School leadership in action: The dynamics of managing preservice teachers' work-integrated learning in South African secondary schools

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Abstract

The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications policy in South Africa prescribes Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as a means of preparing preservice teachers for authentic school environments. During WIL, School Management Teams (SMTs) are expected to provide guidance, mentorship, and leadership support to students. However, little is known about how SMTs manage preservice teachers in practice and what challenges they face in fulfilling this responsibility. The study explored how SMTs manage preservice teachers during WIL and the challenges they encounter. Grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory and framed within an interpretive paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design. Purposive sampling was employed to select nine participants: two mentor teachers and two departmental heads, who participated in semi-structured interviews, and five preservice teachers, who took part in a focus group discussion. Data was analysed thematically. Findings revealed that SMTs demonstrated key transformational leadership behaviours by providing orientation, assigning mentors, and ensuring access to resources. Nonetheless, structural and organisational barriers, including limited resources, time constraints, and weak collaboration, restricted their ability to fully enact their leadership roles. These limitations signify the need for enhanced partnerships between schools and higher education institutions, effective resource allocation, and structured mentorship training. Although limited to one school, the study findings are significant by shifting attention to the leadership role of SMTs in WIL, a dimension often overlooked in teacher education research. The findings provide valuable insights that can inform policy, strengthen school-university partnerships, and support the professional growth of preservice teachers.

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1. Introduction

In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) advises the Minister of Education and Training on all matters related to higher education and is responsible for quality assurance and promotion through the Higher Education Quality Committee. This statutory body, established by the Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997, ensures the quality of higher education provision. According to CHE (2011), higher education is under increasing pressure to reform curricula and pedagogies in ways that are responsive to both local realities and global demands. The emphasis is not only on supporting students from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, but also on preparing them to thrive in a competitive global economy while acting as responsible citizens. The CHE (2011) notes that, internationally, governments expect universities to enhance students' 'graduateness,' that is, their ability to transition into the workforce and contribute meaningfully to society.

In response to concerns about student development and graduate attributes, there is increasing interest in promoting university learning that is less didactic and more situated, participative, and 'real-world' oriented. This approach to learning is known as Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) (CHE, 2011). In teacher education, WIL is especially important because it provides preservice teachers with practical experience, pedagogical skills, and contextual understanding needed to thrive in diverse, democratic, and inclusive classrooms (Mncube & Mphahlele, 2019). It intentionally combines theoretical knowledge with practical application, allowing preservice teachers to participate in authentic learning experiences that directly support their professional development (Almaiah et al., 2020).

In the South African context, schools are central to supporting preservice teachers during WIL. The School Management Team (SMT), comprising the principal, deputy principal, and department heads, is responsible for overseeing school operations and fostering a supportive learning environment (Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2023; Mashiane-Nkabinde & Nkambule, 2025). The SMT is legally accountable for the purpose and functioning of the school (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2022), while also serving as key mentors and facilitators to preservice teachers. Their leadership role, which involves guiding and influencing teachers and learners to achieve school goals (Naidoo, 2021), suggests that SMTs occupy a pivotal position in the success of WIL.

Ideally, the SMT should provide preservice teachers with structured mentoring, professional support, and opportunities for growth. Reverte et al. (2023) highlight the

importance of supervision that integrates mentorship, performance management, and problem-solving. Similarly, Johannes et al. (2020) emphasise that aligning responsibilities with the competencies of both preservice teachers and experienced staff is crucial for the successful implementation of WIL. Kula and Güler (2021) further emphasise that preservice teachers should be treated as valued colleagues within the school community.

However, empirical research highlights significant gaps between these ideals and actual practice. Studies point to persistent challenges that undermine the effectiveness of WIL in South African schools. Letseleha (2023) found that preservice teachers often perceive SMTs as offering insufficient mentorship and support. Mafugu et al. (2024) reported challenges such as limited access to school facilities, heavy workloads, and ineffective guidance, all factors that fall under the remit of SMTs. Similarly, Jederud (2024) observed that preservice teachers frequently face inadequate support structures to sustain their professional development, while Ngidi and Nieuwenhuis (2020) identified weak coordination between universities and schools as a barrier to smooth WIL implementation. These concerns are further echoed by Langeveldt and Pietersen (2024), who argue that inadequate SMT support ultimately undermines the impact of WIL models in South Africa.

Taken together, these studies reveal a clear gap: although SMTs are formally responsible for providing mentorship and support to preservice teachers, their role is often inadequately enacted in practice. This undermines WIL's potential to prepare preservice teachers effectively for the profession and raises questions about how SMTs actually manage preservice teachers, as well as the challenges they encounter in fulfilling this responsibility. Addressing this problem is critical, as the quality of SMT involvement directly shapes the experiences of preservice teachers and the long-term effectiveness of WIL in South African teacher education. To respond to this gap, the present study is guided by the following questions:

How do School Management Teams manage preservice teachers and navigate the challenges associated with this responsibility?

2. Literature review

2.1 Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in Teacher Education

WIL has long been recognised as a cornerstone of teacher preparation, equipping preservice teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for professional practice

(Thaanyane & Jita, 2025). By blending theoretical learning with authentic practice, WIL enables preservice teachers to develop effective pedagogy while navigating the complexities of school culture and context (Munday et al., 2021; Banks, 2016).

A variety of WIL models have been employed internationally and in South Africa, including mentorship, school placement, and co-teaching (Johannes et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2021). The success of these models depends on striking a balance between theory and practice, and ensuring adequate guidance from experienced mentors (Nieuwenhuis & Ngidi, 2019). Yet, research also cautions that placements often create tension for both preservice teachers and mentors. For instance, preservice teachers are required to negotiate conflicting institutional expectations (Manderstedt et al., 2022), while mentors face increased workloads due to supervisory responsibilities. These challenges are intensified in South Africa's multilingual and multicultural context, where preservice teachers require strong intercultural competence to navigate diverse school settings (Savolainen et al., 2012; Langeveldt & Pietersen, 2024).

2.2 Research on WIL

Recent studies have extended WIL scholarship into new areas. Mogale and Jita (2025) investigated the use of educational apps in primary schools, demonstrating their potential to make lessons more interactive; however, limited Internet access constrained their effectiveness. Maphumulo and Gcabashe (2025) explored mentor teachers' perceptions of preservice mathematics teachers' preparedness, concluding that stronger mentorship support is needed to improve pedagogical content knowledge. Ndebele and Legg-Jack (2023) examined the impact of WIL on shaping professional identities, finding that the school environment has a strong influence on preservice teachers' identity development. Other subject-specific inquiries, such as Letseleha (2023) on Physical Education, have revealed mismatches between training and classroom realities. Langeveldt and Pietersen (2024) identified diverse WIL models for South African contexts, but argued for improved partnerships between schools and higher education institutions. Collectively, these studies confirm that WIL enriches the development of preservice teachers, yet they also highlight persistent barriers, including resource constraints, inadequate mentoring, and weak coordination between institutions and schools.

2.3 The School Management Team and WIL

Although much of the literature has focused on preservice teachers' experiences, mentorship, and the design of WIL models, limited attention has been given to the leadership role of the SMT. The SMT, comprising the principal, deputy principal, and heads of department, plays a central role in school functioning and has legal responsibility for supporting preservice teachers' professional development (RSA, 2022; Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2023). Their leadership influences how effectively preservice teachers are integrated into schools and supported during WIL placements (Naidoo, 2021).

Research shows that SMTs are expected to provide supervision, mentorship, and collaborative opportunities (Reverte et al., 2023; Johannes et al., 2020; Kula & Güler, 2021). Yet, studies consistently point to shortcomings in practice: preservice teachers report insufficient support (Letseleha, 2023), overloaded workloads (Mafugu et al., 2024), inadequate support structures (Jederud, 2024), and poor coordination between universities and schools (Ngidi & Nieuwenhuis, 2020). As Langeveldt and Pietersen (2024) argue, these deficiencies compromise the effectiveness of WIL models.

2.4 Possible WIL Challenges for SMTs in Schools

While SMTs are expected to provide mentorship, supervision, and support to preservice teachers, several studies have highlighted that this role is not without its challenges. Supervising preservice teachers often imposes additional demands on SMT members who already shoulder administrative and instructional responsibilities. Insufficient training, limited time, resistance to change, and weak coordination between schools and universities have been widely cited as barriers to effective WIL management (Billet, 2011; Tillery & Sharma, 2017; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Fullan, 2007).

A major challenge concerns the limited preparation of SMTs for managing preservice teachers. Although SMTs hold leadership responsibilities for professional development, they may lack specific training on mentoring and evaluation practices related to WIL (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This gap can lead to inconsistent supervision, limiting preservice teachers' opportunities for authentic learning.

Workload and time constraints further complicate the supervision process. Classroom teachers and departmental heads already balance extensive administrative and instructional duties, and the inclusion of preservice teachers often adds pressure (Billet, 2011). As Loose

(2014) argues, effective management requires deliberate workload distribution and clarity on which teaching tasks preservice teachers can assume.

Another recurring issue is resistance to change among some teachers who may have had negative experiences with preservice teachers or are sceptical of new WIL practices. Such resistance can manifest in limited cooperation or reluctance to adapt teaching routines to accommodate mentoring (Fullan, 2007). Consequently, SMTs are required to exercise transformational leadership to build trust, model collaboration, and foster positive school cultures that welcome preservice teachers.

Lastly, poor communication between schools and higher education institutions continues to undermine effective WIL implementation. Studies indicate that the lack of structured feedback, unclear expectations, and inconsistent communication channels create misunderstandings between SMTs, mentor teachers, and universities (Rodriguez-Valls, 2014; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Strengthening these partnerships through continuous dialogue and joint planning could mitigate the disconnection and enhance preservice teachers' learning experiences.

These challenges emphasise the need for leadership capacity-building within SMTs to ensure that WIL placements are effectively managed and that preservice teachers receive meaningful support aligned with school realities.

2.5 Research Gap and Novelty

While existing studies have examined WIL through the lenses of technology use (Mogale & Jita, 2025), pedagogical preparedness (Maphumulo & Gcabashe, 2025), professional identity (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2023), subject-specific challenges (Letseleha, 2023), and diverse models of implementation (Langeveldt & Pietersen, 2024), little attention has been paid to how SMTs themselves manage preservice teachers during placements. This oversight is significant, given that SMTs hold formal responsibility for school operations and teacher support, yet evidence suggests that their role is inconsistently enacted.

The present study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on how SMTs manage preservice teachers during WIL and what challenges they face in this process. By shifting the focus from preservice teachers' perspectives to SMT practices, this study contributes a novel angle to the literature and responds to the persistent call for stronger alignment between schools and higher education institutions in advancing teacher education.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Transformational Leadership Theory

The research is based on the framework of Transformational Leadership Theory, which was first proposed by James Downton in 1973 and developed further by James MacGregor Burns in 1978. This theory explains how leaders can create a collective sense of purpose and commitment in followers by inspiring and motivating them to go beyond their own self-interests (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Transformational leaders exhibit four primary behaviours: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bose & Haque, 2021). Understanding how SMTs support preservice teachers and respond to the tensions they encounter will relate to the effectiveness of these transformational leadership behaviours.

Through individualized consideration, SMTs support the unique needs of preservice teachers with mentorship and guidance, ensuring that each preservice teacher is well-supported, according to their individual needs and stage of professional development. Inspirational motivation enables SMTs to foster a positive and professional school atmosphere, nurturing confidence in preservice teachers and encouraging them to give their best effort in their teaching practice. In addition, intellectual stimulation encourages preservice teachers to think critically about their own practice and adopt new pedagogies in the classroom, providing a further outline of learning and development. Finally, SMTs demonstrate idealized influence by serving as strong ethical role models for their preservice teachers, leading by example, and showing them what positive ethical leadership looks like.

This theoretical framework aligns with the study's aims by demonstrating the core leadership practices that SMTs support for preservice teachers. In addition, it establishes a context for investigating the challenges SMTs face when supporting preservice teachers, such as balancing individual support while navigating organisational demands, collaborating with others, and addressing resource and training shortages. Within this study, which applies Transformational Leadership Theory to interpret and discuss the findings, this study offers a rich understanding of how SMTs can create a context to support their preservice teachers' professional development while also grappling with the challenges that accompany this role.

3. Methodology

3.1 Paradigm and Approach

This research utilised a qualitative research approach to understand how people interpret and experience the world, rather than merely quantifying or measuring objective facts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Qualitative research aims to provide depth of insight into participants' attitudes, behaviours, and social phenomena. Creswell (2020) defines qualitative research as an inquiry that involves methodological traditions exploring a social or human problem. In this study, the focus was on the School Management Team's (SMT) ways of managing preservice teachers during Work-Integrated Learning (WIL).

A descriptive phenomenological design was adopted, as it enabled the researcher to access participants' lived experiences and capture the essence of how SMTs and preservice teachers experience WIL.

3.2 Participants

Participants in this study were two mentor teachers, two departmental heads, and five preservice teachers in one secondary school. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants were directly involved in WIL and, therefore, capable of offering rich insights (Campbell, 2020). The five preservice teachers were third-year students from one university, selected because they were undertaking their teaching practice in the same secondary school where the study was conducted.

Inclusion criteria: (a) SMT members (departmental heads) and mentor teachers directly engaged in supervising preservice teachers during WIL; (b) preservice teachers placed at the secondary school during the study period.

Exclusion criteria: (a) school staff not directly involved in WIL supervision; (b) preservice teachers placed in other schools; (c) first- and second-year students without WIL exposure.

Table 1 presents details of the research site. Only one school was sampled, comprising approximately 904 learners, four Departmental Heads (DHs), and one principal. The school is classified as a Quintile 3 institution, indicating that it serves learners from low-income communities and operates as a no-fee school.

Table 1

Details of the research site

Name of school	Number of principals	Number of Departmental Heads (DHs)	Number of teachers	Number of learners	Quintile ranking
School A	1	4	26	904	3

Table 2 presents the biographical details of the participants. A total of nine participants took part in the study, comprising two Departmental Heads (DHs), two mentor teachers, and five preservice teachers. Both the mentor teachers and Departmental Heads have more than five years of teaching experience.

Table 2

Participants' biographical details

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Teaching Experience
PS 1	Preservice teacher	Male	0
PS 2	Preservice teacher	Male	0
PS 3	Preservice teacher	Male	0
PS 4	Preservice teacher	Female	0
PS 5	Preservice teacher	Female	0
MT 1	Mentor teacher	Female	5 years
MT 2	Mentor teacher	Male	12 years
DH 1	Departmental Head	Male	7 years
DH 2	Departmental Head	Female	9 years

3.3 Data Generation

Two complementary methods were employed to generate data: semi-structured interviews (SSI) and focus group discussions (FGDs). SSIs were conducted with mentor teachers and departmental heads. This method provided opportunities for in-depth, individual exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, while allowing flexibility to probe for further detail (Kallio et al., 2016).

FGDs were conducted with preservice teachers to capture their collective experiences of WIL. Krueger and Casey (2014) describe focus groups as qualitative data collection methods in which a small group engages in guided discussion about a set of topics. This format allowed preservice teachers to recall and reflect upon their lived experiences together, stimulating richer responses through peer interaction (Cash, 2022). Although

phenomenological studies often privilege individual interviews, FGDs were justified here because preservice teachers' experiences of WIL are inherently social and situated within collective contexts. The group setting encouraged dialogue while careful facilitation ensured all voices were heard and that findings captured the essence of lived experiences rather than group consensus. Triangulation was achieved by combining SSIs with FGDs to enhance credibility and provide a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon.

Table 3

Participants and data generation methods

Participant group	Number	Sampling strategy	Data collection method
Mentor teachers	2	Purposive	Semi-structured interviews
Departmental heads	2	Purposive	Semi-structured interviews
Preservice teachers	5	Purposive	Focus group discussion

Table 3 provides details of the participants included in the study, including their total number and the method employed to generate data from each category of participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) structured phases. First, the researcher engaged in familiarisation by transcribing the interviews and repeatedly reading the data to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. This was followed by the process of initial coding, where relevant data features were systematically identified and labelled. The next step involved theme development, in which related codes were collated into broader categories representing significant patterns across the dataset. These themes were then reviewed to ensure coherence with the original data and refined where necessary to strengthen consistency and accuracy. Finally, themes were named and defined, providing clear descriptions that captured their essence. Through this process, the researcher generated themes that offered deeper insights into participants' lived experiences of WIL. The analysis illuminated similarities and differences between SMT members, mentor teachers, and preservice teachers, and facilitated a nuanced discussion of the challenges and practices that shaped their experiences (Naeem et al., 2023).

3.5 Coding Process and Rationale

Initial codes were generated inductively from participants' narratives, guided by the research question on how SMTs manage preservice teachers during WIL. Each meaningful segment of text was highlighted in colour in the transcribed data to capture participants' own expressions (e.g., "orientation meetings," "mentor assignment," "resource sharing"). These codes were later compared and refined into conceptual categories such as school integration practices and support mechanisms. The categories were then organised into broader themes, orientation services, assigning mentor teachers, and provision of learning resources, which reflected the leadership practices of SMTs. This process ensured that the themes remained grounded in participants lived experiences while aligning conceptually with transformational leadership principles, making the codes essential in linking raw data to the study's theoretical framing.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of the Free State Ethics Committee (UFS-HSD2018/1107). Prior to participation, individuals were provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their rights. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of transcripts. They were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty, and that all responses would be treated with strict confidentiality. Furthermore, participants confirmed that they were of sound mind and provided consent freely and voluntarily.

3.7 Limitation

This study focused exclusively on quintile three secondary schools in a single district within one province, limiting the generalizability of its findings to other quintiles, districts, or provinces. Additionally, while providing depth, the qualitative approach limits the ability to generalise findings across broader contexts. The study's reliance on one district may overlook regional variations in school management and WIL practices. The limited scope also excludes the perspectives of higher education institutions involved in WIL.

4. Findings

4.1 Experiences of School Management Teams (DHs) in Managing Preservice Teachers during WIL

Orientation services. Data revealed that SMT members (DHs) play a critical role in orienting preservice teachers to school policies, culture, and professional expectations. DH1 explained,

> *"We provide guidance, such as time management, so they can apply the 'teach and assess' strategy during teaching and learning."*

The extract shows the leadership-driven process that reflects Transformational Leadership Theory through idealised influence, as SMTs serve as role models in demonstrating professionalism and clarity of expectations.

Assigning mentor teachers. The SMTs also ensured that preservice teachers were paired with appropriate mentors. MT2 highlighted,

> *"The SMT is responsible for the placement and supervision of preservice educators. They ensure that student teachers are assigned to experienced mentor teachers."*

The extract shows the SMT's responsibility for creating a supportive mentorship framework, aligning with the individualised consideration dimension of Transformational Leadership. Effective pairing of preservice teachers with mentors ensures professional growth, monitoring, and reflective learning throughout WIL.

4.2 Experiences of Mentor Teachers (MTs) in Supporting Preservice Teachers

Mentoring and orientation support. Mentor teachers (MTs) viewed orientation as part of their extended role in supporting the professional induction of preservice teachers. MT1 remarked:

> *"We guide preservice teachers in achieving teaching practice outcomes as expected by the university and help them adapt to the school's practices and procedures."*

The extract suggests that the MTs considered themselves intermediaries between SMT leadership and preservice teachers, fostering intellectual stimulation and reflective engagement.

Assigned mentorship responsibilities. MTs further explained that being assigned as mentors came with responsibilities of guiding, assessing, and modelling pedagogical approaches. MT3 reflected,

> *"Once assigned, we take full responsibility to support preservice teachers in lesson planning, assessment, and behaviour management."*

This assignment fosters accountability and promotes a professional learning culture, where experienced teachers mentor future educators through ongoing dialogue and constructive feedback.

4.3 Experiences of Preservice Teachers (PSs) during WIL

Orientation experience. Preservice teachers (PSs) reported that orientation by SMTs and mentor teachers was valuable for understanding the school environment and daily operations. PS5 shared:

> *"On our first day, we had a meeting with the school's management. That is when we got to know who we would be working with and what was expected of us."*

While orientation eased their integration, the extract suggests it focused more on administrative than pedagogical aspects.

Mentorship allocation and interaction. Preservice teachers appreciated the process of being assigned mentors, describing it as essential to their growth. PS3 indicated:

> *"We have a mentor teacher to whom we report and share challenges or needs here at school."*

The extract suggests that preservice teachers viewed the mentorship assignment as a safe space to seek guidance, reflect on challenges, and connect theory with practice, thereby reinforcing the experiential and collaborative nature of WIL.

4.4 Challenges Experienced by Participants

Timeframe. Both DHs and MTs reported that the limited duration of WIL restricted the depth of supervision and mentorship. DH1 noted that preservice teachers often arrive during busy periods, which limits the available time for mentoring. He shared;

> *"The preservice teachers usually come to schools for WIL during busy times of the school. I think it would be best if they could come early in February when teachers are less busy."*

MT2 observed,

> *"Preservice teachers end up teaching concepts they enjoy rather than following the Annual Teaching Plan when mentors are occupied."*

Time constraints thus weakened consistent mentorship and the opportunity for transformational learning.

Limited resources. Participants highlighted persistent shortages of teaching materials, classroom space, and technological resources. PT1 described,

> *"Lack of resources is a main challenge for SMT members in rural schools as it affects us in classrooms. This also limits the preservice teachers' development as they are not exposed to specific resources that can add value to their teaching experience soon."*

PS2 echoed this concern, adding that such shortages limit preservice teachers' exposure to diverse teaching tools, which could enrich their learning experience. He explained:

> *"The challenges that we face include limited resources. Our school experiences limited resources such as classroom space, teaching materials and technological equipment."*

Poor communication. DH2 emphasised weak communication between universities and schools. She lamented:

> *"We only receive requests from preservice teachers for placements; then, permission is granted, and we will see when they arrive. From there, we will only see their assessors or hear from their leaders that their assessors are coming in a certain. It ends there. We do not get any kind of communication or training from*

their university. When it is time for the next phase, the same process continues, as I indicated."

The lack of collaboration affects continuity in supervision and feedback. Effective WIL, therefore, requires systematic partnerships and information exchange between higher education institutions and SMTs.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that SMTs play an integral role in supporting preservice teachers during WIL by providing orientation and assigning mentors to them. Naidoo (2021) states that SMTs are important because they are the key supervisors of teachers, a component of the school leadership, and have a significant influence on teacher quality in schools. They provide teachers with orientation and support, as well as ensure that teachers have the necessary resources. They align with Transformational Leadership Theory, demonstrating that they can inspire and motivate people to lead by addressing their needs (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Oloba et al. (2025) and Skytterstad et al. (2025) emphasise the vulnerability of new teachers as they begin their teaching careers, as they must acclimate to a new school culture, routines, their students, and the subjects they teach. For this, Skytterstad and colleagues reiterate that new teachers should be oriented to the school culture through mentoring as a learning process. Similarly, Harju and Niemi (2020) noted that new teachers need to gain support and experience in addressing tasks beyond the classroom, such as fostering collaboration among parents and colleagues and offering comprehensive support to their students. Ndebele and Legg-Jack (2023) and Jita and Munje (2021) also found that mentors play a crucial role in developing multiple professional identities for preservice teachers during their teaching practice. However, the findings also revealed that systemic challenges such as limited resources, time constraints, and communication barriers hinder the execution of these responsibilities.

Limitations of Resources and Individualised Consideration. Resource constraints represent a significant challenge for SMTs in fulfilling their leadership role during WIL. Individualised consideration, a key component of transformational leadership, requires addressing the unique needs of preservice teachers. Therefore, it could be argued that insufficient resources may make it difficult for SMTs to deliver equitable and consistent

support. For instance, Nyathi (2025), Letuma (2023), Ngidi and Nieuwenhuis (2020), and Singh et al. (2018) identified resource shortages and inadequate infrastructure as persistent challenges in South African schools, which, in the case of this study, hinder the effective implementation of WIL. However, findings by Letuma and Mdodana-Zide (2024) present a contrasting perspective, suggesting that part of the resource shortage in South African schools stems from schools' failure to implement proper retrieval and preservation mechanisms, implying that schools initially possessed sufficient resources at some stage. Nevertheless, without adequate resources, preservice teachers are deprived of essential mentorship, tools, and facilities needed to maximise their learning experiences, ultimately compromising their professional growth.

Time Constraints and Inspirational Motivation. The findings also indicated that time constraints impede the ability of SMTs to engage preservice teachers effectively. Inspirational motivation, another critical element of transformational leadership, involves fostering a positive and supportive environment. However, this may become challenging when mentors are preoccupied with other responsibilities, which makes it harder to guide preservice teachers. As participants alleged, in such scenarios, preservice teachers often teach their preferred concepts rather than adhering to the annual teaching plan, limiting their opportunities to gain comprehensive experience.

The issue of inadequate time for WIL is not unique to South Africa. In Lesotho, Thaanyane and Jita (2025) found that the typical eight-week teaching practice is insufficient for preservice teachers to develop expertise in teaching mechanics. Similarly, Billet (2011) highlights that WIL requires significant time and effort from both preservice and mentors, often perceived as an additional burden.

Communication Barriers and Intellectual Stimulation. Effective communication between the institution of higher learning and schools where preservice teachers are placed is vital. However, the study found that there is poor communication. Such circumstances may lead to a lack of coordination of activities, thereby creating confusion and limiting the professional development of preservice teachers. Ngidi and Nieuwenhuis (2020) similarly identified inadequate collaboration as a significant barrier to the smooth integration of preservice teachers into schools. Langeveldt and Pietersen (2024) believe that communication

between schools and higher education institutions is crucial for the success of WIL due to the country's diversity and several official languages. They encourage better collaboration to ensure that preservice teachers are situated in contexts that foster their development and align with their needs.

Implications for Idealized Influence. Transformational leaders act as role models through idealised influence, inspiring team trust and respect. However, systemic challenges such as resource shortages, time constraints, and lack of communication may compromise the ability of SMTs to consistently exemplify this leadership quality. These obstacles may not only impact the professional development of preservice teachers but also risk diminishing their perception of effective leadership. Preservice teachers may struggle to internalise the leadership values modelled by SMTs, thereby affecting their aspirations and practices as future educators.

6. Conclusion

While SMTs engage in important transformational leadership behaviours while managing preservice teachers during WIL, they face systemic challenges, such as resource allocation, time constraints and poor communication, that limit their ability to exert their full leadership capacity. There are strategies to address this but they require collaboration, greater resource allocation, and changes to the WIL model. By improving partnerships, aligning WIL with school schedules, and developing training for mentoring, various stakeholders can establish an environment in which preservice teacher supports are available, professional development is addressed, and educational experiences improve in schools. In addition, university continuous education or extension programming for school leadership is an important investment, particularly in regard to WIL.

The findings of this study carry broader implications that extend beyond the immediate school context. They demonstrate SMTs are pivotal agents in shaping the professional learning experiences of preservice teachers during WIL. When SMTs embody transformational leadership attributes, idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, they create school environments that nurture reflective, competent, and ethically grounded future educators. However, systemic barriers such as limited resources, time constraints, and weak institutional coordination suggest that leadership

effectiveness cannot be divorced from the broader organisational and policy context in which SMTs operate.

Theoretically, this study advances the application of Transformational Leadership Theory within teacher education by showing that transformational leadership extends beyond interpersonal relationships between SMTs and preservice teachers. It also functions at a structural level, where institutional systems, resources, and policies determine the extent to which leadership practices can be enacted. The study, therefore, contributes to leadership theory by illustrating that the success of transformational leadership in WIL management depends on contextual enablers such as collaboration, workload distribution, and institutional alignment.

Practically, the findings imply that universities and schools should move beyond transactional WIL arrangements toward sustained, collaborative partnerships. SMTs require continuous professional development in mentoring, supervision, and reflective leadership to effectively guide preservice teachers. Embedding WIL planning within school improvement frameworks could also strengthen the alignment between preservice teacher training and the realities of the classroom. This approach will enhance coherence between university curricula and school expectations, ensuring that preservice teachers experience authentic and contextually relevant learning.

At the policy level, the study points out the need for systemic reform in teacher education governance. The Department of Basic Education and higher education institutions should co-develop national guidelines that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of SMTs in WIL supervision. Such frameworks should be supported by sustainable funding for mentorship, structured monitoring systems, and cross-institutional training opportunities. These measures would strengthen accountability, enhance quality assurance, and align South Africa's WIL practices with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which advocates inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Building on these implications, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen SMT leadership and improve the WIL experience:

Strengthen Collaboration: Higher education institutions and schools should establish formal partnerships to align WIL programmes with school calendars and operational realities. Joint planning and communication structures can improve placement coordination and supervision.

Increase Resource Allocation: Government and education departments should prioritise funding to support WIL, ensuring that SMTs and mentors have access to teaching and learning resources essential for preservice teacher development.

Formalise Mentor Training: Implement structured mentor-training programmes to equip mentor teachers with supervision, feedback, and assessment skills while balancing their existing workload.

Utilise Community Support: Schools should engage parents, community members, and governing bodies to provide supplementary mentorship and logistical support, reducing the burden on SMTs and teachers.

Collectively, these implications and recommendations call for a paradigm shift in how WIL is conceptualised and implemented. Enhancing SMT capacity, institutional partnerships, and policy coherence can foster a more integrated and sustainable teacher education system that not only develops competent educators but also strengthens school leadership and improves learning outcomes across South Africa

Future research could expand to include multiple provinces and districts, capturing diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts to enhance generalizability. A similar study may focus on the efficacy of SMT strategies when managing preservice teachers. Comparative studies between quintile three schools and other quintiles could provide a broader understanding of WIL challenges across different resource levels. Mixed-method approaches incorporating quantitative data could validate and complement qualitative findings. Exploring the perspectives of higher education institutions and preservice teachers would provide a more holistic view of WIL management. Research on innovative collaboration models between schools and higher education institutions could also inform policy and practice improvements.

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Declaration

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