





Lecturers' strategies for inclusive spaces in preparing pre-service teachers at a selected university in the Western Cape

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Abstract—Inclusive teaching in South African universities remains a continuous challenge for many lecturers. Although national and institutional policies acknowledge diversity and commit to supporting all students, classroom experiences often tell a different story. Many lecturers struggle to ensure that every student feels seen and valued. Creating spaces of belonging goes beyond policy; it involves how lecturers teach, speak, and relate to their students in everyday practice. This work is often undertaken independently, with limited institutional support. This study explored how lecturers within a teacher preparation programme engage in inclusive practices and foster learning environments that affirm diversity. It focuses on the everyday pedagogical strategies used when teaching pre-service teachers from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Situated within an interpretive phenomenological framework, the study draws on narratives from three lecturers at a university located in Cape Town, South Africa, each with over ten years of teaching experience. Their narratives reveal how they strive to create inclusive classrooms, often within systems that inadvertently reproduce exclusion. The study draws on four theoretical lenses: Nel Noddings' ethics of care, the philosophy of Ubuntu, critical pedagogy, and the concept of epistemic injustice. Together, these frameworks highlight inclusion not merely as a set of teaching strategies, but as an ethical and relational process shaped by institutional culture and power relations. The findings show that lecturers employ practical yet meaningful strategies, such as building caring relationships, adapting their teaching to meet diverse needs, and maintaining open communication to ensure students feel recognised and supported. Through continuous reflection, lecturers adjust their practices and model inclusive teaching for pre-service teachers. However, these individual efforts often occur in isolation, within systems that continue to prioritise efficiency over care. The study concludes that inclusion in higher education is not a quick fix or merely a technical adjustment, but an ongoing ethical practice. Achieving sustainable inclusion demands both personal commitment from lecturers and structural transformation within teacher education programmes.

Keywords: Diversity, Higher education, Inclusive education, Lecturers' strategies, Pre-service teachers

To cite this article (APA): Sitoyi, Z. M., & Moletsane, M. K. (2025). Lecturers' strategies for inclusive spaces in preparing pre-service teachers at a selected university in the Western Cape. *International Journal of Studies in Inclusive Education*, 2(3), 52-62. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijisie.v2i3.2134>

I. INTRODUCTION

IN South African higher education, inclusion holds a particular significance for students who were historically excluded. For black and Indian students, those from under-resourced rural schools, women, and students with disabilities, inclusion means more than simply gaining access to university. It means being recognised, treated with respect, and given a fair opportunity to succeed academically. During the apartheid era, education was profoundly unequal. Black students were channelled into poorly resourced teacher colleges designed to limit their futures under Bantu Education. White students, by contrast, attended well-funded schools and universities that offered far greater opportunities. Students with disabilities were almost entirely excluded from higher education (Christie, 2006; Sayed & Motala, 2012).

This history has left a lasting legacy. Even after 1994, when policies promised equality and inclusion, universities continued to bear the imprint of a system built to exclude. Reports by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2004, 2016) and Luescher et al. (2023) show that these patterns have not entirely disappeared. Students from privileged schools, middle-class families, and those fluent in English or Afrikaans

still have a greater chance of success. In contrast, students from rural, working-class, and first-generation backgrounds remain at the highest risk of exclusion. Since 1994, more students have entered universities – a process linked to the massification of higher education and supported by transformation policies such as the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education [DoE], 1997) and later reflections by Badat (2010). These policy shifts were intended to undo the damage of apartheid and open the doors of learning to all.

Yet, for many, the promise of inclusion remains distant. Language barriers, inadequate academic preparation, and limited institutional support continue to hinder student success. This concern is echoed by the CHE (2004, 2016) and the Transformation Oversight Committee (TOC, 2023), which highlight persistent disparities in student success along lines of socio-economic status, schooling background, and language proficiency. These reports reaffirm that students from rural areas, low-income households, and first-generation backgrounds continue to face the greatest barriers to inclusion. This is not a minor crisis. Badat (2020) argues that access without success only deepens inequality. Marginson (2016) contends that mass participation systems expand access while reproducing social stratification. Luescher (2016), in a study on student experiences, found that struggles around funding

and representation reflect deeper forms of exclusion. Together, these studies confirm that for many students, meaningful inclusion remains out of reach. Enrolment in South African universities has expanded significantly since 1994, with student numbers increasing by approximately one million (Davids & Waghid, 2024). Yet, as Badat (2020) and Marginson (2016) caution, access alone does not guarantee success. Graduation rates remain low, dropout rates are high, and many students continue to struggle within institutions that offer limited academic and emotional support systems (Luescher, 2016).

Policies aimed at promoting inclusion for students with disabilities have been introduced, marking a shift from earlier decades when such students were often excluded or unable to meet academic demands (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Ainscow (2020) situates these efforts within a broader global movement towards inclusive education that gained momentum in the 1990s. However, experience shows that policy alone is insufficient. Inclusion is enacted through everyday teaching practices, the quality of lecturer-student interactions, and the availability of support when students face challenges. Globally, inclusive education has gained momentum (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2017). Piketty (2021, as cited in UNESCO, 2017) emphasises that widening access is only meaningful when paired with robust support systems that enable all students to succeed. In the South African context, this requires close attention to how student teachers – those currently enrolled in teacher preparation programmes – create learning environments where students from diverse backgrounds, languages, and abilities feel a sense of belonging and can thrive. These student pre-service teachers face the country's deep social and educational inequalities, and their success depends on how effectively universities prepare them for the realities of diverse classrooms. Teacher preparation cannot be reduced to subject knowledge alone; both their epistemic and social relations must be affirmed. Pre-service teachers need to learn how to engage learners with varied learning styles, who speak different languages, and who require multiple forms of support. Critically, they must be equipped to access and respond to students' systems of meaning.

Research demonstrates that multilingual approaches enrich learning by validating students' home languages and fostering deeper understanding across subjects (Heugh, 2015; Probyn, 2009). If universities fail to address these needs, the cycle of exclusion will continue within the school system. Inclusion must begin within higher education itself. Institutions have a responsibility to create environments where pre-service teachers witness inclusive pedagogies being modelled in lecture halls, tutorials, and assessments. Inclusion should be embedded both as a linguistic and philosophical reality – one that affirms all students as valued, respected, and supported to learners, regardless of background or ability. Mosito (2025) argues that inclusion is not merely about placing students in the same physical space but about ensuring they experience a sense of belonging and recognition. Moletsane (2012) extends this view by arguing that inclusion requires transforming institutional cultures and practices that continue to marginalise students from disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Badat (2020) emphasises that inclusion must address both social and epistemic dimensions, providing students with access to knowledge while affirming their identities. Buthelezi (2019) frames inclusion as an ethical commitment to justice, calling on universities to confront the structural inequalities that hinder full participation. These perspectives underscore that inclusion is not merely a technical add-on, but a fundamental principle for achieving equity and justice in higher education.

Language remains one of the challenging barriers in higher education, as most students enter university with mother tongues that are not recognised as languages of instruction. At the university where the study was conducted, English is the dominant medium of instruction, with Afrikaans primarily used on another campus. Veitch (2019) highlights how this makes it harder for the students to succeed, especially in the absence of targeted multilingual support. Additional

challenges include academic student underpreparedness, living with disabilities, and navigating economic and social pressures that affect learning. In these contexts, lecturers play a crucial role in helping students meet their learning needs. Carballo-Delgado et al. (2019) found that lecturers' practices can directly influence student performance and sense of belonging. When lecturers are trained and supported to integrate inclusive strategies into their teaching, they help remove barriers and create learning spaces that are accessible to all. Based on this background, the study investigates how lecturers in teacher preparation programmes create inclusive learning spaces that support pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, it explored the everyday strategies lecturers employ to respond to diversity, how they reflect on their pedagogical practices, and how these efforts shape pre-service teachers' experiences.

The study examines how lecturers accommodate, support, and empower pre-service teachers, positioning inclusion not merely as a policy directive but as a lived, daily practice within teacher education. It focuses on the relational and pedagogical dimensions of inclusion, highlighting how inclusive teaching is enacted through intentional strategies that affirm students' identities and foster a sense of belonging.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since South Africa transitioned to democracy in 1994, the country has made firm commitments to expanding access to education. These promises are grounded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which, in Section 29, guarantees the right to basic and further education. In pursuit of these goals, the South African government has introduced a range of policy reforms to promote inclusive education. For example, the Education White Papers 3 (DoE, 1997) and 6 (DoE, 2001) emphasise transformation, equity, and inclusive practices across the higher education sector. The CHE was tasked with overseeing quality assurance, transformation, and equity, and with monitoring the implementation of these commitments (CHE, 2004). Similarly, the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) was mandated to promote and protect multilingualism and uphold the rights of all official languages in education and society (Department of Arts and Culture, 2002). Together, these frameworks reflect the state's commitment to expanding access, addressing historical inequalities, and developing an inclusive, responsive higher education system that reflects South Africa's diversity. The right to education is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996, Section 29(1)), which states that "everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education, and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible". This provision marks a decisive break from the apartheid era, during which access to quality education was determined by race. In the democratic context, the Constitution repositions education as both a fundamental right and a means to achieve equality and social justice.

Under apartheid, education was deliberately structured to reproduce inequality. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 placed African students in underfunded schools and restricted their curriculum to manual labour and subservient roles, while white students attended well-resourced institutions (Christie, 2006). Scholars like Sayed and Motala (2012) argue that apartheid education entrenched divisions along lines of race, geography, and class, thereby leaving a legacy of structural inequality that democratic South Africa continues to confront. In higher education, this has necessitated dismantling racially segregated universities and colleges, as well as implementing policies to achieve redress, equity, and inclusivity in line with constitutional values. Policies were revised to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those living with disabilities, could access university education. However, despite these reforms, many students continue to face persistent challenges. Barriers such as insufficient funding, inadequate accommodation, and poor academic support continue to hinder their

success.

Mzangwa (2019) acknowledges improvements in access and financial aid for students from low-income families, noting that bursaries and support programmes are now widely available than in the past. Similarly, Davids and Waghid (2024) observe that student enrolment has increased by approximately one million since 1994. While this appears to signal substantial progress, a closer look reveals a more complex reality. Badat (2020) and Marginson (2016) argue that although more students are entering universities, many do not complete their studies, resulting in high dropout rates. Thus, while access has expanded, success remains elusive.

As Morrow (2007) emphasises, genuine inclusion requires more than physical entry into the university; it requires *epistemological access*. This means that students must be equipped with the intellectual tools necessary to engage meaningfully with the grammar of inquiry specific to each discipline to succeed. As Luescher (2016) posits, many students who enter university struggle to cope due to inadequate academic and emotional support. Gaining access is one thing; staying enrolled and succeeding is another. This underscores the reality that access without meaningful support does not constitute genuine inclusion. It is similar to opening the gate without guiding individuals along the path. Moreover, students living with disabilities have faced even greater challenges. Historically, they were excluded from higher education spaces or perceived as incapable of coping with university life (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Today, laws and policies require institutions to provide both access and support for students with disabilities. Ainscow (2020) notes that since the 1990s, many countries, including South Africa, have adopted inclusive policies to protect students who were previously excluded. While these frameworks are promising on paper, the lived experiences of students excluded before 1994 reveal that full inclusion remains an ongoing struggle.

UNESCO (2017) asserts that creating welcoming and supportive university environments benefits all students. Inclusion is not a favour extended to a select few; it is a matter of social justice. Social justice entails the equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and recognition, thereby enabling all members of society to participate fully (Fraser, 2009; Tikly, 2020). In the context of higher education, this means ensuring that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are not only admitted but also supported to succeed and to feel a sense of belonging (Badat, 2020). However, social justice must also be understood in epistemic terms. Fricker (2007) describes epistemic justice as the fair treatment of people in their capacity as knowers. In South Africa, this involves valuing knowledge systems rooted in African contexts rather than privileging Eurocentric traditions (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Fataar, 2018). Linking social justice with epistemic justice reveals that true inclusion must address both material and symbolic dimensions: equitable access to resources and the recognition of diverse ways of knowing.

Piketty (2021, as cited in UNESCO, 2017) supports the view that broader access to education, when coupled with adequate support, can reduce dropout rates and help address inequality. However, the reality within South African universities reveals that policy reforms are insufficient to transform institutional cultures. Many students continue to feel unwelcome or alienated. The #FeesMustFall campaign of 2015–2016 highlighted these issues, articulating demands not only for affordable education but also for the decolonisation of curricula and institutional culture (Langa, 2017). Students argued that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved while universities continue to privilege Eurocentric knowledge systems and marginalise African philosophy (Heleta, 2016; Booysen, 2016). These protests revealed that equity in higher education extends beyond financial access; it must also encompass epistemic and cultural justice.

Institutions must be a place where diversity and inclusion are respected and supported. This goes beyond having a policy on the website. Institutions must be intentional and pragmatic in enacting their transformation policy provisions. Inclusive education fosters a learning

environment that values students' self-worth, enabling them to feel confident and capable (Volmink, 2018). When institutions fail to provide this, it is almost impossible for students to fit into the institution's traditional "norm" and culture, thereby making them feel like outsiders (Nichols, 2023). These are not merely feelings without weight; they also affect how students perform and their overall well-being. In the South African context, the concept of Ubuntu can help us grasp this. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that says *a person is a person through other people* (*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*) (Ramose, 1999; Mbigi, 2005). It speaks about shared humanity, interdependence, and care. Waghid and Davids (2014) explain that Ubuntu also involves justice and mutual responsibility. When Ubuntu values are absent from universities' daily life, inclusion remains a mere concept on paper. Students who face challenges are often left to struggle alone, which contradicts Ubuntu, a philosophy that emphasises mutual support so that no one is left behind (Cornell & van Marle, 2015).

Although research indicates that access to universities has increased, the real challenge lies in creating sustainable and inclusive environments where students from diverse backgrounds can thrive and succeed. Many scholars concur that inclusion is not merely about getting students into the system; it should also ensure that they have a sense of belonging and are supported throughout their journey (Davids & Waghid, 2024; Badat, 2020; Ainscow, 2020). What is missing in most of the literature reviewed is the voice of lecturers who are at the frontline for inclusion – those who empower and support students despite the challenges. It is lecturers grappling with the Eurocentric education system and institutional culture that are not inclusive. While many studies have explored policies and students' experiences of inclusion, fewer have examined lecturers' voices. International work by Moriña et al. (2015) and Carballo-Delgado et al. (2019) argues that lecturers can play a significant role in ensuring that students feel included. These scholars note that lecturers' classroom practices often have a greater influence on students' sense of belonging than formal policies. In South Africa, Boughey and Bozalek (2012) and Heleta (2016) argue that lecturers are at the frontline of negotiating institutional cultures that are not always inclusive. Yet even these studies focus more on structural critique than on lecturers' strategies.

This study builds on that literature, but shifts the lens directly to lecturers' everyday experiences. It questions how lecturers navigate the challenges of teaching inclusively in systems that do not accommodate diversity. By foregrounding their narratives, the study responds to the call for more research, which highlights the agency, struggles, and reflections of those tasked with modelling inclusive pedagogy in teacher education (Moriña, 2022; Albertyn, 2024).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Inclusion in South African higher education must be understood in its historical and social context. During apartheid, teacher education was separated by race. Black students were sent to poorly resourced colleges that offered limited opportunities. Most students with disabilities were excluded from universities. Christie (2006) argues that these divisions created profound inequalities that continue to influence access to education today. After 1994, the new government introduced reforms, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and Education White Paper 6 (2001). These aimed to correct past injustices and build inclusive education. Sayed and Motala (2012) note that more students now enter higher education than before. However, Badat (2020) emphasises that access without support does not lead to success.

Many students from rural areas and working-class backgrounds continue to struggle with adapting to university culture and language. The CHE (2004, 2016) and the TOC (2023) also reveal that student performance continues to reflect inequality. To make sense of these challenges, this study draws on four theories to shape our understanding of inclusion. These are Ethics of Care, Ubuntu, Critical Pedagogy, and Epistemic Injustice. Together, they provide the main

framework for reading lecturers' strategies for fostering inclusive learning spaces in teacher preparation programmes. Each theory supports a different aspect of the analysis and demonstrates how the lecturers' work relates to relationships, community, power, and knowledge.

The ethics of care provide the moral and emotional foundation for this study. Noddings (1984) explains that real teaching begins in a caring relationship in which teachers listen to and respond to students' needs. In this study, the Ethics of Care helps to demonstrate how lecturers build trust with pre-service teachers and model the kind of care that students will later exhibit in their own classrooms. Tronto (1993) adds that care is not only personal but also social. She explains four forms of care: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving. These ideas help the study to perceive inclusion as shared work between lecturers and the institution. When universities notice student needs and act on them, they practise caring about and taking care of.

Additionally, when they implement systems that support both lecturers and students, they practise caregiving. When they listen to student feedback, they practise care-receiving. In this way, Ethics of Care helps to explain the ethical direction of inclusion and the shared duty to respond to difference.

Ubuntu adds a social and cultural layer to this study. The isiXhosa saying "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*," which means "a person becomes a person through others," captures the essence of Ubuntu. Ramose (1999) writes that Ubuntu calls people to live in relation, with compassion and respect. Waghid and Davids (2014) link Ubuntu to moral responsibility in education. In this study, Ubuntu helps explain how lecturers understand inclusion as a form of belonging within a learning community, rather than as a competition among individuals. Metz (2011) and Nyamnjoh (2017) warn that Ubuntu can sometimes be used to silence or exclude, especially when people hide behind unity to avoid difference. Yet, as Mabvurira (2020) explains, real Ubuntu cannot tolerate exclusion, because it recognises the dignity of every person. Ubuntu, therefore, guides this study by showing that inclusion is not an act of kindness, but a shared duty that joins the well-being of one student to the success of all.

Critical Pedagogy focuses on how power works in education. Freire (1970) states that education always takes a side. It either supports injustice or challenges it. In this study, Critical Pedagogy offers a lens through which lecturers view teaching as a political act that can open space for change. Slee (2011) demonstrates that many barriers in universities, such as inaccessible lecture halls and rigid assessment systems, are not mistakes but rather part of structures that perpetuate privilege. Nieminen (2024) notes that these systems often prioritise efficiency over care. For students with disabilities, such structures make inclusion even more challenging, as noted by Morña et al. (2015). Giroux (2009) calls teachers who resist these systems "transformative intellectuals". This study utilizes that idea to understand lecturers who challenge unfair rules and advocate for their students' full participation. Critical Pedagogy, therefore, gives direction to the study by showing that inclusion is not only about empathy but also about the courage to confront inequality. When placed alongside Ubuntu, Critical Pedagogy introduces a useful tension that challenges the norm. Ubuntu values harmony and community, while Critical Pedagogy invites challenge and resistance. When combined, they show that inclusion in higher education must be both caring and critical. It must foster a sense of belonging, but also speak out against rules that limit it. Without this balance, Ubuntu may become too soft, and Critical Pedagogy may lose connection to compassion.

Epistemic injustice focuses on voice and knowledge. Fricker (2007) writes that injustice occurs when some people's knowledge is ignored or treated as less valuable. Boughey and Bozalek (2012) argue that this persists in South African universities where Western views dominate the curriculum. Heleta (2016) emphasises that true decolonisation must go deeper than adding African authors; it must change how knowledge itself is valued. In this study, Epistemic Injustice explains how lecturers

recognise students' lived experiences as legitimate knowledge. By doing this, they challenge the idea that only academic texts carry truth. They also ensure that classrooms are open and respectful spaces where students can see themselves as part of the learning process. When these four theories are read alongside each other, they offer direction to this study and support the primary focus on lecturers' strategies for inclusion. Ethics of Care explains the moral side of teaching. Ubuntu adds the social and cultural meaning of belonging. Critical Pedagogy emphasizes the importance of challenging structures that perpetuate exclusion. Epistemic injustice reminds us that real inclusion must value all forms of knowledge. Together, these theories enable the study to conceptualise inclusion not merely as a set of methods, but as an ethical, social, and political practice that shapes how lecturers teach, reflect, and engage with their students.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explored how lecturers within a teacher preparation programme engage in inclusive practices and foster learning environments that affirm diversity. It focuses on the everyday pedagogical strategies used when teaching pre-service teachers from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

V. METHODS

Research approach and paradigm

This study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm to explore the strategies that lecturers use to foster inclusive learning environments in the preparation of pre-service teachers at a selected university in the Western Cape. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows a deeper understanding of people's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their actions (Creswell, 2013). The interpretive paradigm allows the study of how lecturers experience and make sense of inclusion in their teaching contexts (Cohen et al., 2017).

A qualitative and interpretive orientation was suitable for this study because inclusion is a personal and contextual process that cannot be meaningfully captured through numerical data. The paradigm acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction between participants and researchers. It was therefore essential to understand how lecturers interpret their daily realities, negotiate challenges, and foster a sense of belonging within the higher education context.

The study adopted an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) design as both the research design and data analysis framework, focusing on lecturers' lived experiences as they navigate the challenges of promoting inclusion in higher education. IPA was chosen because it provides the tools to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences within their specific social and institutional contexts (Smith et al., 2009). It was preferred over other qualitative designs, such as case study or grounded theory, because the goal of this research was not to develop a theory but to understand the depth of lecturers' personal experiences.

Research design

Phenomenological research describes and interprets people's lived experiences to understand how they make sense of specific phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2016). It seeks meaning rather than measurement and aims to capture the essence of experience as it is lived. IPA provides a detailed, idiographic, and interpretive approach within this tradition. It emphasises how individuals make sense of their experiences in context, while recognising that the researcher plays a role in interpreting those meanings (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

IPA is built on what Smith et al. (2009) refer to as a "double hermeneutic": participants make sense of their world, and researchers make sense of the participants' sense-making. This makes IPA especially useful here, as it allows for close engagement with lecturers' narratives

while acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role. The design also supports a reflective stance, allowing the researchers to examine their own influence during data interpretation. This ensured that the findings remained authentic and grounded in participants' voices.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three lecturers in teacher education programmes. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at the university. The interviews explored lecturers' experiences, reflections, and strategies for fostering inclusive learning environments. An interview guide was used to steer the conversation around broad areas, including inclusive teaching practices, care, belonging, diversity, and institutional support. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were taken during and after the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that informed interpretation.

Research site

The study was conducted at a university in Cape Town, Western Cape Province, South Africa, which was chosen for its diverse student population and teacher education programs. The institution offers undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in education, serving students from both urban and township backgrounds. It has a strong focus on transformation, inclusivity, and access, aligned with national higher education policies, such as White Papers 3 and 6. The Faculty of Education hosts several departments that prepare pre-service teachers for the Foundation, Intermediate, and Senior Phases. The site was ideal for this study because it reflects the complexities of diversity, multilingualism, and socio-economic inequality that shape inclusive education practices in South Africa. The researcher is familiar with the institutional culture, which enabled a deeper understanding of lecturers' experiences and pedagogical challenges in fostering inclusive learning environments.

Participants

Three lecturers were purposively selected based on their extensive experience in teacher education, particularly in the Foundation and Intermediate Phase programmes, and each has over 10 years of teaching experience at the university. The sample size was intentionally small, in line with the phenomenological research approach, which prioritises depth over numerical representation (Tavakol & Sandars, 2015). Smaller samples allow for a more intimate and detailed engagement with participants' narratives, providing a rich understanding of their lived realities (Bartholomew, 2021).

The participants, referred to by the pseudonyms Zandra, Cindy, and Busi, were all lecturers in the Faculty of Education at a university in the Western Cape. Zandra, a Coloured woman aged 60 to 65, holds a Master's degree and is currently completing a PhD. She has about 15 years of experience teaching Science Education to pre-service teachers. Cindy, a woman of colour with a PhD in Education, has 7 years of experience in higher education teaching and 25 years in schools. She lectures in Professional Practice and Life Skills and coordinates the music components in the Foundation and Intermediate Phase programmes. Busi, a Black African female, holds a PhD in Inclusive Education and teaches Inclusive Education, Philosophy, and Psychology. She joined academia in 2022, following a career as a teacher and subject advisor for the Department of Basic Education.

Ethics note. Demographic details are drawn from participants' narratives and reported with confidentiality maintained through the use of pseudonyms, as the small sample size could make participants easily identifiable.

Data analysis

This study employed a narrative analysis. According to Riessman (2008), narrative analysis is a method of interpreting the stories people tell to make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them. It focuses on how individuals construct and communicate their lived realities through language and storytelling. Creswell (2013) explains that narrative analysis enables researchers to study the lives of

individuals by collecting and retelling their experiences in rich, descriptive detail, thereby identifying common patterns, insights, and turning points.

This approach was crucial to the present study, as it enabled the researcher to understand how lecturers interpreted and enacted inclusion in their teaching contexts. By analysing their narratives, the study aims to identify the personal, institutional, and social factors that shape inclusive practices in higher education. This approach was beneficial as it enabled the researcher to organise the lecturers' narratives into themes that highlighted their strategies for fostering inclusive learning.

During the narrative analysis, each transcript was first read several times to gain a holistic understanding of the lecturers' narratives. The researcher then identified key events, expressions, and reflections that illustrated how inclusion was practised and experienced. Finally, these narrative segments were grouped into themes that represented the lecturers' strategies for fostering inclusive learning environments.

This study employed various strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Reflexivity was important. A research journal was maintained throughout the study to record thoughts, doubts, and choices, which helped to determine where the researcher's position could shape their interpretation of the findings. Peers were consulted to question and refine interpretations, thereby reducing bias and strengthening credibility (Finlay, 2002; Maree, 2019). Member checking was used to confirm that participants' narratives were accurately represented. Peer debriefing sessions were also held to cross-check and validate emerging ideas. Triangulation at both participant and researcher levels provided different perspectives and ensured the dependability of the findings (Kerfoot & Winberg, 1997). These combined strategies addressed the issue of rigour that underpins a strong qualitative study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's Faculty Ethics Committee (HS2/9/90). All participants provided written consent after being informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in all reporting to protect their privacy.

In addition, data were securely stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researchers. The ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice were consistently observed throughout the study to ensure that participants were treated with dignity and care. The study also followed the university's research ethics policy for conducting research involving human participants, ensuring that the collection and use of personal narratives were handled sensitively and responsibly.

VI. RESULTS

Biographic results

Table 1: Biographic results of the participants

Name	gender	Age range	Qualifications	Teaching experience	Area of specialisation
Zandra	female	60-69	masters	+20 years	Science Education
Cindy	female	50-59	PhD	+20 years	Life Skills and Professional Studies
Busi	female	30-40	PhD	+ 10 years	Inclusive Education

Note: This study used pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities.

Lecturers' strategies for fostering inclusive spaces in preparing pre-service teachers

Promoting connection, belonging, and responding to individual needs

The lecturers shared their strategies to ensure their practices are inclusive and to always promote inclusion in their lectures. They mentioned fostering inclusive spaces that make students feel welcome

and supported. The lecturers emphasised self-reflection on their conduct and continuous improvement of their teaching practice to better serve students' needs. As Zandra explained:

"As a lecturer here at the university, I ensure that the students I teach feel welcome and that they belong. I reflect on my day, my work, how to improve my work, and my interactions with colleagues and students..." (Zandra)

This excerpt from Zandra illustrates a commitment shared by the other two lecturers. Interactions and dialogue are central here. In the spirit of Ubuntu, dialogue is about exchanging words and affirming one another's humanity. It fosters recognition and mutual respect – an important part of the university's Vision 2030 strategy, which aims to build unity through inclusive engagement. The lecturers strive to create a classroom atmosphere where students from different backgrounds and with varying learning needs feel "seen" and valued as part of the community. This concept aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of a community of practice, in which learning is contingent on membership and participation within a group. The willingness of lecturers to support students individually gives those students a better chance to perform well as they feel noticed and included, not merely a number in the system. As mentioned earlier, when students from diverse backgrounds have access to supportive learning environments in higher education, they are more likely to achieve academic success (UNESCO, 2017).

Globally, higher education institutions are responsible for responding to changing student demographics. This includes creating spaces where students can be themselves, receive support, and see their cultures and identities respected so that no one feels isolated or marginalised. In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall movement made clear that many students continue to experience exclusion through unaffordable fees, Eurocentric curricula, and institutional cultures that do not affirm their identities (Booyesen, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Langa, 2017). These struggles reveal that inclusion is about access and the transformation of the deeper structures of higher education.

Cindy and Busi reinforced the importance of modelling care and inclusion through their behaviour, knowing that their students – future teachers – will carry those lessons into their careers. For example, Cindy said:

"I should model what students must do in their classrooms to promote inclusion. I am responsible for ensuring my students feel they belong to this institution. Students come from different corners, and when they arrive, they meet other people..." (Cindy)

Her point about "meeting other people" highlights the role of diversity in higher education. Diversity carries both promise and difficulty. Meeting others from different backgrounds can create spaces of learning and enrichment, but it can also bring tensions and misunderstandings. Studies on intercultural communication reveal that students frequently encounter challenges, including language barriers, cultural assumptions, and stereotyping (Deardorff, 2009). At the same time, diversity can be empowering. Encounters across socio-historical divides encourage critical reflection, facilitate the exchange of ideas, and foster the development of new perspectives on the world (Leask, 2015).

In South Africa, these issues are tied to broader commitments. The Constitution speaks of "unity in diversity," affirming the right of all people to dignity and cultural recognition (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Across African higher education, many institutional visions also draw on the value of oneness, which reflects the Ubuntu principle that diversity should strengthen community rather than divide it. When lived out this way, diversity is a challenge to manage and a resource for building more inclusive and humanising universities.

Busi highlighted the ethic of care in teaching:

"As a teacher, showing students that you care about them is essential because you will be disadvantaging them if you do not care..." (Busi)

Busi's reflection shows that demonstrating care for students is fundamental, especially in teacher preparation. This links well with Tronto's (1993, 2013) phases of care, which move from recognising the

needs of others, to taking responsibility, giving care, and receiving feedback. In Busi's account, care was about noticing when students struggled, acting to support them, and checking whether that support was adequate.

At the same time, her reflection resonates with the Ubuntu ethic. Ubuntu values shared humanity, belonging, and mutual respect (Ramose, 2002; Waghid & Davids, 2014). For Busi, showing care in the classroom meant affirming that each student was part of the community, not an individual left to fend for themselves. This brings Tronto's ethics of care and Ubuntu into dialogue: both stress that inclusion depends on relationships, attentiveness, and responsibility rather than on abstract policy.

The lecturers' reflections highlight that pre-service teachers learn to be caring and inclusive. Care and inclusion are dynamic concepts that must be experienced. Just like *Ubuntu*, care must be felt, and students feel it when they receive care from their lecturers. For lecturers, showing caring is a personal virtue and a core part of preparing future teachers for diverse classrooms. As Noddings (1984) argues, pre-service teachers must be taught the importance of being a caring teacher. The schools where these students will eventually teach are diverse; if future teachers are not trained to be loving and inclusive, it would be unethical because some learners in those schools would be neglected. Therefore, it is crucial for lecturers (as teacher-educators) to fully commit to teaching and modelling care, listening to students, respecting everyone, and supporting learners with diverse needs (Noddings, 2013). These lecturers actively practice this care, echoing Noddings' idea that genuine engagement with students' well-being is at the heart of ethical teaching.

Accommodating diverse students in higher learning institutions

The second theme illustrates how lecturers accommodate and support students with diverse needs and the challenges they face. All three lecturers described efforts to ensure their diverse students are supported and prepared to become inclusive and reflective teachers who can help diverse students in schools. A reflective teacher continually examines their practice, questions assumptions, and adapts their methods in response to students' needs (Schön, 1983; Larrivee, 2000). Reflection helps teachers identify which students may be at risk of exclusion, adjust their strategies, and create more responsive and inclusive learning environments. In South Africa, reflective practice also resonates with the call for decolonisation. By questioning inherited Eurocentric teaching models, lecturers and student teachers can begin to value different knowledge and challenge practices that reinforce inequality (Le Grange, 2016). In this way, becoming a reflective teacher is a personal skill and a political and ethical stance in support of inclusive and socially just education.

"The venues do not cater to physically challenged students, as they were built years ago, and I think the builders did not care about people with disabilities. We have several physically challenged students. I remember when a student in a wheelchair was in a lift on the way to a lecture..." (Busi)

The excerpt reveals that many campus buildings are old and not designed with accessibility in mind. Lecture venues without ramps or alternative access routes make it difficult for students with physical disabilities to participate fully. This sometimes leads to exclusion and dropout, not because of academic ability but because the physical infrastructure is not designed to accommodate everyone. The issue is exacerbated during load shedding, when reliance on lifts without accessible stairways leaves wheelchair users stranded and excluded from essential spaces.

These experiences illustrate how the design of university buildings reflects a legacy of Eurocentrism. Historically, diversity was often overlooked, and accessibility for people with disabilities was not considered (Howell, 2006). This is why debates on massification and transformation stress the need to redesign higher education so that all students, not merely the privileged, can participate (CHE, 2016; Badat, 2010). Inclusion cannot stop at policy. It requires fundamental changes in infrastructure, teaching, and institutional culture.

Zandra gave a painful example:

"Only last week at our staff meeting, we heard that one student who was in a wheelchair had dropped out of university because she was struggling to access the building, which is not wheelchair friendly." (Zandra)

This student's future was cut short because the institution failed to care. This contradicts Ubuntu's ethics of care, which stipulate that no one should be excluded, and is inconsistent with UNESCO's (2017) and White Paper 7's (DHET, 2013) vision of inclusive higher education.

Cindy highlighted another gap:

"The university does not offer diversity training to its staff. Since joining the university, I have never attended such training, and I am unaware of any. Diversity and inclusion training for staff members would benefit our professional development and help us work with and accommodate the diverse students we teach..." (Cindy)

Her words reveal a genuine staff commitment to supporting students, but without training and institutional backing, inclusion remains an ideal rather than a practice.

This narrative reveals that lecturers are likely to face challenges in addressing diversity and disability, which can impact their support for students. When lecturers are not adequately trained to respond to diverse needs, their role as educators is compromised. Living up to the professional value of inclusion can be challenging and disheartening. Many lecturers want to act with care and responsibility, but without the proper preparation, they may feel disempowered, unable to meet the expectations of their students or themselves. Research confirms this. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to extend what is ordinarily available to all students, but this can only happen if teachers are adequately supported. Moraña (2022) also argues that higher education staff require continuous professional development to address diversity and prevent the reproduction of exclusion. Without such training, institutional commitments to inclusion remain more symbolic than practical. Ultimately, the absence of structured support limits students' opportunities and weakens the confidence and sense of worth of lecturers committed to inclusive education.

Support units exist (Disability Unit and academic support centres). However, there is still a disconnect, as students are often unaware of these services or the services are not adequately responsive to their on-the-ground needs. Additionally, lecturers lack formal training on diversity and inclusion, meaning the university has largely left it to individual lecturers to determine how to be inclusive. As Busi noted, "without proper training, the institution cannot assume that all lecturers naturally know how to support diverse learners or train future inclusion teachers". Despite the challenges, the lecturers indicated that they are willing to do their best to accommodate students from all backgrounds in their courses. For instance, they may personally advocate for students (as Zandra did by raising the issue of the wheelchair-unfriendly building in meetings or referring a student for counselling support when needed).

However, the lecturers recognise that such individual efforts can only go so far if systemic issues are not addressed. In their narratives, one can sense frustration that institutional commitment has not fully caught up with the ideals of inclusion. For example, policies exist on paper, but practical implementation, such as accessible facilities or staff training programmes, often lags. Generally, the theme of accommodating diverse students highlights a valuable reality: structural and systemic constraints limit the extent to which inclusion can be achieved in higher education. Infrastructural shortcomings, such as inaccessible buildings and a lack of institutional support for professional development in inclusive teaching, pose serious challenges. These experiences mirror broader issues reported in the literature. Research indicates that while access to higher education has expanded in South Africa, resources, teaching practices, and institutional cultures have not undergone sufficient transformation to ensure success for all (CHE, 2016; Badat, 2010; Scott, 2018). This makes it clear that inclusion is not merely about bringing more students into

universities but about changing the systems that shape their chances of success.

It is encouraging that lecturers remain committed to doing what they can within their sphere of influence. They collaborate with support units when possible and raise student concerns with the institution. Cindy explained:

"When I see problems, I do not just ignore them. I speak to the support office, and I also tell my students about these things, because they must know what inclusion really means in practice."

This demonstrates that lecturers advocate for their current students and utilise these challenges as teaching opportunities. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to see how structural factors, such as facilities and policies, affect inclusion. They hope to carry this awareness into their future classrooms and even into advocacy for change in schools.

Promoting respect and acceptance in teacher education

The third theme centres on how the lecturers promote a culture of respect and acceptance for diversity in their current classes and as a value for their students to take into their future classrooms. The lecturers not only practice inclusion themselves, but they also teach their pre-service teachers to respect others and celebrate differences. This closely connects with Ubuntu, emphasising mutual respect and the recognition of shared humanity.

The study focused on how the lecturers addressed sensitive identity issues, such as gender and sexuality, and how they modelled inclusive attitudes in these contexts. The participants also discussed how their institution's policies and culture supported or hindered these efforts. All three lecturers indicated they try to be as inclusive as possible in their teaching practice. However, they also pointed out structural barriers at the institution that complicate the pragmatic act of promoting inclusion.

Busi gave a telling example regarding LGBTQI+ students:

"I remind my class that all learners deserve respect, even if you do not share their choices or lifestyles. You cannot claim to include some and exclude others." (Busi)

Such reflections show how lecturers try to embody inclusion while preparing student teachers to do the same. At the same time, they highlighted that institutional policies and cultures often lag, making the pragmatic act of promoting inclusion difficult.

"It is not easy to teach diverse students, but it is an exciting challenge. Another thing, if I go back to the issues of infrastructure, I have students who belong to the LGBTQI+ community who are transgender or gay. A student's challenge was that there are no unisex bathrooms when they go to the bathroom, and it becomes uncomfortable to use a single-gender bathroom." (Busi)

This statement demonstrates that inclusion is not only about how lecturers teach and care, but also about how institutional policies and infrastructure shape a sense of belonging. For LGBTQI+ students, the absence of gender-neutral bathrooms reflects a structural problem that affects their well-being and identity. Inclusion, therefore, involves recognising students' multiple identities and ensuring that these are respected in the learning environment (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Richardson, 2017). Historically, Eurocentric education was designed to privilege certain bodies and identities while excluding others. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 11) argues, colonial and Eurocentric education models were "never neutral but always intended to reproduce particular hierarchies of race, gender, and knowledge." The fact that university buildings and policies still fail to cater to gender-diverse students shows how these colonial legacies remain present in higher education.

Identity plays a critical role in access and success. When students see their identities respected and affirmed, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and to persist in their studies (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Strydom et al., 2010). By contrast, when institutions ignore identity, students often feel marginalised, undermining academic success and social inclusion.

The participants in this study are aware that fostering inclusive spaces involves advocating for institutional changes to ensure that no student feels excluded. This aligns with what Nichols (2023) observes:

learning institutions ensure that students are not excluded or discriminated against on the basis of gender or sexual orientation. This is also a lesson for pre-service teachers, showing how policies or infrastructure can impact one's life and sense of belonging. It is a testament to the fact that inclusion involves both people's attitudes and structural accommodations.

Even without full institutional support, the lecturers take steps in their classrooms to foster a respectful environment. Cindy gave a powerful example of how she sets expectations for respect among her students:

"I encourage students to respect each other. I always tell them they must respect other people's values and choices. They must not impose their beliefs on others; I hope they adopt that attitude in their classrooms someday. We have a man here [a male student] who wears the highest heels. Students know that this is not their place to judge. I tell them to treat others how they want to be treated." (Cindy)

This statement emphasises the importance of respecting people's values and choices, and of acknowledging diverse belief systems. It challenges Eurocentric traditions that often assumed a single, dominant cultural standard. It also reflects what the Constitution refers to as "respect for democratic rights" and what ubuntu encompasses: treating others with care and dignity (Ramose, 2002; Republic of South Africa, 1996). Tronto's (2013) ethic of care is also relevant here, as Cindy's practice emphasises attentiveness and responsibility in how students interact with one another. Vision 2030's emphasis on oneness and respect for diversity echoes the same principle.

Another lecturer, Zandra, recounted a situation that highlighted the tensions that can arise when students bring their personal or cultural biases into the classroom and how she responded to them.

"I remember a few years ago, we had a student here who was different in how he dressed. Before the student's teaching practice, he experienced difficulties, and I recommended that he consult a psychologist. This student used to dress in traditionally female clothing. A Teaching Practice Co-ordinator forced the student to wear a suit like any other male in a formal school setting..." (Zandra)

Zandra's account raises a critical question: What is the university's role in the 21st century? Is it to enforce professional expectations, or to protect students' democratic rights to freedom of choice and association? The case of a student being forced to wear a suit highlights the tension between institutional notions of professionalism and individual rights. Professionalism in education is typically defined as the conduct and values that uphold the dignity of the teaching profession (Sockett, 1993; South African Council of Educators, 2019). Dress codes are often used to project authority and respectability (Department of Basic Education, 2016). Yet, rigid enforcement can undermine constitutional rights to dignity, expression, and association (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996; De Vos, 2009). Unfortunately, in this case, the student eventually dropped out, showing the painful consequences of choosing conformity over inclusion. The incident illustrates the unresolved tension between preparing students for professional norms and protecting their right to live and learn with dignity and diversity.

From the lecturers' narratives, it is evident that one key strategy they employ to promote a culture of respect and acceptance is explicitly teaching their students (pre-service teachers) to understand and honour others' identities and values. Cindy's approach of actively discouraging judgment and emphasising empathy ("treat others how you want to be treated") demonstrates a commitment to creating an inclusive classroom. By confronting prejudices and setting an acceptance-oriented tone, she effectively models how to manage diversity in a school. This benefits the current class climate and reinforces to future teachers that inclusive teaching fosters a judgment-free, respectful environment for all students. The experience of the male student in high heels carries a strong message: In Cindy's class, students learn that peers should not police personal expression; instead, they can practice more acceptance, tolerance and non-judgment.

Zandra's story demonstrates the limits of individual effort when policies and institutional practices are not supportive. Despite her referral of the student to counselling, the institution's official response was exclusionary. The Teaching Practice Co-ordinator told the student that "a male student must wear a suit in a formal school setting," citing the expectation of professional appearance during teaching practice. In doing so, the co-ordinator acted in accordance with institutional policy, prioritising conformity over individual identity.

The painful outcome – the student dropping out – illustrates the damaging impact of a lack of acceptance. Zandra noted that counselling may help individuals cope emotionally, but it does not resolve the systemic issues that caused the exclusion in the first place. Her reflection highlights the need for policy reform that enables students to choose between their identity and future career paths. At the same time, her narrative also shows the potential role of lecturers in preparing future teachers to question such unjust rules. Zandra wanted her students to understand that professional expectations should not come at the expense of human dignity. In this sense, she was modelling what Giroux (2004, 2009) calls educators' critical and revolutionary agency, the ability to challenge the status quo and advocate for more just and inclusive practices.

Overall, this theme of promoting respect and acceptance reveals that the lecturers actively cultivate respect for diversity and social acceptance within their teacher preparation classes. They confront issues of gender and cultural difference openly, teaching by example and through discussion that every student deserves respect. These practices align with the idea that lecturers act as mentors in shaping pre-service teachers' attitudes (Gallant & Riley, 2014). By demonstrating inclusive values, such as treating everyone equally and standing up for marginalised students, the lecturers are mentoring their students to become inclusive educators. This echoes Stites et al. (2018)'s assertion that teacher training should prepare new teachers to ensure no student is discriminated against, thereby delivering quality education to all. The narratives also highlight that while individual educator effort is crucial, supportive institutional policies are crucial to sustain an inclusive environment. The lecturers impart techniques for inclusion to their pre-service teachers and the importance of advocacy for inclusive policies in education.

VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores how lecturers in teacher preparation programmes work to create space for inclusion. The findings confirm what the scholarly literature widely notes: while policy frameworks promise inclusion, students' daily experiences often reflect exclusion (Ananga, 2020; Nungu, 2013). At this university, students continue to face challenges. Some examples from the data clearly illustrate this: A wheelchair user dropped out because lecture venues were inaccessible. A male student faced judgment from peers for wearing heels, while another student was forced to wear a male suit for teaching practice and later left the university. These narratives remind us that diversity is not an abstract concept, but a lived reality, often marked by pain and complexity.

Lecturers responded by modelling care and respect. They attempted to demonstrate to pre-service teachers that all students deserve a sense of belonging. Their actions created small inclusive spaces, but these were fragile. When policies, buildings, or leadership did not support them, their care could only go so far. This illustrates that inclusion cannot depend solely on goodwill. Inclusion remains patchy and uneven in the absence of curriculum reform, staff training, and infrastructure updates. The four theories employed in this study demonstrate these tensions. *The Ethics of Care emphasises the significance of relationships and boundaries in the context of workloads and managerial culture. Ubuntu adds a communal ethic of belonging and reciprocity, reminding us that diversity should strengthen community. Yet in practice, competition and institutional individualism often undermine the values of Ubuntu. Critical Pedagogy reveals that barriers such as dress*

codes or a lack of diversity training are not minor oversights, but rather structural practices that reproduce inequality within educational spaces (Freire, 1970). *Epistemic injustice* reminds us that real inclusion is not only about buildings, but also about which voices and knowledge are valued (Morrow, 2009; Heleta, 2016). The contradictions in the findings are also significant. Lecturers resisted exclusion, but sometimes within limits. One sent a student for counselling instead of challenging the discriminatory dress code. This highlights how even well-meaning actions can inadvertently reinforce exclusion if the underlying issues remain unchallenged. As Giroux (2004) notes, lecturers need critical agency to challenge unjust policies, rather than merely comforting students within them.

What does this mean for teacher preparation? Pre-service teachers learn from what they see. If they view inclusion as an optional extra carried out by individuals, they may perpetuate the same uneven practices in schools. However, if inclusion is embedded in the everyday life of the university in classrooms, policies, and infrastructure, then it becomes part of their professional identity.

In conclusion, lecturers' efforts matter. They foster spaces of belonging, even under challenging conditions. However, systemic change is needed to close the gaps. Universities must redesign their buildings, invest in staff development, and review exclusionary policies. Curriculum reform should value diverse knowledges rather than Eurocentric standards. Inclusion must shift from being fragile and personal to being structural and ordinary. Until then, the future of inclusive education continues to rest too heavily on the shoulders of individual lecturers, rather than on institutions that claim to stand for equity and transformation.

VIII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our gratitude to Professor Chris Winberg and Mr. Thembinkosi Mthonjeni of CPUT for their critical engagement with this work.

IX. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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