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THE ESSENCE OF TEACHER TRAINING QUALITY IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA**Ntando Elliot Mpahla***Walter Sisulu University, South Africa**E-mail: nmpahla@wsu.ac.za**Received 10 May 2026; accepted 30 July 2026; published 30 September 2026*

Abstract. This study sought to examine the essence of quality teacher training in implementing inclusive education at a higher education institution in South Africa. Inclusive education in the South African education context is a reformatory tool to welcome diversity amongst learners in one classroom. Drawing on a multi-method South African policy discourse and teacher education for inclusion, the study interrogates how pre-service and in-service training prepare teachers to teach diverse students in higher education contexts. Inclusive education policy, as stated in Education White Paper 6, establishes teachers as the primary implementers of inclusion. Yet, systematic evidence points to gaps between policy ideals and actual teacher preparation, practice, and support within higher education settings. Qualitative data for this study was drawn from student teachers and lecturers from a selected university. All participants in the study were members of the faculty of education. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. In this study, semi-structured interviews served as a well-established qualitative data collection method suited to exploring complex stakeholder perspectives. Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to elicit in-depth insights from diverse participants while preserving comparability across interviews. The purposive sampling technique was selected because it enables the identification and selection of participants who are particularly knowledgeable and experienced with the phenomenon of interest. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The findings of this study revealed that student teachers are not being prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners that they will teach at school. Respondents frequently reported gaps in knowledge, practical competencies, and confidence to implement inclusive strategies in diverse classrooms. The study concludes that both the theory and the practical implementation of inclusive education for student teachers are paramount to transforming the educational landscape in South Africa. This points to the need for strengthened teacher education for inclusion within South Africa's higher education programs.

Keywords: quality teacher training; inclusive education; higher education; policy

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1. Introduction

The quality of teacher training is crucial for the effective implementation of inclusive education, especially in higher education contexts, where the need for qualified teachers capable of addressing diverse learner needs is paramount. In South Africa, the post-apartheid educational landscape necessitates a profound reconsideration of teacher preparation programs to ensure they are equipped to foster inclusion and meet the multifaceted needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities and other special educational needs (Mlambo, Hlongwa & Mubecua, 2018; Bozalek & Boughey, 2020). The significance of this subject is underscored by the legislative frameworks and policies established to promote inclusivity within educational institutions; these policies

emphasise the importance of equitable access to education for all individuals, irrespective of their background or learning challenges (Bozalek & Boughey, 2020). Numerous studies emphasise the relationship between teacher training and attitudes toward inclusive education. This notion relates to teachers who participate in specialised training programs and show higher levels of efficacy and more positive attitudes toward inclusive practices, which translate into better educational outcomes for students with diverse needs (Rasmitadila, 2023). Notably, long-term engagement in training enhances teachers' readiness and willingness to embrace inclusion in their classrooms. Similarly, the experiences of teachers in various contexts, such as the Maldives and Japan, indicate that a substantial proportion lack formal training, which affects their confidence and readiness to implement inclusive educational practices effectively (Yada & Savolainen, 2017; Naseer & Hameed, 2024). Moreover, existing literature highlights systemic challenges in implementing inclusive education, including inadequate resources, insufficient training, and the necessity for collaborative efforts among educational stakeholders (Monteiro & Ikegami, 2023). These barriers hinder effective educational practices and underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions in teacher preparation.

Considering the articulation above, the study advocates integrating inclusive education principles into teacher education curricula, emphasising the role of effective pedagogies and approaches tailored to diverse learning environments (Kumari, Bika & Bhesera, 2024). This framework is especially relevant to South Africa, where the historical context of educational oppression requires a nuanced approach to redressing inequities in access and quality of education (Osman & Maringe, 2019; Koch, Pool & Heymans, 2023).

This study, therefore, aims to illuminate the dynamics within a South African higher education institution, focusing on how teacher training can transform pedagogical approaches towards inclusivity. The significance of this study lies not only in exploring the current state of teacher education but also in proposing actionable strategies to enhance the quality of teacher training, which is vital for fostering inclusive educational environments.

2. Literature review

The implementation of inclusive education is a pressing challenge worldwide, particularly in South Africa, where socio-political factors compound the needs of diverse learners. A substantial body of literature underscores the critical importance of teacher training in effectively fostering inclusive education practices. This review explores key themes in the literature on the relationship between teacher training and inclusive education, drawing on experiences from various educational contexts and drawing implications for South African higher education.

Importance of teacher attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion

A foundational aspect of teacher training for inclusive education is the development of positive attitudes and beliefs among teachers. Research indicates that teachers' attitudes significantly influence the success of inclusive practices in classrooms. For instance, Krischler and Cate (2019) emphasised that pre- and in-service training programs should be designed to enhance teachers' competencies while also cultivating positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and challenging behaviours. In this vein, prospective teachers trained in special education had higher efficacy beliefs regarding inclusion than their counterparts in general education, underscoring the impact of educational specialisation on teacher attitudes. Moreover, studies in various international contexts, such as Japan, corroborate these findings, noting that teachers' experience can shape attitudes toward inclusive practices, with younger teachers generally having greater exposure to inclusive education training (Yada & Savolainen, 2017).

Effectiveness of professional development programs

Professional development is critical to ensuring that teachers are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to implement inclusive education effectively. Several researchers have highlighted that targeted training programs

lead to measurable improvements in teachers' competencies in inclusive settings. For example, Strakšienė and Musneckienė (2024) reported that involvement in professional development training enhances pedagogical skills and fosters personal and interpersonal competencies essential for inclusive teaching. Furthermore, Ahmad and May (2018) highlighted ongoing challenges in teacher preparation for inclusive education, noting that inadequate training could hinder the education of students with learning disabilities.

Training and collaboration between teachers

Collaboration between general and special education teachers is vital for successful inclusive practices. Salim (2019) articulates the importance of pedagogical competence gained through collaborative training between special and regular teachers, which fosters effective teaching strategies for learners with special educational needs. This collaborative model resonates with findings from various studies indicating that a systemic approach, one that integrates support from all educational stakeholders, can significantly enhance the quality of inclusive practices in classrooms.

Impact of teacher experience and ongoing training

Literature reflects a consensus on the role of both initial teacher training and ongoing professional development in preparing educators for inclusive education. In this instance, Masongsong et al. (2023) argued that enhanced teacher training correlates directly with improved efficacy in inclusive classrooms, suggesting that ongoing professional development is essential for success. This viewpoint is echoed by Moon (2023), who stressed the need for targeted interventions to promote teacher readiness and performance in inclusive settings. The variability in experiences, as noted in Yada and Savolainen's (2017) work, highlights the complexity of teacher readiness and points to a significant yet nuanced relationship between years of teaching experience and attitudes towards inclusive education.

Holistic training incorporating diverse educational needs

A holistic approach to inclusive education training that accounts for various learner needs is necessary for successful implementation. Research conducted by Rabi, Ghazali, Rohaizad and Zulkefli (2028) indicated that pre-service teacher courses focusing on inclusive education significantly transform attitudes and self-efficacy regarding teaching diverse student populations. Similarly, Coelho, Blázquez and Cubo (2017) emphasised the diverse factors, such as qualifications, training type, and personal experiences, that shape teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, advocating for comprehensive teacher training that addresses these dimensions.

In synthesising the literature, the corpus reveals a persistent gap related to the insufficient integration of policy intent with the lived realities of teacher training in South Africa's HEIs. This indicates a gap in understanding the specifics of translating policy into effective, inclusive practice within HEI contexts. The gap in understanding encompasses the design, delivery, and assessment of teacher education that produce the competencies, dispositions, and collaborative capacities required for inclusive learning environments. Beyond this gap, there is an incomplete understanding of how the quality of pre-service and in-service training differentially shapes inclusivity outcomes in South African HEIs, particularly those that most effectively produce inclusive teaching practices. Lastly, there is limited attention to the holistic training of teachers to address diverse educational needs within South African HEIs, including broader inclusion dimensions beyond disability.

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Engelbrecht's (2006) Inclusive Education Theoretical Framework. Engelbrecht (2006) explored the significance of inclusive education in the South African context, asserting that it is not merely an additional educational option but a vital strategy for promoting social justice and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. It is within this vein that Bipath, Tebekana and Venketsamy (2021) posit that all learners, regardless of their background or abilities, have the right to access quality education in shared environments. This notion emphasises that teacher training must equip teachers with the necessary skills,

knowledge, and dispositions to cater to diverse learning needs. Within this scope, Vergunst, McKenzie and Hansen (2021) additionally emphasised the importance of capacity building among teachers, which is vital for instilling the confidence and competence necessary for effectively implementing inclusive education. This assertion indicates that training and collaboration can foster positive changes in teachers' attitudes towards inclusive practices, reinforcing Engelbrecht's (2006) assertion regarding the essential nature of educator training and policy reform.

Moreover, research demonstrates that effective inclusive education requires intentional curriculum design that fosters adaptability in teaching methodologies and embraces diversity as a strength rather than a barrier. To advance this notion, Bipath et al. (2021) assert that in the South African context, inclusive education aligns with the Education White Paper 6 (WP6), which articulates the nation's commitment to developing inclusive education systems. Thus, this framework emphasises that inclusive education is fundamentally intertwined with larger democratic ideals and is supported by key policy documents, such as the White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education, which advocates for systemic change to foster an inclusive educational environment (Engelbrecht, 2006). In other words, Engelbrecht's (2006) theoretical framework provides a foundational understanding of inclusive education in South Africa, linking educational practices to broader democratic and human rights principles.

3. Research methodology

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore teacher trainees' experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher training programs in implementing inclusive education. The researcher employed this approach to delve into the lived experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers regarding inclusive education (Cresswell, 2017). This methodology is particularly well-suited, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how these teachers perceive their training and the implementation of inclusive practices, aligning with insights into bridging research gaps in teacher training and inclusion. Further, the phenomenological approach facilitates understanding issues surrounding teacher self-efficacy and attitudes throughout the educational spectrum, supporting the notion that these factors profoundly impact the effectiveness of inclusive education (Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Employing this qualitative approach was intended to align with the study objectives, focusing on understanding the subjective experiences of teacher trainees and potentially illuminating the need for improved training methodologies and support systems within higher education institutions in South Africa.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who are directly involved with inclusive education training processes. This ensures that the data collected is relevant and specific to the research questions outlined. Fundamentally, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience and knowledge of the specific themes under investigation. The logic behind purposive sampling was to select information-rich cases that could provide an in-depth understanding and meaningful insights into the research focus. In this study, participants were teachers with substantial engagement in inclusive education practices, ensuring that their perspectives were well-informed. This targeted selection is fundamental, as qualitative research aims to explore specific phenomena in depth rather than generalise across a broad population (Herchline, 2024).

With purposive sampling, the researcher focused on specific groups that offer the clearest insights into the issues surrounding quality teacher training and inclusive education. This aligns with the assertion that qualitative research concentrates on themes that emerge from the experiences of those most relevant to the topic (Herchline,

2024). In this instance, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, such as student teachers, in-service teachers, and lecturers, provided a comprehensive understanding of the training landscape.

The researcher selected a small sample size of 12 participants to reflect the depth of data desired rather than the breadth. The purpose of selecting such a small number of participants was to facilitate profound insights while remaining manageable within qualitative frameworks. For the study on teacher training for inclusive education, the researcher targeted this number (12) of participants who are actively engaged in inclusive education, maintaining a balance between richness of data and minimising repetitive responses. Participant selection, therefore, took the stance intended to reach data saturation, as Kodagoda and Deheragoda (2021) posit that saturation may be achieved with a few participants in certain situations, depending on the research context. This notion holds that data saturation is a pivotal concept in qualitative research, denoting the point at which no new information or themes emerge from the collected data. This principle helps determine when sufficient data have been gathered, allowing the researcher to cease further participant recruitment (Glick et al., 2024).

Participants selected were comprised of a diverse sample of stakeholders from the educational landscape, including pre-service teachers currently enrolled in teacher training programs and in-service teachers working in various educational contexts. The sample population ensured representation across diverse demographics and teaching backgrounds, providing a nuanced view of the varied experiences and challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education (Strakšienė & Musneckienė, 2024).

Data collection

This study used qualitative data collection, a method utilised in qualitative research, to gather non-numeric insights through various techniques that provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena. Unlike quantitative research, which often relies on numerical data and statistical methods, qualitative research emphasises the collection of rich, descriptive data that elucidates participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours in their natural contexts. This approach is critical for exploring complex topics where understanding the how and why is vital (Yesseikyzy et al., 2022; Magta et al., 2024). This involves employing techniques that facilitate an open-ended, exploratory investigation of human experiences. The primary goal is to obtain information that reflects the nuances of these experiences rather than to quantify them. Common methods used in qualitative data collection include interviews (structured, semi-structured, or unstructured), focus group discussions, ethnography, and participant observation (McGrath et al., 2018; Magta et al., 2024; Imran et al., 2024). The nature of qualitative data collection allows researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives, fostering a holistic view of the issues under study (Anugrah, Ibrahim & Sukardjo, 2021; Depari, Sihombing & Siahaan, 2024). For this study, multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed. These include the following.

Semi-structured interviews: These explored teachers' perceptions of their training, skills, and the effectiveness of their preparation for inclusive education. The interviews were guided by semi-structured questions to allow flexibility, adaptability, and depth in participants' responses (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2018). This method enabled the researcher to probe deeper into participants' thoughts and feelings, thereby enriching the data collected. By utilising semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing teachers' preparedness to teach in inclusive settings and to identify potential barriers encountered during the training process. Studies indicate that incorporating personal narratives and experiences can significantly highlight the barriers and facilitators encountered in implementing inclusive practices (Obah, 2024). Insights gathered from participants provided rich, context-specific data that allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current teacher education strategies related to inclusive practices (Raith, 2021).

Document analysis: Training materials, program curricula, and policy documents related to inclusive education at the institution were reviewed to triangulate data collected from interviews and focus groups, and to substantiate the analysis with existing educational frameworks and instructional methodologies (Masongsong et al., 2023). Researchers had also analysed existing documents, such as reports, meeting minutes, and other relevant materials, which provided additional context and insights related to the study topic (Cleland, 2017; Anugrah, Ibrahim & Sukardjo, 2021).

Interviews were conducted during a general qualitative fieldwork window from March to June 2025. These interviews were conducted in person without any pandemic-related constraints. An appropriate time to conduct interviews was arranged with the participants, as they were all engaged in their study and work-related programs. Participants were reached through purposive sampling. The sampling strategy was chosen because the study aimed to include participants with substantial engagement in inclusive education practices, ensuring that their perspectives reflect practical experience with training and implementation, as outlined in the sampling section. There was, therefore, a purposive consultation of individuals known to be engaged in inclusive education activities.

Data Analysis

For qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and insights that emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions (Susilawati et al., 2023; Naseer & Hameed, 2024). Thematic analysis was also utilised to identify recurring themes and patterns within the qualitative data. This method enabled the interpretation of the participants' narratives within the broader context of inclusive education policies and their practical implementation. The themes were contextualised within existing literature on attitudes towards inclusive practices and teachers' perceived competencies (Nkomo, 2022; Gorani & Mahmood, 2024). This method allowed for the interpretation of data within the cultural and contextual realities of South African higher education institutions.

For data analysis, the researcher followed a step-by-step process, with the initial step being familiarisation with the data. In this instance, the researcher was deeply involved with the raw data or transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. This step was essential for recognising initial thoughts and patterns regarding the participants' perceptions and experiences of inclusive education. According to Filia et al. (2018), multiple readings of the data can help distil significant insights and prepare the researcher for subsequent coding. Following familiarisation, the generation of initial codes began, where data segments of relevance were identified and labelled systematically. This is the stage where data is translated into a coded format, allowing for efficient organisation and retrieval later on. The researcher then searched for themes, organising the codes into potential themes that represent broader patterns observed across the datasets. Themes were constructed by examining the interplay between codes, thereby guiding the overarching narrative regarding the essence of quality teacher training in the context of inclusive education. It was therefore crucial at this stage to consider the relationships among various codes and sub-codes to uncover the latent messages in the data (Lenvik et al., 2021).

After themes were formulated, the researcher reviewed them by evaluating identified themes against the dataset for consistency and internal validity. This was done to ensure that the final themes adequately reflect the diversity of participants' viewpoints (Filia et al., 2018; Avci & Omar, 2023). Once reviewed, the researcher defined and named the themes. Each theme's essence was clarified, facilitating a coherent narrative in the qualitative report that encapsulates participants' insights into teacher training and inclusive education. Naming themes effectively helped present the findings in an accessible and comprehensible manner for the intended audiences, including scholars and teachers.

Finally, the report was produced, culminating the thematic analysis process. This involved presenting the findings in a structured manner, including narrative descriptions supported by direct participant quotes to illustrate the themes robustly.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review committee. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was secured before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, with participants granted the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty (Frey, 2021).

4. Results of the Study

The essence of quality teacher training in implementing inclusive education within higher education institutions in South Africa is a vital topic that reflects a growing need for teachers to be adequately prepared to address diverse learning requirements. The participants' verbal insights, comprising student teachers, in-service teachers and lecturers, provided critical perspectives on this matter. Student teachers frequently articulated the importance of inclusive education training as foundational to their preparedness. One participant noted: *"Having courses specifically focused on inclusion will not only change my attitude but prepare me better for real-life classroom scenarios I will face"*.

This sentiment emphasised the role of targeted training, which is inclusive education in this case, in shaping future teachers. Such a sentiment is echoed by findings suggesting that student teachers' attitudes can be significantly enhanced through direct experience and practical engagement with the principles of inclusion (Qandhi & Kurniawati, 2019). Participants articulated a need for comprehensive training in inclusive pedagogies, which aligns with findings that show self-efficacy significantly predicts positive attitudes towards inclusion (Kazanopoulos et al., 2022). Thus, training programs that incorporate inclusive education strategies can build teachers' self-efficacy and reduce their apprehensions about implementing inclusive practices. In-service teachers also provided valuable reflections on the challenges they face in an inclusive educational landscape. One teacher candidly expressed: *"I often feel overwhelmed by the diverse needs of my students, but realise that my training didn't fully prepare me for this reality"*.

This response highlighted a critical gap in pre-service education that ought to be undertaken by the higher education institution (Costello & Boyle, 2013). Furthermore, studies demonstrate that when teachers perceive themselves as inadequately equipped for inclusive education, it hampers their ability to create effective learning environments (Hellmich & Görel, 2017). This inconsistency between training outcomes and classroom reality calls for a reassessment of current educational programs.

Lecturers, as facilitators of teacher education, underscore the necessity of integrating inclusive education into mainstream training curricula to ensure future teachers are well-equipped. For instance, lecturers noted the importance of effectively integrating inclusive education into teacher training, suggesting that without proper training, both student and in-service teachers may struggle to implement inclusive practices confidently (Avramidis et al., 2019). From this understanding, a lecturer articulated: *"We need to not only teach the ideals of inclusivity but also how to implement these principles in diverse classrooms practically"*.

The notion emphasises the dual focus on theory and practical application in the teaching-learning situation (Nel et al., 2023). This approach aligns with the understanding that inclusive education must be viewed holistically, where both theoretical frameworks and experiential learning coexist (Koliqi, Koliqi & Zabeli, 2023). Moreover, with South Africa's commitment to inclusive education post-1994, teachers need consistent support to implement policies effectively, moving beyond mere compliance to actively foster inclusive cultures (Ndebele et al., 2024).

Finally, the insights from student teachers, in-service teachers, and lecturers underscore a pressing need for comprehensive training that not only promotes the ideals of inclusive education but also equips teachers with the practical skills needed for classroom implementation. As articulated by various participants, successful inclusion depends significantly on enhanced training efforts that reflect the complexities inherent in diverse educational contexts.

4. Interpretation of results

The results indicate a robust, evidence-based interpretation: high-quality teacher training for inclusive education in South Africa requires deliberate, targeted training in inclusive education (IE) for student teachers. This must be strengthened by practical engagement and self-efficacy-building experiences, as well as ongoing support and professional development for in-service teachers. There should be a deliberate integration of IE into mainstream teacher education curricula facilitated by lecturers and aligned with broader policy and curricular reform. The convergence of student, teacher, and lecturer perspectives with global IE literature supports a coherent strategy: implement holistic, practice-oriented IE training within South Africa's higher education system, underpinned by policy support and sustained institutional investment.

5. Discussion

The results underscore that student teachers view IE-focused coursework as essential for shaping attitudes and preparing them for real classroom scenarios. This aligns with the broader literature showing that targeted IE training fosters both attitudes and practical competencies necessary for inclusive practice (Martin & Bertram, 2024; Ndebele et al., 2024). Online and face-to-face IE modules are increasingly used in South Africa to build knowledge about barriers to learning and responsive pedagogy, though evidence suggests translation into sustained practice remains variable (Nel et al., 2023; Martin & Bertram, 2024; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). The literature also notes that pre-service training should not be limited to ideals; it must integrate practical experiences that build self-efficacy in IE strategies to mitigate apprehensions about implementation (Ledger et al., 2021; Nel et al., 2023; Martin & Bertram, 2024). The MRTEQ framework positions inclusive education as central to teacher preparation, yet empirical work suggests the need for explicit guidance on translating policy into classroom practice (Ledger et al., 2021; Nel et al., 2023; Martin & Bertram, 2024).

The in-service teachers' sentiments about feeling overwhelmed by diverse learner needs point to a gap between university preparation and the realities of contemporary South African classrooms. The literature documents similar concerns, highlighting a misalignment between theory and practice, insufficient practical experience, and a lack of concrete competencies for inclusive teaching in diverse contexts (Mosito et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2023; Ndebele et al., 2024; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). When teachers perceive themselves as inadequately equipped for IE, their ability to establish inclusive environments is constrained, which can perpetuate exclusionary practices or superficial compliance rather than transformative inclusion (Mosito et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2023; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). This underscores the need for ongoing, praxis-oriented professional development (PD) that is linked to classroom realities and supported by schools and universities (Nel et al., 2023; Ndebele et al., 2024; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). This calls for the design of an ongoing, context-responsive IE PD that directly addresses student diversity.

Lecturers also advocate for infusing inclusive education throughout initial teacher education, rather than treating IE as a stand-alone add-on. This perspective echoes findings that the infusion of IE into foundational and advanced teacher education is essential to ensuring that future teachers can implement IE confidently in diverse classrooms (Nel et al., 2023; Mabasa-Manganyi, 2023).

A holistic approach integrating IE theory, pedagogy, practice, and policy is advocated as conducive to sustainable inclusion. This aligns with the South African policy milieu where IE is anchored in constitutional rights, White Paper 6, SIAS, SASA, and related reforms, but where implementation gaps persist due to resource constraints, capacity limits, and variable school contexts (Ndebele et al., 2022; Stemela-Zali et al., 2022; Nel et al., 2023; Mabasa-Manganyi, 2023; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024).

Notably, the study's findings show similarities and differences with other research studies. For instance, the findings described in the discussion are largely consistent with existing research on the need for practicum and PD, the centrality of policy-to-practice translation, and the reported gaps between university preparation and classroom realities in South Africa and comparable contexts. The discussion does not present claims that starkly contradict the literature, where differences arise. The literature mainly reflects the ongoing, nuanced debates about the relative weight of pre-service versus in-service training and the variability of translation into sustained practice. The cited set of references includes several positions that are broadly consonant with the findings, as well as minor deviations that likely reflect specific South African institutional contexts.

6. Conclusion

The research unveiled critical insights into how teacher training shapes teachers' competencies and attitudes toward inclusive education in the South African higher education context. By exploring essential components of effective teacher training programs, such as collaborative practices and reflection on personal biases, this study aims to contribute valuable recommendations for program design and policy formation (Kurniawati et al., 2016; Juhairiah, Yuwono, & Sabela, 2024). Moreover, the findings will enhance understanding of the support mechanisms required to empower teachers in their inclusive educational endeavours and highlight potential areas for improvement in teacher preparation programs to better align with inclusive educational mandates (Ahmad & May 2018).

This qualitative study is poised to significantly enrich the discourse on inclusive education by examining the quality and effectiveness of teacher training in the South African context and providing evidence-based recommendations to enhance educational practices that cater to diverse learning needs. In this qualitative research study, the researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection. This means that the researcher was actively engaged with participants and adapted their approach based on ongoing interactions. The researcher's perspectives and interpretations inherently shaped the data collection process, underscoring the importance of reflexivity throughout the study (Tarin, 2017). This dynamic relationship not only enriches the data but also enables researchers to respond to unfolding insights and emerging themes throughout the study.

Lastly, this paper will contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education in South Africa, drawing on extensive evidence illustrating the pressing need for comprehensive teacher training initiatives to address the unique challenges educators face in promoting inclusive practices. Inclusive education is no longer a new phenomenon in the education system; it only needs a revisit in implementation practices. Nonetheless, high-quality teacher training is integral to the successful implementation of inclusive education, particularly in the South African context, where historical disparities persist. This notion underscores the necessity of fostering positive attitudes, enhancing pedagogical competencies, promoting collaborative practices, and offering holistic training programs tailored to meet the needs of diverse learners. Such multifaceted training initiatives could provide teachers within South Africa, and more broadly, a robust framework for achieving truly inclusive educational environments.

The novelty of the results is that the study contributes contemporary, South Africa-specific insights into how IE-focused coursework shapes the attitudes and perceived readiness of students and in-service teachers within higher education contexts. While prior work documents general links between IE training and attitudes, this study

reinforces the applicability of these dynamics to South African higher education settings, highlighting the lived variability across pre-service, in-service, and lecturer perspectives in South African HEIs. Once more, by incorporating student teachers, in-service teachers, and lecturers, the study offers a more holistic portrait of IE training effectiveness than studies focusing on a single stakeholder group. This triangulation extends the literature, which often emphasises one group by showing how each group perceives the same training ecosystem and its translation into practice, thereby clarifying where gaps are shared or diverge across roles.

Regarding limitations, the findings are drawn from one South African higher education institution, which may limit their transferability to other South African HEIs with different resource levels, student demographics, and policy implementation support. This aligns with methodological cautions in qualitative studies that emphasise context-specific insights rather than broad generalisation. Also, while triangulating three groups is a strength, the sample size and composition do not capture the full heterogeneity of South African HEIs. This is aligned with the understanding that while three stakeholder groups offer depth, there are subgroups, such as students with disabilities, subject-specific lecturers, or senior administrators, whose experiences are not captured in the study.

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