveraging their expertise. The findings demonstrate how a shared understanding of objectives enabled the partners to understand their professional practice more coherently, connecting their knowledge sources and expertise (Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Hammerness et al., 2017; Jackson & Burch, 2019). Furthermore, an alignment of the different notions made the partnerships' inherent tensions and contradictions more manageable.

The mentor teachers reflected on their professional growth while adapting to new roles (Grudnoff et al., 2017) and reorganizing their existing knowledge (Burns & Baker, 2016), encouraging them to rethink their professional identities (Taylor et al., 2014; Zeichner et al., 2015). Thus, working collaboratively in the university environment enabled the mentor teachers to reconceptualize their professional roles as educators (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015; Butler-Mader et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2018) and develop their professional identity as teacher educators (Andreassen et al., 2019; Izadinia, 2014). While crossing these boundaries, extant studies have acknowledged that practitioners often resist assuming this academic identity (Boyd et al., 2007, pp. 1–28; White, 2014). Murray and Male (2005) conceptualized a shift from a first-order practitioner working in school to a second-order practitioner in higher education. The participants in this study acquired experience as teacher educators preparing candidates within the first-order setting. Murray (2002) warned us that overuse of first-order experiential knowledge, i.e., transmitting personal knowledge to pre-service teachers, may limit pre-service teachers' learning and their own individual professional development as second-order practitioners. As joint faculty, the participants were challenged to acquire new knowledge in their professional development as second-order practitioners (Badali & Housego, 2000; Koster et al., 1998; Murray & Male, 2005). University faculty played a crucial role in facilitating the collaboration, promoting a sense of safety and acceptance of mentor teachers as legitimate members of the community of second-order teacher educators (Andreassen et al., 2019; Jackson & Burch, 2019; Lunenberg & Hamilton, 2008). For university faculty, this required both philosophical and

practical shifts, changing positions and language, sometimes in unfamiliar ways.

7. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Drawing conclusions from this small-scale qualitative study in the context of a partnership in one ITE program should be done carefully for numerous reasons. The study does not intend to suggest that the boundary-crossing teacher practitioners' experiences directly apply to other contexts, but rather that the specificity of the context within this partnership program is expected to shape mentor teachers' experiences (Fisher & Many, 2014; Many et al., 2012). I recognize that this study is situated within a context in which I myself have been an active contributor. Thus, generalizing the results to other similar contexts without this form of direct influence from a researcher would be difficult (Barab & Squire, 2004). Readers still can relate to the research findings through naturalistic generalizations when provided with socio-cultural insight into these school-based mentor teachers' experiences operating across institutional boundaries (Jackson & Burch, 2019). The results of this study can show transferability to other professional educations (vocational, health care, etc.) that rely heavily on interaction and action across higher education and work practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Engeström & Toivainen, 2010). Furthermore, as previously discussed, the author's dual role as a researcher and partnership initiator raises some ethical considerations. However, this positionality also may be viewed as an analytical resource, as it provides deeper insight into the context and experiences of the participating mentor teachers (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The university most often initiates partnership efforts, and research has focused most often on benefits to the university (Buczynski & Sisserson, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Therefore, it would be useful to gain more knowledge of other key stakeholders who are involved indirectly, such as school and faculty leaders, as partnerships ultimately aim to achieve renewal in both universities and schools simultaneously (Lillejord & Børte, 2016). Future studies should examine how teacher education leadership could provide a better understanding of organizational routines and practices in which boundary-crossing mentor teachers are included or excluded. Future studies also should include university faculty and pre-service teachers' perspectives (Jeffery & Polleck, 2010; Taylor et al., 2014).

8. Implications for ITE and concluding remarks

The present study carries theoretical and practical implications for initial teacher education beyond school-university partnership rhetoric (Smith, 2016). This study adds to limited existing research on how creative approaches to staffing could enhance school-university partnerships and provide an example of an effort to bridge gaps between these two activity systems (e.g., Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015). An immense difference exists between inviting a teacher to practice in a partnership within already-established frameworks and developing horizontal expertise, i.e., creating an inclusive setting with shared responsibility and joint ownership (Zeichner et al., 2015). Thus, this study focused on these interactions' quality and the facilitating conditions to nurture effective collaborations (Allen et al., 2010; Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015). Partnerships do not imply progress automatically, and several studies found that structural and cultural differences between higher education institutions and schools can make it challenging to sustain partnerships over time (Allen et al., 2010; Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Risan, 2022). One of the major challenges seems to be a lack of institutional incentives to engage in the work

of building partnerships unless external grants are involved to support costs. For the most part, promotions also are founded on research and publications; thus, senior faculty are incentivized away from engaging in time-consuming partnership work (Burroughs et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2014; Zeichner, 2021). Therefore, short-term enthusiasm at the beginning of new projects is not the same as developing a sustainable partnership over time (Jeffery & Polleck, 2010). Therefore, partnerships rely on faculty leaders who acknowledge the significance of collaborating with schools, understand the complexity of cross-institutional collaboration, and support the faculty involved (Allen et al., 2010; Lillejord & Børte, 2016; Risan, 2022). Similarly, this study's participants had markedly different experiences concerning how their school leadership supported the partnership. Creating a robust and sustainable partnership requires school leaders who support and see the potential for mutual professional learning across institutional boundaries (Dresden & Thompson, 2021; Fullan, 2014).

Based on this study's results and accumulated knowledge from the literature, what it means to be a teacher educator needs to be reshaped by making better use of expertise across contextual domains. The study reveals several challenges, but simultaneously demonstrates how successful interactions between teacher practitioners and university faculty can be used as a partnership model to improve initial teacher education quality.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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