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Teaching in Diverse Lower and Upper Secondary Schools in Norway: The Missing Links in Student Teachers' Experiences

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Abstract: Teacher education programs must be able to prepare student teachers to work effectively with heterogeneous groups of students in ways that support the learning of all students and affirm their identities within growing neoliberal and neoconservative discourses. In Norway, classroom composition has also become more diverse, primarily due to a higher number of students of a transnational background. This paper explores student teachers' experiences of preparation for the changing nature of the teaching profession that is informed by increased student diversity. A case study with four student teachers from a teacher education program at a Norwegian institution of higher education is employed to gain rich insight into the students' perceptions and experiences. The findings illustrate a need for better preparation on the part of the program in relation to teaching content and methods, the practicum experience, and intercultural training from a pedagogical perspective.

Keywords: diversity; Norway; practicum; intercultural learning



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1. Introduction

Institutions of formal education in the twenty-first century are characterised by increased cultural and linguistic diversity when it comes to the student population. Considering that such a trend is only expected to intensify over the next decades, teacher education programs must be continuously re-evaluated and redesigned in order to remain relevant and responsive to sociodemographic changes. More specifically, teacher education programs must be able to prepare student teachers to work effectively with heterogeneous groups of students in ways that support the learning of all students and affirm their identities within growing neoliberal and neoconservative discourses [1,2]. In Norway, classroom composition has also become more diverse, primarily due to a higher number of students of a transnational background, whether through forced or voluntary immigration [3]. Indeed, this and other pressing trends have been identified by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [4] in a report titled *Teacher Education 2015: National Strategy for Quality and Cooperation in Teacher Education* that includes key areas for the improvement and development of teacher education in Norway.

The purpose of this paper is to explore student teachers' experiences of preparation for the changing nature of the teaching profession that is informed by increased student diversity. The guiding question for this paper is as follows: What are student teachers' perceptions and experiences of the preparation they receive from their Norwegian teacher education programs in relation to teaching in diverse classrooms? To answer this question, this paper draws on a case study with four student teachers from a teacher education program at a Norwegian institution of higher education. In the next section, a conceptual discussion of some of the fundamental tenets of a socially responsive teacher education program will be presented, along with a review of the Norwegian context of (teacher) education. Subsequently, the methodological design of the study will be introduced. This paper is concluded with a discussion of the findings and their implications for teacher education programs in Norway.

“Diversity” and “diverse” tend to be used qualitatively as catch-all terms in everyday discourse. In education, diversity can also be evoked within different sociological areas, such as language, culture, gender, sex, age, ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion [5,6], although some of these may be viewed as falling under “cultural” diversity altogether. In this study, cultural diversity adopts this latter, more inclusive view, focusing on the difference in lived experience between groups of people [7] and on “its relational aspect by emphasising the relationships of interdependence among groups in the context of unequal power and domination” [8]. Linguistic diversity is also used in this paper, set apart from cultural diversity and with reference to students who use more than one language or language variety in their everyday life. This includes situations when their home language is another than the official or majority language taught in schools. Both cases apply in the Norwegian context [9], thereby informing the need for Norwegian teacher education to position linguistic diversity as a resource for education.

2. Teacher Education in Changing Times

Globalisation and transnationalism continue to diversify the landscape of education at all levels of study today. Considering the fast pace in which society has changed in the twenty-first century, Darling-Hammond [10] argued almost two decades ago that “schools of education must design programs that help prospective teachers to understand deeply a wide array of things about learning, social and cultural contexts, and teaching” (p. 302). Equally important, Darling-Hammond [10] maintained that schools of education must prepare future teachers to “be able to enact these understandings in complex classrooms serving increasingly diverse students” (p. 302). To this end, schools of education must work to develop and cultivate strong partnerships with the surrounding community for the co-construction and transfer of knowledge in a mutually beneficial manner, while keeping student learning at the centre of all changes [11].

Darling-Hammond [10] elaborated on two interconnected areas for teacher education that directly support the development of student teachers for the changing times. The first relates to the knowledge needed for teaching (the “what” of teacher education) and the second relates to program designs and pedagogies (the “how”). In the first area, the focus is on the knowledge, on the part of (future) teachers, that is tied to the improvement of the learning experiences of students. This includes knowledge about learners, how they learn in different contexts, what the curriculum consists of in terms of content and expectations, and what teaching skills should be prioritised to teach the content to students of diverse backgrounds, in diverse situations, and with different needs. A strong knowledge foundation is thus essential, for “without knowing deeply how people learn, and how different people learn differently, teachers lack the foundation that can help them figure out what to do when a given technique or text is not effective with all students” [10].

The second area goes beyond simply the design of a teacher education program in terms of course selection and sequence. Opportunities for student teachers to integrate, reflect upon, and apply their knowledge continually and meaningfully in the classroom are of great consequence for how and why student teachers become teachers. Such opportunities can lead student teachers to deconstruct and reconstruct their past learning experiences that often inform their opinions on and visions of teaching and learning [12]. In doing so, a better understanding of what it means to be a teacher and to teach may be fostered. A number of possible issues stem directly from the “how” of teacher education programs. For instance, “disconnection between theoretical knowledge and teachers’ practical work in classrooms,” theory being given more weight than practice, and the development of stand-alone courses to address particular teaching topics in isolation are some of the issues that can affect the success of a teacher education program [13].

Considering the growing linguistic and cultural diversity in schools, practicum experiences play a central role in how student teachers learn about students, the self, and the teaching profession. While practicum experiences contribute in multifaceted ways to the development of student teachers’ skills and knowledge, the practicum location needs to be

carefully selected. Yet, the practicum in itself cannot be viewed as the answer to all questions linked to practical development [14]. Ulvik and Smith [15] found that the practicum can emerge as a place where student teachers apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained from their courses, which problematically emphasises theory over practice. This may result in that “students’ beliefs are not challenged and they are not encouraged to rethink and reflect in depth” (p. 533). In a different vein, the practicum can be seen as a place for the development of one’s identity and practice. In this sense, student teachers may be more challenged, especially through collaboration and mentorship. These insights help further contextualise the complexity of teacher education from a broader perspective.

3. The Norwegian Context in Focus

The challenges and opportunities facing teacher education in Norway vary substantially from region to region. In light of this reality, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (NMER henceforth) [4] released objectives for 2025 aimed at attracting and retaining students in teacher education programs across the country. These include robust strategies to attract a diverse incoming student population, a higher number of students and greater competition for acceptance into teacher education programs, reduced drop-out rates, in-depth preparation to teach the lower grades, and strong partnerships between educational stakeholders [4]. In the same document, NMER highlights the importance of better completion rates for all teacher education programs, but “perhaps especially so for the integrated master programs for secondary school teachers (*lektor* programmes), where drop-out rates have been relatively high” [4]. This insight is especially relevant as this study examines the experiences of student teachers in a *lektor* program who will become teachers of English (see next section).

When it comes to student teachers and novice teachers following graduation, recent research has confirmed the need for better preparation for the profession. This is true for teacher education programs across the spectrum of school grades and not only for secondary school grades [4]. In terms of cultural and linguistic diversity in Norwegian schools, a study found that most in-service teachers did not have any training or education in how to teach English to multilingual students through differentiated instruction and knowledge of multilingual competence [16]. Indeed, although the English curriculum for all school grades includes objectives related to the multilingual (and multicultural) development of students, some teachers and schools have reported not understanding multilingualism both in theory and practice—that is, how to integrate such objectives into pedagogy [17,18]. Additionally, the need to better understand linguistic diversity in teacher education programs has intensified lately, as research has shown that many student teachers associate multilingualism with foreignness and even language deficit [19].

Multiculturalism and multilingualism have become key words in the educational discourse of Norwegian institutions and organisations of education. In an analysis of the legal documents that regulate Norwegian teacher education, Benediktsson [20] identified a number of issues and gaps that directly affect the ways in which teacher education programs may prepare student teachers. For instance, the same documents relegated issues related to cultural diversity to a single module on pedagogy and pupil-related skills “instead of emphasizing the importance of integrating multiculturalism as a mindset into the whole programme” (p. 9). It is important to acknowledge that the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, in its various divisions and functions, has recently engaged more with issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity overall in comparison to previous years. Still, recommendations for multicultural education do not prioritise a critical take on cultural diversity—one in which power structures are examined and confronted. In the end, “the emphasis remains on content integration and awareness of cultural differences” [20], which may offer student teachers only a surface-level understanding of how to work with and through diversity.

Ulvik et al. [21] found that within their teacher education program, lower secondary student teachers assigned the most meaning to the practicum experience. The authors found

that “it is experiences from practice that make it easier to understand theory and make the theory become more meaningful” (p. 647), in addition to the practicum contextualising the teaching profession for students in ways that may be overlooked in theory-driven coursework in Norwegian teacher education programs. However, based on the students’ experiences, the authors also identified a lesser focus on binding the practicum experiences to coursework through formal and engaging mechanisms that foster critical reflection in the student teachers. Based on their findings, the authors stressed the centrality of providing student teachers “varied [practicum] experiences that support their qualification” (p. 648), recognising that student teachers from the same program can experience very different realities of the teaching profession depending on where the student teachers are placed. This observation is important when we consider the growing diversity that characterises Norwegian schools today [22].

4. Methodology

This study was methodologically framed as a case study. Case studies in qualitative research focus on subjective experience, typically of a small sample, within the boundaries of a particular social context [23]. This case study reflects a descriptive design, which attempts to describe the ways in which participants conceived of their experiences [24]. The research site was an institution of higher education in eastern Norway, pseudonymised as East School. More than 10,000 students were enrolled at East School across all campuses at the time of the study. On its website, East School emphasised a close link between research and practice that guided the development of research and pedagogical activities at the institution. Moreover, the website also stated that one of the largest programs at East School, namely the teacher education program, was oriented by a multidisciplinary range of research led by the institution’s own researchers.

This case study is part of a larger project with student teachers enrolled specifically in language teacher education programs for the secondary and upper secondary grades (Norwegian: *lektorutdanning i språkfag*). Following the ethics approval by the national research council, participants were recruited through an email invitation. The invitation was distributed to the main student organisation associated with the teacher education program at East School. Seven students replied to the invitation; however, just four students were invited to participate considering the research aim of understanding their experiences in-depth and the research design of describing personal experiences richly [25] in a manner that was also manageable in terms of the volume of data. The four students were chosen on the basis of their availability and year of study, thereby presenting a wider distribution of experiences across the number of years for the teacher education program: five years. However, no student in the third year of the program was available to join the study. Information on the participants is available in Table 1. All participants were studying to become teachers of English. The small sample and the case study design are not meant to generate generalisable findings, which may be viewed as a limitation of the study.

Table 1. Participant information.

Participant	Age	Year of Study	Sex
Student 1	40	1/5	Female
Student 2	32	2/5	Male
Student 3	22	4/5	Female
Student 4	26	5/5	Female

For three months in 2022, two semi-structured interviews in English were conducted with each participant. Semi-structured interviews were employed to ensure that the topics of concern were explored, while simultaneously allowing the conversation to lead to other topics [26]. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and consisted of topics related to becoming a teacher (e.g., interests, educational background, representations of the teaching profession) and completing a teacher education program in Norway (e.g., course load and

content, expectations, challenges). All interviews were transcribed and read multiple times by the researcher for familiarisation. A process of thematic coding [27] was then employed to identify units of meaningful data, which were coded descriptively. The coded data were subsequently grouped thematically within each participant's transcribed interview, thus helping to create a "profile" for each participant. The themes reflected key topics of previous research literature or emerged organically through the analysis. The analysis was concluded by reviewing the themes that were common across participants' interviews, or in other words, across all students' experiences.

Students in the teacher education program under consideration (Norwegian: *lektorutdanning i språkfag*) obtain a master's degree in English upon graduation. The program also has a stream for Norwegian. The first three years are considered undergraduate (or "lower degree") studies, while the final two years comprise the graduate component (or "higher degree") of the program. By the end of the program, the students will have achieved 300 credits and completed approximately 100 days of practical experience, which begins in the first year. According to East College's web page, the curriculum of the teacher education program reflects both the regulations and guidelines established by the Norwegian Ministry of Education for teacher education. A research-based master's thesis is a requirement for all students. East College offers student teachers opportunities to complete a semester exchange or internship within Europe with the aim of gaining practical experience internationally, which connects to learning about cultural and linguistic diversity outside of Norway.

5. Findings

Generally speaking, but to differing degrees, all student teachers reported being satisfied with many aspects of their teacher education program. However, the analysis of the interview data pointed to three overarching categories whose findings directly answer the guiding question for this paper. These categories are reviewed individually in this section but are interconnected in relevance. The first category illustrates the students' overall experiences and perceptions of learning subject content in the teacher education program. The second section focuses on topics related to the practicum. The final section reveals the need for better intercultural training from a pedagogical perspective.

5.1. Superficial Presentation and Engagement with the Content

The most prominent theme across the student teachers' experiences was related to course content. In particular, the students reported that their courses addressed interesting and timely topics, but that the presentation of the content as well as the opportunities made available to engage with it—through discussion, reflection, or any other activity involving in-depth learning—were insufficient and superficial. For instance, Student 2 commented that the pace of the program was such that discussing the content, sharing personal experiences in relation to it, and learning from peers had become a common challenge time-wise:

Yeah, [there is] not enough time to discuss it [the content], not enough time to read or talk with other people about their experiences, so it's very time limiting, you have to be really good at time management. (Student 2)

Moreover, the same student reported that his courses presented too much information. The information was delivered at once, rather than incrementally and in response to the actual pace at which students learned. Consequently, Student 2 explained that he could not tend to all important points equally. As a result, he started to believe that such an issue was simply a natural, immutable feature of all courses within the teacher education program at East School.

To be honest, it's quite overwhelming I would say when we get all the information from the lectures and the teachers. It's a lot of information and focal points at the

same time, so it can be very overwhelming. But I think we have to sort of just accept that that's how it is, and we have to just try and do our best. (Student 2)

A similar concern was mentioned by Student 1. She explained that there was value in learning about the theoretical foundation of the concepts introduced in her courses in pedagogy. However, she also reported that the content was delivered not only superficially, but also repetitively, thereby deflecting time and importance from actually engaging in activities that could facilitate learning about practical and contextual applications of the subject matter.

It's good to know [the theory], I'm not saying that we shouldn't learn the theory behind it. We need to learn the theory behind it. But as far as me and some of my other classmates, we have felt that we could go deeper into the why, and not just, I think that we repeated certain information five or six times, and it was more important to know the details of who invented what and what they stand for than how you will use it in the classroom, how does that affect, how can you integrate that within a multicultural classroom [...] But of course, I've only had a semester and some weeks now, so it's difficult to make a generalised idea about that. (Student 1)

Overall, the students identified the insufficient amount of time to engage with the content as a significant barrier to their learning and development. Engagement typically meant having enough time to read, reflect, and discuss the content with peers in order to learn through the exchange of ideas before moving on to the next topic. Darling-Hammond [10] drew attention to the importance of peer collaboration and interpersonal interaction in the preparation of future teachers "when the range of knowledge for teaching has grown so expansive that it cannot be mastered by any individual" alone (p. 305). Without sufficient time to engage more deeply with the content—whether individually or with others—student teachers miss out on opportunities to assess whether and how much they have actually learned before going out to teach.

At the same time, the shared experience of insufficient time for engagement led the students to perceive that such an issue was simply a natural feature of the teacher education program. In the words of Student 2: "we have to sort of just accept that that's how it is, and we have to just try and do our best". Consequently, the students came to believe, especially as seen through the experiences of Student 2, that developing the skills and knowledge to be able to teach was dependent on the individual, as in one doing "their best" to learn and succeed. Such perspectives can cloud students' understandings of the responsibility that teacher education programs share in adequately preparing student teachers for the profession. These perspectives can also sustain the myth that only the "good" students move forward.

Finally, there was also a concern relating to a superficial presentation of the content by means of what information was prioritised to students. A divergence in concern can be identified based on the students' experiences: the students were preoccupied with learning "practical" matters related to diversity from their instructors, while the instructors were preoccupied with passing on theoretical knowledge for students to memorise. Such a divergence contributed to the students' feelings of unpreparedness as they were progressing through the program without having their concerns addressed.

5.2. Better Preparation for and Experience in Practica

All students discussed common challenges within their experiences of both preparation for and work in the classroom through practica. Student 2 reported that he did not feel meaningfully prepared to identify how the experiences he encountered in his practicum related to the concepts and theories learned in the courses. Yet, the inability to discriminate between the various events in the classroom by drawing on his academic training was not the only challenge he faced. When it came to working with cultural diversity, he explained

that because his practicum took place in a monocultural classroom setting, he missed out on opportunities to learn about such a topic in context.

And it's basically, at least with experiences in the practicums, *you* have to sort of engage and search for them, the experiences. And sometimes you can be lucky and sometimes you just won't get the chance to experience cultural diversity because there isn't any, maybe. (Student 2)

Considering the geographical location of East School, Student 3 encountered similar social and cultural experiences when it came to completing her practicum. She explained that her courses introduced her to topics related to cultural diversity, but that this knowledge remained within the conceptual boundaries of her courses as the schools of her practica were not culturally heterogeneous. In other words, she could not experience it first-hand unless she moved to another city in Norway where more schools were characterised by diversity.

The schools here where I teach or where I go to practice are not that diverse in terms of culturally diverse. So, if I move to [city in Norway], there I will experience more of that cultural diversity. So, in a way it [the program] teaches me, but at the same time I don't think I will experience it fully until I move to a place that is more culturally ambiguous. (Student 3)

Student 2 reported that his experiences of preparation for the practicum in his second year did not differ in any way from those of his first year of study. He felt as though the onus was on him to, again, discriminate, conceive of, and connect the novel experiences in the classroom during the practicum to the content learned in the courses without more structured opportunities or pedagogically designed guidance. For him, the lack of adequate preparation meant being "tossed" into difficult or overwhelming situations that could potentially even change his decision to remain in the program—an outcome that actually materialised for some of his peers. A common issue in Student 2's overall experience was that of not being exposed to other ways of feeling prepared for the practicum by his program other than by reading the theory.

The intention is communicated to us, so we get the value system of how we are supposed to be in the classroom. But in terms of practicums, they sort of toss us into it and we have to experience it. That's the leap from theory to practice. They sort of profess that you have to experience this, you can read all about it but it's gonna be something different when you experience it first-hand. And I feel like that's just how it is. I have to accept it, take it as it is. I know some of my co-students have had troubles. They find it very difficult to be in practicums. There are some students that have left the programme because they found out that it wasn't suited for them. (Student 2)

For Student 3, the need to learn to work with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students was such that going to other, more diverse cities in Norway for the practicum was something she was enthusiastically open to doing. She recognised that there was an intrinsic limitation in doing her practica in a more monocultural city, but that the program could also consider working with other schools outside the current city for students who had the means to engage in such arrangements.

I feel like they're doing the best that they can with the schools that they have here in [Norwegian city]. The students that they have at the school is [sic] the students that they have, so they can't change that. But if they could send us to a school that is more culturally ambiguous, that would be awesome, I think. 'Cause then I would get a new perspective of how it is to be one of those kids that have [sic] another language to refer to [other] than Norwegian, how to balance that in the classroom, how to take the homework home with you and doing that when you also have another language that you use at the home and that is not dominant, but at the same time is dominant in your life. (Student 3)

In the excerpt below, Student 4 argues for the need for training in sites where student teachers may gain exposure to more culturally and linguistically diverse experiences, a theme that is explored discretely in the next section. She explained that opportunities to practice in contexts where challenging situations are present can help student teachers to develop a more comprehensive experiential repertoire and therefore gain more familiarity with how to deal with challenges when they later emerge in their own classrooms.

I also think to have practical training at, what's it called? It's called *språksenteret*. I'm trying to remember... It's basically where they take in people, when they first come here and teach them Norwegian or English. So, to actually have training where the situation is more dire in a sense. When you work in upper secondary, you get students that are already gotten to the point where they're able to apply or make use of Norwegian or English to a certain extent. But we actually have students that, even though they go through their training in the basic requirements to get to upper secondary, that still have very little competency in both Norwegian and English. And that's when we know [that], it kind of, not becomes a problem, I don't like to call it a problem, but it becomes a challenge. It's not as smooth sailing. So, I think training where it's kind of the hardest as well could give us a valuable experience. (Student 4)

All students envisioned the practicum as the place where opportunities for a kind of contextualised, hands-on learning experience could take place. Particularly when it came to learning about working with linguistically and culturally diverse students, the student teachers expected to develop such skills solely through the practicum, considering that their learning experiences in their subject courses entailed largely reading theory. Yet, the students' experiences suggest that their practicum was almost entirely disconnected from what they had learned in their courses in relation to diversity because their placements were in monocultural schools. Consequently, the students felt as though they had not had enough opportunity to develop their knowledge of practical matters and that such development was rather a result of luck.

Furthermore, the students' experiences suggest that they could have been better prepared for the practicum experience. Preparation in the sense of what to look out for and how to recognise opportunities for diversity was a gap identified by all students, though less so for Student 4, who was in her fourth year and wished for more varied training. Darling-Hammond [10] argued that "teachers need highly refined knowledge and skills for assessing pupil learning, and they need a wide repertoire of practice—along with the knowledge to know when to use different strategies for different purposes" (p. 304). In this sense, the students' experiences of preparation for and work in the practicum did not meet any of these needs: first, having the knowledge and skills acquired through their courses to teach diverse students (the what, when, and how), and second, having a diversified repertoire of practice through practica.

5.3. More Intercultural Training

The final theme speaks to a need for more or better intercultural training to teach in classrooms characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity. When reflecting on her five years in the program, Student 4 concluded that "we have just some more cultural challenges than we have linguistic challenges" in the context of teaching English to multilingual student groups in her practica. When asked what and how much she had learned about inclusive and intercultural teaching during her five years, she replied that those were not central themes in her courses.

In the sense of how to create inclusion, how to take culture into consideration in your teaching actually, [only] to some extent. But it's also, I'm of the opinion that we need more pedagogical training. Not because I think we're not able to do the job, but people always say it doesn't matter how well you do in the subject. It depends how well you're able to teach the subject. For me, that really applies,

‘cause I think the students don’t care if I have an A or a B in English phonetics. They care if I’m able to apply that knowledge to help them. (Student 4)

As mentioned in her response, Student 4 also identified the need for the program to focus more on subject didactics rather than subject knowledge. In a similar vein, Student 1 explained that the necessity for the student teachers to be aware of a student’s cultural and linguistic background is made explicit in the program, which she saw in a positive light. However, she reported encountering two issues: first, although teaching and learning about diversity were a part of her courses, diversity was only superficially discussed, and second, pedagogical training for how to work with and through cultural and linguistic diversity was not introduced. In the interviews, Student 1 made frequent references to feeling unprepared and having to “figure out” these questions on her own.

In a sense, it is mentioned here and there that we always have to take into account the background. But it’s not really explained, insofar at least I have been at school, how to do that, how shall we work, how shall we figure out what the backgrounds are and what are we allowed to do? Are we allowed to speak to the parents, are we allowed to have an initial interview at the child’s start, for example at school, from a different country? That is not something that has been spoken about. (Student 1)

Student 4 explained that the majority of what she had learned about intercultural knowledge was not actually in any course related to didactics. Rather than learning about intercultural or multicultural pedagogy, it was in a course in international relations that she began to think more intently about her own views on culture and language. However, this happened without a segue designed specifically to connect this new knowledge to teaching students of a culturally or linguistically diverse background. Her experience illustrates that deeper learning—engagement “to a greater extent”—was important and possibly transformative, though it happened very briefly.

I think in the programme, the subjects that have challenged me to think differently are not necessarily the straightforward ones in a sense, but the ones that have asked me to look at different perspectives to a greater extent. It is probably those which have prepared me the most. The international relations course, for example, was very brief, but in the couple months that I had that course, I had to re-evaluate a lot of my own perspectives. It didn’t necessarily mean that I changed perspectives, but I had my own perspectives challenged in a sense. So, even though they were ‘good intent’ perspectives to begin with, sometimes it’s good to have them challenged, so you get reaffirmed, or you learn something new. (Student 4)

Considering the pace at which society is changing, student teachers need “a much deeper knowledge base about teaching for diverse learners than ever before” [10]. This knowledge base must include a knowledge of multicultural teaching and learning methods, instead of learning only *about* diversity. Here, the students’ experiences demonstrate that their program did make reference to the need to consider diversity in teaching. However, the tools for how to move beyond considering to actually supporting student academic achievement—which was the student teachers’ primary concern and expectation—were not introduced to them. Their experiences suggest that this is a more serious issue, since Student 4, in her final and fifth year, still felt as though she had received only little training, the source of which was a course unrelated to didactics.

6. Discussion

The student teachers in this study reported feeling broadly unprepared to teach in schools characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity. The three areas of concern identified in the previous section can be examined from two angles: the “what” and the “how” of teacher education [10]. The “what” has to do with the development of a comprehensive, complex, and responsive knowledge base in student teachers that can

help prepare them for the dynamic nature of the profession. In the context of East College, the emphasis in the courses was based on learning primarily theory. The emphasis on reading and memorising was such that it contributed to the student teachers developing an over-dependence, perhaps one even unrealistic, on the practicum, envisioning it as the only place to engage in practical experiences related to diversity by testing the theoretical knowledge they had gained from their courses.

Ulvik and Smith [15] maintained that “the main objective of the practicum is to provide student teachers with authentic hands-on experience in teaching” (p. 520). Despite this affordance, Korthagen et al. [11] have challenged the dichotomy between theory (transferred to students through coursework) and practice (acquired through practicum experiences) by calling for a “theory-and-practice” rather “theory-into-practice” approach. As such, there is a need for “embedding student teachers’ learning in ways that enable them to experience the ‘doing’ of the curriculum more than the information of the curriculum” [11]. Here, the practicum need not be seen exclusively as the “doing of the curriculum” if coursework is also designed to include different forms of experiential opportunities for student teachers (e.g., virtual reality simulation technology). Such opportunities help interrupt “traditional practices” in teacher education that divide theory and practice [11].

Nevertheless, the program at East College can be viewed as one in which some integration of theory and practice may be identified. For instance, the student teachers mentioned having discussions pre- and post-placement with peers. However, the manner in which these opportunities were devised for students to link theory and practice was inconducive to a more in-depth learning process that would lead to a sense of preparation. The courses offered not only too much information to student teachers but also superficial opportunities for them to meaningfully engage with the content. Opportunities for collaborative learning, especially through peer discussion, were few and brief. The importance of peer collaboration cannot be underestimated in teacher education, since “learning about teaching requires an emphasis on those learning to teach working closely with their peers” throughout their educational journey [11].

The lack of meaningful and consistent opportunities to reflect on the content shifted student teachers’ understanding of the role and purpose of their program. Working through the fast pace, the overload of content, and the insufficient time and means for reflection-for-learning [11] resulted in the student teachers believing that success—or more accurately yet, not failing—depended first and foremost on individual characteristics, such as the ability to manage one’s own time, rather than on structural changes to the program (the “how”). When a program is designed in such a way, student teachers will not encounter opportunities that make it possible to bind theory and practice together. When it comes to learning about and through diversity specifically, “diversity” will remain a distant, detached, and discrete *concept* that will be associated entirely with the practicum and potentially preserve the perception that diversity is in the *other* and exists outside the classroom [28].

Understanding the complexity of the teaching experience, particularly through the practicum, is important for self-development and knowledge re- and co-construction. Ulvik and Smith [15] emphasised that the quality of the first teaching experiences tends to have a consequential impact on student teachers’ continuity in a teacher education program. As such, “it is therefore essential that student teachers are offered quality practice placements” (p. 521). All four student teachers’ experiences indicate that a better selection of practica was necessary and that all their concerns and expectations revolved around the development of a practical experience with diversity. Student 2 explained that “they sort of toss into it and have to experience it. That’s the *leap* from theory to practice” (emphasis added). His experience was not one of movement within a single path interconnected by theory and practice. Instead, it was one of a gap in between, creating an either/or (theory or practice) experience.

When it comes to intercultural training, all students demonstrated a heightened awareness of its importance. Still, what it means and looks like to teach with and from

an inclusive pedagogy that moves beyond simply acknowledging cultural and linguistic diversity was not a topic of learning for students. Student 4, who had been in the program for five years, suggested the inclusion of practica in more challenging environments to learn in multiple areas simultaneously. When education anchored in cultural diversity is not made central in teacher education, teachers may end up with “only rudimentary knowledge of culturally responsive teaching and assessment methods” [20]. Such critical multicultural perspectives to education help not only prepare student teachers for diversity in the profession but also direct teacher education, as a field, into new potential engagements with epistemological and pedagogical diversity [29].

7. Conclusions

Student teachers need adequate preparation to work with growing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. Darling-Hammond [10] maintained that “learning to teach requires that new teachers be able to understand and respond to the dense and multifaceted nature of the classroom, juggling multiple academic and social goals” (p. 305). Without the necessary experience, knowledge, and skills, current and future teachers will remain underprepared to support the socio-academic success of all students, especially those who may need more specialised support. In the context of East College, better preparation is related to what and how student teachers learn about diversity, both in the classroom and in the practicum. This paper adds to the Norwegian research on teacher education by emphasising that more opportunities for deeper (peer) interaction and a better selection of practicum locations remain at the core of the students’ experiences in one of Norway’s long-established teacher education institutions. The findings also point to the need for more intercultural development, both through theory and practice.

Including and listening to student teachers’ voices is central to the improvement of teacher education. However, as Korthagen et al. [11] pointed out, “all over the world, [teacher] candidates’ voices are rarely used to ascertain whether their teacher education program achieves its goals” (p. 1035). This paper contributes to the need to better understand how Norwegian teacher education programs prepare future teachers for diversity by foregrounding student teachers’ perspectives in relation to content learning and practical experience [9,17,19]. Future research could consider the concerns guiding this paper at a broader scale within the Norwegian context by considering the experiences of teacher educators and practicum supervisors to a greater degree. Research into the improvement of teacher education is key in supporting future teachers to become agents of social change in their communities.

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