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Threshold Concepts and Case-Based Teaching: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Culturally Inclusive Classrooms

ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) by examining how case-based teaching and threshold concepts promote culturally inclusive pedagogical practices among pre-service teachers (PSTs). Our research design reflects SoTL principles by taking a systematic, transparent, iterative, and collaborative approach to collecting, analysing, and sharing data. Our work is explicitly aligned with theoretical frameworks, and we address unresolved issues in order to facilitate transformative learning. We aimed to explore how PSTs perceive culturally inclusive pedagogy and professional competence in a case-based course. Three key findings emerged: increased awareness of classroom diversity, a change in the PSTs' understanding of culturally inclusive teaching, and resistance to exploratory learning designs. Many PSTs demonstrated transformative learning and sound professional judgment. However, some expressed resistance and uncertainty, underscoring the importance of scaffolding and support. The findings align with the literature on threshold concepts as gateways to boundary crossing and a deeper understanding of diversity in SoTL. The results highlight the potential of case-based teaching to encourage metacognitive reflection and to promote inclusive educational practices in teacher education programs. The study demonstrates that designing inquiry-based learning activities that integrate case studies and threshold concepts can facilitate critical reflection and metacognition among PSTs.

KEYWORDS

culturally inclusive pedagogy, pre-service teachers, professional competence, threshold concepts, case-based teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education faces an increasing imperative: to prepare future teachers to handle the realities of culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. According to international studies, many teachers feel unprepared to adapt their teaching to students from different backgrounds (Gay 2002; OECD 2019). Researchers have highlighted this concern, revealing limited knowledge of minority contributions to curricula and unfamiliarity with multicultural education (Banks 2009; Sleeter 2024). Our study is grounded in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) as a research paradigm (Felten 2013; Hutchings 2000; Kreber 2005) and emphasizes exploring unresolved issues in order to facilitate transformative learning (Kreber 2025). We deeply embedded our study in the discipline of

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teacher education, with our questions stemming from the nature of the field and what it means to have a deep understanding of it (Hutchings 2000). Therefore, we investigated and described the context, participants, course design, and way of thinking within the field of pedagogy. Our commitment to transformation and change motivated us to develop a more inclusive pedagogy. The findings emphasize systematic, evidence-based inquiry into teaching and learning practices. This SoTL approach enhances pre-service teachers' (PSTs') learning and professional development and contributes to the scholarly community through dissemination and peer review.

We build on Bain and Bass' (2011) argument that threshold concepts can transform faculty practice because they challenge deeply held assumptions and foster new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. However, Bain and Bass (2011) also caution that individual change is often insufficient without institutional and pedagogical support. With this dual perspective in mind, we explore how case-based teaching and threshold concepts support PSTs as they develop culturally inclusive pedagogy. Our study aligns with Felten and Geertsema's (2023) call to engage with teaching and learning "as if the world mattered." By exploring how PSTs critically reflect on diversity and inclusion through case-based inquiry, we aim to contribute to individual professional transformation as well as to changes in pedagogical practices within teacher education programs and, ultimately, to broader social change in education.

Threshold concepts, as defined by Meyer and Land (2005), are transformative ideas that shift learners from surface to deep understanding. These concepts are often troublesome and emotionally demanding, yet they open new ways of thinking and acting once internalized (Ward and Meyer 2010). In our course, PSTs engaged with concepts, such as multilingualism, identity, and socialization, through a fictional but theoretically grounded case study of Amir, a Syrian student facing language barriers (Figure 1). After teaching PSTs about diversity for many years, we identified threshold concepts such as multilingualism, identity, and socialization as crucial to enhance PSTs' understanding in a Norwegian second-year teacher education context. We gradually realized that once the PSTs understood these concepts and the associated theories, their reflections on practice became deeper and more professional. In line with Shulman's (1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge, which combines subject expertise with knowledge of students' backgrounds, our study design aimed to encourage metacognitive reflection and professional judgement. By integrating threshold concepts and pedagogical content knowledge, the study reflects how structured reflection and experiential engagement can promote culturally inclusive teaching. This approach prepares PSTs to understand and act on diversity in transformative ways.

As Webb (2016) and Webb and Tierney (2020) argue, *studentness* and *boundary crossing* are central to inclusive pedagogy. Studentness refers to a person's identity and experience as a PST, including their perception of their role, responsibilities, and relationships within the learning environment. It also involves engagement, motivation, and participation in the learning process. Furthermore, it encompasses how students relate to course content in terms of academic achievement and personal development. The focus is on the influence of factors such as the learning environment, identity, relationships, engagement, and boundary crossing. Boundary crossing refers to the ways in which students navigate different learning contexts and transfer knowledge and skills from one setting to another (Webb 2016; Webb and Tierney 2020). In this study's context, boundary crossing relates to the way PSTs incorporate different viewpoints into their pedagogical reasoning. Overall, the concept of studentness provides valuable insights into the experiences of students in today's complex and diverse learning environments. It sheds light on how faculty can support students so that they develop positive and productive identities as learners.

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Figure 1. Key details of Amir's actions and the class activities (short version)

Time	Class activity	Amir's action
0–2 min	Getting books and finding a seat	Amir's bilingual teacher offers help in the group room; Amir remains silent
2–20 min	Teacher holds a presentation on children's rights using Power Point with lots of words	Amir watches the teacher and the PowerPoint
20–35 min	Individual work on tasks	Amir works on exercises with grammatical errors; declines help from his bilingual teacher twice
35–40 min	Class discussion on answers	Amir observes but does not participate
40–45 min	Lesson summary and workbook collection	Amir sits quietly, watching the teacher
Break	Students play football or chat	Amir takes time to go outside, approaches Lars but then watches football from a distance

Figure 1 above outlines the classroom actions and activities of Amir's class, which the PSTs analyzed.

The ongoing disparity in teacher education concerning culturally inclusive practices merits further consideration (Cherng and Davis 2019; Gay 2002). Our study addresses the need for course design that is both intentional and supportive, connecting theory with practice (Iseminger, Diatta-Holgate, and Morris 2020). We contend that PSTs should receive support in navigating the discomfort of threshold learning and developing the professional competence required for diverse classrooms. Our study ultimately aligns with Kreber's (2025) assertion that inquiry into crucial problems coupled with critical reflection can lead to personal and social transformation. Through our course, PSTs learn to teach and understand themselves, their students, and the complex worlds they inhabit.

Critical reflection, a foundational principle within SoTL, is central to transformative learning (Mezirow 2008). SoTL emphasizes not only systematic inquiry but also reflective engagement with teaching and learning practices that enhance individual and institutional development (Sutherland 2013). Recent SoTL literature highlights the role of reflection in shaping scholarly identities and improving pedagogical approaches (Cruz, Grodziak, and Steiner 2024; Manarin, Adams, Fendler, Marsh, Pohl, Porath, and Thomas 2021). Furthermore, researchers increasingly recognize reflective writing as a scholarly practice that fosters metacognitive awareness and deeper engagement with threshold concepts (Zhang 2025). By situating our study within this broader conversation, we assert the essential contribution of structured reflection to professional growth. SoTL practices can facilitate reflective teaching as a lifelong process.

In recent research, scholars have emphasized the significant role of metacognition in fostering deep learning and developing professional skills, a topic of particular interest for PSTs. For example, Manarin et al. (2021) demonstrated how metacognitive strategies in SoTL projects facilitate the connection between disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical reasoning. Similarly, Cruz et al. (2024) asserted that reflective writing is a metacognitive tool that fosters conceptual comprehension and the development of a scholarly identity. Zohar and Barzilai (2013) emphasized the importance of metacognition in inquiry- and case-based learning, in which students must navigate ambiguity and integrate diverse perspectives. Providing learners with explicit instruction in strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluation strengthens their ability to apply theory to practice has been a

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central dimension of our course design.

In this SoTL process, our guiding research question is: How can case-based teaching and threshold concepts support the development of culturally inclusive pedagogies among PSTs? For the purposes of the following analysis and reflections, we will use pseudonyms when referring to PSTs' experiences mentioned in this article.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We examine the role of case-based teaching and threshold concepts in PSTs' learning experiences through the use of iterative coding, explicit alignment with theoretical frameworks, and a commitment to transparency. The qualitative, interpretive research design aims to explore PSTs' reflections and learning processes from a teaching and learning perspective.

Course design

In the fourth semester, PSTs at a Norwegian university college completed a 20-week course in culturally inclusive pedagogy. The course aimed to prepare future teachers to facilitate learning in socially, religiously, and culturally diverse classrooms (UHR 2025). Drawing on Meyer and Land's (2005) threshold concepts, the course emphasized multilingualism, identity, socialization, and resource-oriented perspectives.

Table 1. Threshold concepts related to diversity in the classroom

Diversity in the classroom			
Resource-oriented perspective	Multilingualism	Identity and self-reflection	Socialization

Table 1 above describes the threshold concepts covered in this course.

The course centered on a fictional case study of Amir, an 11-year-old Syrian student facing language barriers. PSTs engaged with Amir's case across three stages: (1) an introduction to threshold concepts and case analysis, (2) a practicum-based reflection and application, and (3) a synthesis and an oral examination. PSTs submitted two reflection notes, one before and one after the practicum, which documented their conceptual development. The instructor employed threshold concepts to encourage in-depth learning and professional judgement. While these concepts are often challenging, they can open new ways of thinking once internalized (Ward and Meyer 2010). The instructor designed activities to help PSTs move from intuitive, experience-based understandings to formal, theory-based pedagogical frameworks, drawing on Vygotskian distinctions of scaffolding (Vygotsky 1978; Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976).

In our study, structured reflection served as metacognitive scaffolding, enabling PSTs to reflect on their reasoning and adjust their strategies when analyzing Amir's case. This iterative process reinforces the use of metacognition as a design principle in teacher education. Our structured reflection activities aimed to foster metacognitive awareness, guiding PSTs from intuitive, experience-based views toward theory-informed pedagogical frameworks. We encouraged PSTs to reflect on diversity, inequality, and power structures (Rowan, Bourke, L'Estrange, Lunn Brownlee, Ryan, Walker, and Churchward 2020). Case-based teaching supported this process by linking theory to practice through realistic scenarios, enhancing critical thinking and professional judgment (Helleve, Eide, and Ulvik 2023; Kelchtermans 2018).

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The course promoted active collaboration and exploratory learning in order to encourage active student engagement (Mintzes and Walter 2020). Students may find this cognitively demanding due to the autonomy and competence it fosters (Owens, Barlow, and Smith-Walters 2020). To connect theory with practice, PSTs analyzed Amir's classroom behavior (Figure 1) and applied threshold concepts to propose inclusive strategies. The course culminated in an oral exam where students demonstrated their ability to integrate theory, reflection, and pedagogical action. The course consisted of the following three steps:

Step 1: On the first day of the semester, the instructor presented the course design, threshold concepts, and Amir's case, highlighting the alignment of learning outcomes, assessment, and case iteration. The PSTs investigated the threshold concepts of multilingualism, resource perspective, socialization, and identity in relation to Amir's case. They engaged in feedback and peer learning activities as well as prepared their first reflection note before the placement period. They selected two threshold concepts and applied relevant theories for deeper learning activities.

Step 2: During the placement period, the PSTs reflected on threshold concepts in the classroom using methods such as mapping, multilingual headings, and hands-on and visual learning approaches.

Step 3: At the end of the semester, the PSTs prepared for the oral exam by presenting at least two threshold concepts in an attempt to analyze and solve Amir's case as future teachers. They submitted a second reflection note on their experiences with threshold concepts and case-based teaching.

Data collection and analysis

We collected data in the spring of 2024 from 44 PSTs, each of whom submitted two reflection notes for a total of 88 texts. The participants were second-year PST students at a Norwegian university college. Although participation was part of a compulsory course, the participants could choose not to take part in the study. Regarding the study's focus, the relevant demographic characteristics are that several PSTs had diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, more PSTs were male than female, and some PSTs had limited Norwegian language skills. The PSTs were generally engaged and interested in the topic, and the classroom was a positive learning environment.

The data is a purposive and theoretical sample from an implementation in spring 2024. This means that we selected the reflection notes based on their relevance to the research questions, our theoretical position and the aims of the study (Silverman 2006). We excluded seven reflections due to lack of relevance to the aim and research question. The aim of this qualitative study is not to generalize the findings to a larger population, but to gain a deeper understanding of PSTs' perceptions of diversity and culturally inclusive pedagogy and their reflections on the case-based approach in the course.

The question for the first reflection note was: "As a teacher, what would you do to support Amir's learning, based on at least two threshold concepts?" This was written before the placement period. In the second reflection note, PSTs answered the following question: "What was your experience of the course design, and what lessons did you learn for future work as a teacher?" We analyzed the remaining data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019, 2022) and systematic text condensation (Malterud 2012). The analysis followed four phases: (1) an initial reading to generate themes, (2) inductive coding, (3) abductive synthesis of the empirical and theoretical codes, and (4) identifying the final themes.

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Figure 2. Visualization of the analysis process

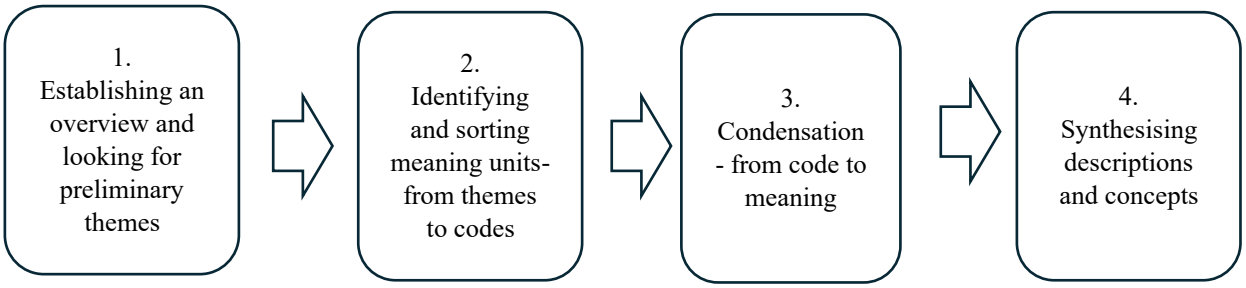


Figure 2 above illustrates the four phases of data analysis.

In the first phase, we discussed preliminary themes and how to proceed with the data material and the analysis process. We read the reflection notes and undertook a preliminary analysis using ad hoc techniques and qualitative interpretation of meaning (Hatch 2002; Kvale 1996). Our research team aimed to get a general impression of the whole and to look for preliminary themes, keeping an open mind and awareness of the voices of the participants (Malterud 2012). We then discussed our general impressions, surprises, and thoughts before creating a list of preliminary themes.

In phase two, we analyzed the reflection notes and generated inductive codes. We identified the special features that emerged as important in the PSTs' stories regarding their perceptions of diversity and culturally inclusive pedagogy in the material and found general themes or common features.

In phases two and three, we applied an abductive approach to coding and analysis, combining inductive (empirical) and deductive (thematic) coding in order to explore and understand the complexity and context of this empirical data. We reduced the data material into fewer themes and categories according to frequency, relevance, and information density in line with the research question and the quality of the theme. In the process of analysis, we focused on coherence and usefulness in relation to the sample, research question, and study context (Braun and Clarke 2019). Figure 3 shows how we inductively coded and categorized the empirical data to establish a more theoretically inspired theme for analysis. This makes the coding more transparent.

Figure 3. Visual representation of the coding process

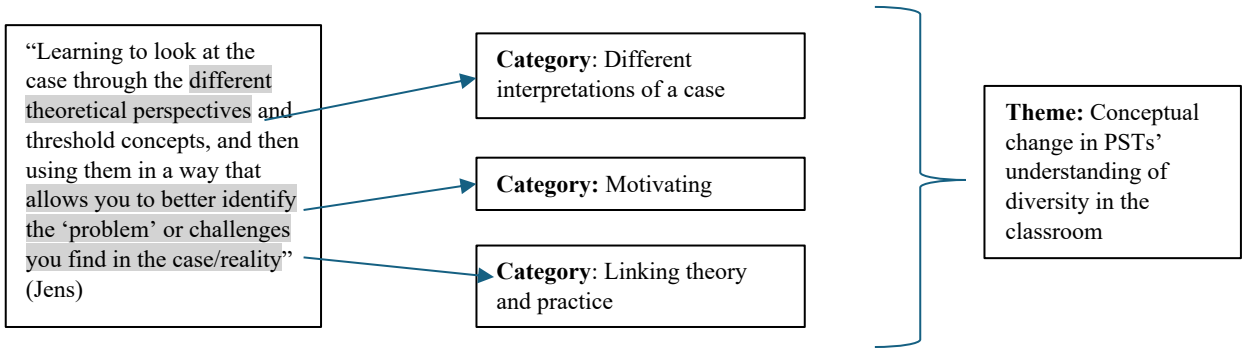


Figure 3 illustrates how we systematically highlighted parts of the text to show the connection between the codes, categories, and themes.

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In the fourth phase, we looked for data that challenged our conclusions and evidence of resistance to the course design in the second reflection note. We developed this as a third theme, as it turned out to be a clear finding in relation to course design. In this phase, we synthesized the data and identified three main themes in response to the research question regarding PSTs' perceptions of culturally inclusive pedagogy: 1) Growing awareness of diversity in the classroom, 2) conceptual change in PSTs' understanding of diversity in the classroom, and 3) resistance to the course design.

Table 2. Themes, categories and codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
1) Growing awareness of diversity in the classroom	Prior knowledge and experiences in learning Resource-oriented perspective Tacit knowledge	Relationships, resource, active, classroom, able, aware, teach, diverse classrooms, better able, empathize, student's situation, more aware, challenges, classroom, future, theory, more clearly, students, resources, language, religion, invisible knowledge, identities
2) Conceptual change in PSTs' understanding of diversity in the classroom	Different interpretations of a case Linking theory and practice Motivating	Different, socialization, perspectives, new, experience, theory, clearer, own language, school, vocabulary, common underlying proficiency, link, practice, reality, skills, different cultures, classroom, task, situations, support, realistic, campus, reflected, practice, case, reality, identify
3) Resistance to exploratory learning design	Uncertainty Struggle with deeper learning activities Teacher-centered view on learning	Solution, concrete, answer, guessing, don't know, ourselves, difficult, groupwork, choose, time, sneak away, collaboration, learning, uncertainty, time, not defined, more teacher leadership

Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and their associated codes and categories.

The findings section (Tables 3–5) provides examples of data analysis and reflection notes with highlighted codes.

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed three main themes that reflect PSTs' perceptions of culturally inclusive pedagogy and their engagement with threshold concepts: 1) Growing awareness of diversity in the classroom, 2) conceptual Change in Understanding of Diversity, and 3) resistance to Exploratory Learning Design.

Growing awareness of diversity in the classroom

Within this theme, there were three categories, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Theme 1: Growing awareness of diversity in the classroom

Theme 1	Categories	Data extract (codes highlighted)
Growing awareness of diversity in the classroom	Resource-oriented perspective	Using the case-based approach to diversity has made me more aware of how to teach in diverse classrooms. By using Amir's case, I am better able to empathize with the student's situation, and I am more aware of the challenges I may face in the classroom in the future (Frida)

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	Prior knowledge and experiences in learning	It is important to do a thorough mapping to find out why, and that there are many things that can be done to make the student feel better or perform better. By mapping you will be able to see where the students are academically, and it will be easier to achieve the goals (Frode)
	Tacit knowledge	Regardless of which language is spoken in a given situation, it stems from the same cognitive mechanism, or common underlying proficiency. In Amir's case, this means that it is possible that he knows more than he shows, because he cannot use the language he knows best (Rita)

Table 3 above highlights parts of the text to clarify the connection between the codes, categories and themes.

The PSTs developed a resource-oriented perspective throughout the course. This is evident in PSTs' reflections on how students learn in different ways and on the importance of varying learning activities in a diverse classroom. Cato says that this course design inspired him; he realized that in a culturally diverse classroom he had to vary learning activities and use "different learning strategies":

> I am very inspired by trying to use other learning strategies than the classic "sitting at a desk and listening." I am now aware that children learn in different ways, and I now have an improved understanding of how to use and build on students' prior knowledge. Trying to create a classroom where there is room to make mistakes and accept that we are different (Cato).

In his reflections, Cato gives value to the student's prior knowledge and background in the learning process. Another PST, Kurt, points out that he broadened his perspective on the multicultural classroom and says that it is important to him that all students experience recognition in the classroom, regardless of where they come from.

> I'm incorporating the things I've learnt in my first year of teaching, the things I've learnt in practice, into my texts and I'm looking at things with more "open eyes." Personally, I want to focus on the multicultural classroom, whether the student is from Syria or has a Sami background. Everyone should be accepted for their culture and language (Kurt).

Martin highlighted mapping as an example of how to find out more about students' academic level and understanding in order to make teaching more culturally inclusive:

> Mapping can help you to find out why the student is not active verbally, why the student responds briefly in writing, why the student does not want help, and to find out more about what the student understands both verbally and in writing. Mapping is important to know how to organize teaching. You can see what level the students are at, and it will be easier to reach the goals (Martin).

The increased awareness of diversity amongst the PSTs is evident in John's quote about socialization and creating a safe classroom environment across languages and cultures, focusing on non-verbal learning activities such as "Barnga," a simulation game on cultural clashes (Thiagarajan and Thiagarajan 2011), and thus developing relations and relationships as a basis for learning.

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> I would work with the whole class to strengthen relationships across established cliques. Here, for example, activities such as the game Barnga games could have been a possibility, Because the game does not use verbal communication, everyone is on an equal level, if the rules are presented to them in a language they understand. This gives the rest of the class an experience of what it's like to be surrounded by people who don't speak the same language as you or have the same starting point as you do. In this way, as a teacher, I could try to increase the understanding of the majority-language students in the class of how the students with a mother tongue other than Norwegian might feel (John).

John's reflections highlight the PSTs' awareness of socialization, relationships, and language as examples of how knowledge is in some ways tacit. Several PSTs reflect upon the importance of Amir being able to use his own language at school and how they realise that it's possible that students know more than they may show in class (Table 3). Yvonne emphasizes that teachers should give Amir the opportunity to use his own language at school, as this is crucial to his professional development and learning: "I think it's very important that Amir gets to use his own language at school too, because good conceptual development in his mother tongue will largely contribute to a large vocabulary in Norwegian." This quote illustrates that the PSTs seem to have gained knowledge about the reasons why what Amir can express in Norwegian is not representative of what he expresses in his mother tongue. Gro emphasized that she had gained a better insight into the practical dimensions of teaching, exemplified by adapted teaching and early intervention as a useful tool in a diverse classroom:

> On the other hand, I think it was good that I got a better insight into adapted education and early intervention in an inclusive school, both of which are very important topics to know about as a teacher. It was useful for me to incorporate both the practice and the threshold concepts in the case about Amir, as I can see a similarity that can help me when I go into practice next week. I'll have more knowledge about why and how I can best adapt my teaching to this student (Gro).

In general, PSTs demonstrated increased sensitivity to student backgrounds, learning preferences, and the importance of inclusive strategies. Their reflections emphasized recognition of prior knowledge, varied learning strategies, and the value of students' linguistic and cultural resources. Many students cited specific activities, such as mapping and simulation games (e.g., Barnga), as effective tools for fostering empathy and relational understanding.

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Conceptual change in PSTs' understanding of diversity in the classroom

As detailed in Table 4, three categories fell under this theme.

Table 4. Theme 2: Conceptual change

Theme 2	Categories	Data extract (codes highlighted)
Conceptual change in PSTs' understanding of diversity in the classroom	Different interpretations of a case	Using a combined case-based and threshold concepts approach to diversity has made me more aware of how to teach in diverse classrooms. I'm better able to put myself in my students' shoes and I'm more aware of the challenges I might face. The theories become clearer through the case (Yuan)
	Linking theory and practice	The theory comes through more clearly in the case. I am going to look at both minority- and majority students as resources regarding language, religion (Frida)
	Motivating	This case was a common theme throughout the semester. I have gained a lot of knowledge about the subject and a broader theoretical understanding (Erna)

Table 4 highlights parts of the text to clarify the connection between the codes, categories and themes.

An example of a conceptual shift in PST's understanding of diversity in the classroom is their ability to interpret a case from different theoretical perspectives. Jens demonstrated this change when he wrote, "Learning to look at the case through the different theoretical perspectives and threshold concepts and then using them in a way that allows you to better identify the 'problem' or challenges you find in the case/reality."

Jens emphasizes that learning to view cases through different theoretical lenses helped him develop professional judgement when faced with different classroom realities. Using threshold concepts as a theoretical lens seemed to make the theories clearer to the PSTs. Yuan pointed out that it made it easier to identify the problems in the case: "I'm better able to put myself in my students' shoes and I'm more aware of the challenges I might face. The theories become clearer through the case." This quote demonstrates how case-based teaching can facilitate a change in PSTs' understanding of culturally inclusive pedagogy. It also shows how interpreting a case in different theoretical ways can alter PSTs' perception of reality.

Sarah's reflections on how she sees the threshold concept of socialization more clearly and concretely through the case is another example of how the PSTs could transfer experiences and theoretical reflections from the campus to the diverse classroom context:

> Helping Amir to socialize is important because we know that socialization is central to language learning. There are two things I think are particularly important here: finding out why Amir is avoiding his old group and exploring the possibility of reuniting with them and helping Amir to start building relationships with other classmates. The latter can be done by a sociogram. This should be done for the whole class, not just Amir (Sarah).

The professional competence and judgement to facilitate cultural inclusive pedagogy is evident in Sarah's quote about how a sociogram, a tool used to visualize social relationships within a group or community, such as a classroom, can help. This shows who is connected to whom and can help PSTs to identify relationships such as friendships, cliques, and isolation between group members. The quotes underline the importance of the theory and the threshold concept of

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socialization, as well as how PSTs manage to link theory and practice. Another dimension that seemed important for the PSTs' conceptual change was the iteration between theory and practice in course design. In the following quote, Arild claims that his reflections on theory and practice made him more aware of the relationship between inclusion, special education, and early intervention:

> By working in this way, I have gained a better insight into inclusion, special education and early intervention, and not least the relationship between the three. It required me to reflect on several issues that arose in the process of linking theory to Amir's 'case' (Arild).

Arild's reflection illustrates how interactions between theory and practice contributed to a sense of empowerment, as well as the discovery of tools and methods to activate students' prior knowledge by the PSTs. It seems that iterative reflection contributes to PSTs' development of professional knowledge regarding how to adapt teaching activities for all students. Bo reflects on the importance of realistic, relevant, and practical teaching and how it motivates him.

> I think that such [a] case-like task is quite fun to work with and incredibly interesting. Addressing the task to a student or a situation and then finding theory that support what you present makes the assignment more realistic; these things we learn at campus are reflected in practice, which is incredibly important (Bo).

PSTs emphasized the importance of course design in making them feel prepared for the exam. This in turn can contribute to better learning outcomes. Designing a course where the learning activities are directly relevant to the exams is therefore important for PSTs' learning, as Tom's quote underlines: "Now I feel more prepared for the exam." In general, PSTs reported a shift in their ability to interpret classroom scenarios through theoretical lenses. Threshold concepts helped clarify abstract ideas and facilitated deeper engagement with inclusion. Reflections highlighted the iterative process between theory and practice, with tools like sociograms and multilingual strategies supporting professional judgement and pedagogical adaptation.

Resistance to exploratory learning design

As detailed in Table 5, we created three categories under this theme.

Table 5. Theme 3: Situated and troublesome knowledge

Theme 3	Categories	Data extract (codes highlighted)
Resistance to exploratory learning design	Struggle with deeper learning activities	I struggled to link theory and literature when talking about Amir's case, but I did my best. I am not sure what to do (Lina)
	Teacher-centered view on learning	I would like less group work and more lecturers sharing their experiences (Ann)
	Uncertainty	At first, I found the task challenging because I was a bit unsure about what to choose to write about the threshold concepts and where to find it (Hege)

Table 5 highlights parts of the text to show the connection between the codes, categories, and themes.

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The following example illustrates the troublesome dimensions of situated knowledge and the struggle with deeper learning. Jacob, a PST, found the threshold concepts to be troublesome and diffuse, as reflected in his own words:

> Working with Amir on this case has been interesting, exciting, and educational, but troublesome. The threshold concepts are broad and sometimes diffuse, so it is difficult to try to define them. However, I think that while there is a definitive answer to the definition of these terms, it has a lot to do with what you put into it (Jacob).

Jacob's quote is an indication of how some of the PSTs lacked the capacity to transfer knowledge between the campus and the classroom, hence the reports of uncertainty in interpreting practical situated knowledge in Amir's case in the light of theory and threshold concepts. This may indicate a lack of higher order thinking and a "deep" approach to learning. This uncertainty experienced by Jacob highlights the different preconceptions that PSTs have about learning in higher education.

Some PSTs felt that they lacked a solution to the Amir case, which may illustrate a teacher-centered approach to learning and a lack of "deep" learning for some PSTs. PSTs perceived working in an exploratory way as demanding, and PSTs with a high degree of autonomy did not cooperate well when they lacked autonomy. A teacher-centered view of learning and uncertainty affects how PSTs reflect on their learning and group work. Ann's quote exemplifies a teacher-centered view of learning:

> In the case of Amir, I miss a proposed solution, that the teacher educators put forward how they would do it. When we work ourselves there is a lot of guessing, again. I miss a more concrete answer. I made a proposal but don't know if it was good or bad (Ann).

Ann points to the troublesome dimension of knowledge, which led to uncertainty. Some PSTs emphasize that they are uncertain and did not feel comfortable working in this way and wanted a fixed answer to the case. For example, Roger discussed how confused he was: "I find tasks that involve defining threshold concepts confusing because they seem so unnecessary." The course is designed to activate PSTs as participants in their own learning process in order to achieve a positive learning outcome. This may illustrate that the active and exploratory learning activities were cognitively and emotionally challenging for some of the PSTs. The learning activities focus on dialogue and reflection in groups on how to facilitate Amir's learning and these quotes may illustrate that some PSTs lack understanding of the aim of the course. Sometimes, PSTs can find case-based teaching troublesome and challenging.

While many PSTs embraced the open-ended nature of the course, others expressed discomfort with the ambiguity of threshold concepts and the lack of definitive answers. This resistance underscores the emotional and cognitive demands of transformative learning. Some PSTs preferred teacher-centered approaches and requested more guidance, revealing varied readiness for metacognitive reflection and autonomy.

DISCUSSION

We identified three key dimensions of PSTs' experiences with case-based teaching and threshold concepts in teacher education based on the narrative and themes from the PSTs' reflections. These dimensions are increased awareness of classroom diversity, conceptual change and

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metacognition, resistance to exploratory learning design, and the need for scaffolding. We also consider how these findings align with Kreber's (2005) model of reflection at the content, process, and premise levels, as well as how they contribute to the emphasis on systematic inquiry and SoTL's transformative potential.

Increased Awareness of Classroom Diversity

One of the most significant outcomes was that PSTs began to view diversity as a pedagogical resource rather than as a challenge. Initially, many viewed cultural and linguistic differences as problems to manage. However, through case-based learning and structured reflection, this perspective shifted, and diversity became an opportunity and a resource. As Frida noted, "Theory becomes clearer in practice. I am going to look at both minority and majority students as resources regarding language and religion." This quote illustrates content-level reflection (Kreber 2005), in which learners recognize what they are learning and why it matters. Similarly, Cato shared, "I am inspired to try other learning strategies besides sitting at a desk and listening. I am now aware that children learn in different ways." These reflections align with Shulman's (1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge, which combines subject matter expertise with an understanding of students' backgrounds. Kurt emphasized the importance of acceptance, stating, "Everyone should be accepted for their culture and language." Together, these statements reveal a cognitive and ethical shift toward inclusive thinking, an essential foundation for creating classrooms where multiple identities are valued. This reframing also strengthened professional judgment and reflected the SoTL principle of evidence-informed, reflective practice (Felten 2013).

Conceptual Change and Metacognition

The second key finding concerns the conceptual shifts among PSTs and the development of their metacognitive awareness. Jens explained, "Learning to look at the case through different theoretical perspectives and threshold concepts and then using them to better identify the problem or challenges you find in the case or reality." Similarly, Yuan observed, "I'm better able to put myself in my students' shoes, and I'm more aware of the challenges I might face. The theories become clearer through the case." These reflections exemplify process-level reflection and metacognition (Kreber 2005), because they demonstrate how learners monitor and regulate their thinking while connecting theory to practice. Structured reflection activities support this process by enabling students to engage with theoretical concepts and apply them in practical contexts (Cruz et al. 2024; Manarin et al. 2021; Zhang 2025). For instance, Sarah's use of sociograms to encourage social inclusion demonstrates her capacity to translate abstract concepts into tangible strategies. This iterative movement between theory and experience strengthened understanding and promoted adaptive, scaffolding expertise. Such metacognitive engagement aligns with SoTL's emphasis on scholarly reflection and systematic inquiry, positioning reflection as a pedagogical tool and scholarly practice.

Resistance and the Need for Scaffolding

Despite these gains, some PSTs expressed uncertainty and resistance. Lina admitted, "I had a hard time connecting theory and literature when discussing Amir's case, but I did my best. I am not sure what to do." Ann added, "In Amir's case, I'm missing a proposed solution. I made a proposal, but I don't know if it was good or bad." Jacob described threshold concepts as "broad and diffuse," highlighting the troublesome nature of these ideas (Meyer and Land 2003). These responses reflect

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premise-level reflection (Kreber 2005), in which PSTs questioned fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning. They underscore the need for structured guidance and feedback in order to support PSTs through ambiguity (Vygotsky 1978; Wood et al. 1976). Effective scaffolding strategies include modeling connections between theory and practice, providing formative feedback, and creating safe spaces for uncertainty.

PSTs' resistance to exploratory learning can be understood through the lens of studentness. Uncertainty about roles and responsibilities often undermines engagement. Therefore, identity negotiation is critical to how PSTs respond to threshold concepts. Structured reflection helps PSTs integrate theory into pedagogical reasoning, supporting boundary crossing. Explicit attention to studentness and scaffolding reduces ambiguity and cognitive load. Conversely, a lack of support can intensify resistance when PSTs struggle to reconcile their emerging identities with inquiry-based learning. These insights highlight the interplay between identity formation, metacognition, and transformative learning. They also underscore the necessity for teacher education programs to foster positive learner identities alongside conceptual change. Providing differentiated support for learners with varied epistemological orientations will ensure that transformative learning remains challenging yet achievable (Haruehansawasin and Kiattikomol 2018; Wood et al. 1976).

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small, and the study is context specific. Second, it relies on self-reported data. While we cannot generalize these findings, they offer insights into course design and pedagogical strategies. Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of threshold concepts and case-based teaching, examine scaffolding approaches, and investigate institutional support for transformative learning. Comparative studies across cultural contexts could illuminate how threshold concepts function in different educational systems and could contribute to a more global understanding of culturally inclusive pedagogy.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Integrating scaffolding with cooperative learning principles effectively supported PSTs who encountered uncertainty in case-based and exploratory learning. Previous studies demonstrate that using collaborative strategies with scaffolding tools reduces cognitive load and improves performance on complex tasks (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 2014). Guided questions and structured reflection in group discussions promote critical thinking and metacognitive awareness, helping students manage ambiguity. As PSTs grow in confidence, gradually fading support fosters their autonomy without overwhelming learners (Wood et al. 1976). Integrating scaffolding into case-based learning reinforces decision-making and professional judgment skills by providing cognitive and social support. Our study found that structured reflection addressed some of these needs. However, incorporating cooperative elements, such as peer feedback and joint problem-solving, could further increase engagement and reduce resistance. Future course designs may include instructor modelling, collaborative analysis, and progressive support withdrawal to develop conceptual understanding and metacognitive strategies. Integrating strategies that promote boundary crossing, such as case-based tasks and reflective activities, allows PSTs to apply their theoretical knowledge to various classroom settings.

In conclusion, threshold concepts in case-based teaching provide a promising framework for preparing future teachers to navigate the complexities of contemporary classrooms. PSTs in our

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course engaged with threshold concepts, such as multilingualism, identity, and socialization, through a realistic case study. This combination helped them develop culturally inclusive pedagogies. Based on our findings, we concur with Bain and Bass (2011) that threshold concepts can transform faculty practice by challenging deeply held assumptions and promoting novel approaches to teaching and learning.

As student populations become more diverse, teacher education programs must design learning environments that reflect this reality. Although our findings are context-specific, they have global relevance. Diverse classrooms are now the norm worldwide (OECD 2019; Sleeter 2024). Integrating case-based teaching with threshold concepts can foster critical reflection and adaptive expertise within these programs. Through scholarly dialogue, educators can share these approaches and collectively advance inclusive pedagogies.

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ETHICS

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (SIKT) approved the collection of data from PSTs (No. 920635). In line with SIKT regulations, we anonymised all written statements, and our research required no ethical approval.

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