



Inclusive Teaching Strategies: Insights From Student Teachers' Experiences in South African Rural Schools

Theresia Joakim, Kanyopa ^{1*}, Matseliso Mokhele-Makgalwa²

¹Dr., lecturer in the Department of Education Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, South Africa

² PhD, Professor, Vice-Dean of Research, Engagement and Internationalisation Faculty of Education, University of the Free State South Africa

✉ ***Corresponding author:**
KanyopaTJ@ufs.ac.za



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ABSTRACT: This study examines the inclusive teaching strategies employed by student-teachers during their teaching practices in South African rural schools. The study was grounded in a qualitative research approach, employing an interpretive research paradigm to explore diverse insights from the student-teachers' experiences during teaching practice in South African rural schools. The study utilised the Learner Integration Wheel (LIW) theory of practice as its lens to frame all the insights from the student teachers. It employed a convenience sampling method to select eight participants from two rural schools (four from each school). Data was collected through focus group discussions and a reflective writing activity, which was thematically analysed. Findings from two themes that emerged from the collected data revealed that negative experiences included the unavailability of resources, lack of inclusive training, poor school support, and lack of parental involvement. The study concludes that student-teachers must be exposed to diverse and inclusive teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: inclusive education, inclusive teaching strategies, Student-teachers, rural schools, teaching practice.

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Introduction

Drawing from the body of literature, Inclusive teaching refers to creating a learning environment where all learners are valued, respected, and supported regardless of their diverse learning needs (Nembambula et al., 2023; Sepadi, 2025). Through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, teachers are required to diversify the curriculum, teaching methods, and materials to foster a welcoming learning environment in their classrooms (McKenzie et al., 2021; Song, 2017). Through the lens of invitational theory perspectives, this study considers inclusive teaching

strategies, such as collaborative learning and facilitative learning, crucial for ensuring effective learner engagement while offering equal opportunities for all.

Meanwhile, research has shown that a considerable factor in the effective implementation of inclusive education in rural schools is determined by teachers' attitudes, their varying interpretations of inclusive education, as well as their roles during the implementation process (Ramadhan et al., 2024; Sydorenko et al., 2024). Conversely, the implementation of inclusive education in South African schools has been widely reported since 2001, after the introduction of the Education White Paper 6. However, the literature shows that the main focus of most studies tends to be on in-service teachers, which is why the authors of this study observed an urgent need to explore the experiences of student teachers in implementing inclusive education in South African schools.

Research Aim and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the inclusive teaching strategies employed by student-teachers during their teaching practices in South African rural schools. To achieve this aim, the study must ensure that these objectives are met.

1. To explore the inclusive teaching strategies employed by student teachers during their teaching practice in South African rural schools.
2. To examine the challenges encountered by student teachers in implementing inclusive teaching strategies in rural school contexts.

Research Questions

1. What inclusive teaching strategies do student teachers employ during their teaching practice in South African rural schools?
2. What challenges do student teachers experience in implementing inclusive teaching strategies in rural school contexts?

Participants profile

Table 1

Biographic information of participants

Participants Synonyms	Gender	Age between	Academic study year	Phases Teaching
Student teacher 1	Male	20-25	Third year	Foundation phase
Student teacher 2	Male	20-25	Third year	Foundation phase
Student teacher 3	Female	20-25	Third year	EFT and Senior phase
Student teacher 4	Female	25-30	Fourth Year	Foundation phase
Student teacher 5	Female	20-25	Fourth Year	EFT and Senior phase
Student teacher 6	Male	25-30	Fourth Year	EFT and Senior phase
Student teacher 7	Male	25-30	Fourth Year	EFT and Senior phase
Student teacher 8	Female	25-30	Fourth Year	EFT and Senior phase

Research Results

Theme one: Contextually adapted inclusive teaching strategies

Through focus group discussions and reflective writing activities, student teachers demonstrated a strong awareness of the need to make learning accessible to all learners, despite the constraints of rural classrooms. Their responses stipulated various strategies they employed to ensure inclusion in their classrooms.

Use of local resources

Findings revealed that student teachers effectively utilised local resources to support learning. Moreover, in contexts where teaching aids and technological resources were limited, student teachers relied on locally available materials such as stones, sticks, cardboard, or community objects to create visual and tactile learning aids. These strategies are reflected in their comments when they engage in group discussions and reflective writing, as they answer research questions.

"In my school, we didn't have enough textbooks or charts, so I used what was available in the environment. I collected stones and sticks for counting in Mathematics, and asked learners to bring empty containers to demonstrate capacity. It helped them understand better because they could relate to what we used." (Student teacher 3, female, BEd 3rd year)

"I learned that inclusion is not about fancy technology but about being creative. In my environmental Natural Sciences lessons, I used leaves, soil, and water from around the schoolyard to teach topics on the topics. The learners were excited, and everyone participated, even those who usually keep quiet". (Student teacher 7, male, BEd 4th year)

Use of code switching and language adaptation

Given that most rural learners speak African languages as their home languages, findings revealed that student teachers often used code-switching between English and local languages (such as Sesotho, isiXhosa, or isiZulu) to enhance comprehension (Kanyopa, 2023). Participants commented that this linguistic adaptation was particularly important for learners who struggled with English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT).

"Most of my learners struggled to understand English instructions, so I explained in Sesotho and then repeated in English. This way, they were not left behind, and even those who were shy started to participate more actively."
(Student teacher 1, female, BEd 3rd year)

"Code-switching became part of my teaching strategy. I realised that using isiXhosa examples helped learners grasp new concepts quickly. I didn't see it as lowering standards but as helping them build confidence in learning through understanding."
(Student teacher 8, female, BEd 4th year)

Use of indigenous knowledge and cultural response activities

Findings also indicated that some student teachers used indigenous stories, songs, and role-play to promote participation, particularly among learners with learning difficulties or those with limited confidence. This was observed from the following comments.

"I used local stories and proverbs to explain moral lessons in Life Skills, so that my learners could connect with the examples because they were part of their daily lives. It made teaching

inclusive because everyone's background mattered."

(Student teacher 4, female, BEd 4th year)

"When I taught History, I asked learners to share stories from their grandparents about life in the past. It encouraged participation and showed that even those with limited reading skills had valuable knowledge to contribute."

(Student teacher 2, Male, BEd 3rd year)

Overall, these inclusive strategies reflected a resilience in teaching and learning, whereby the drawn experiences of student teachers in South Africa shaped their experiences of student teachers in Africa. However, the findings also revealed that the effectiveness of these strategies depended largely on the level of support from mentor teachers and school leadership, as well as the student teachers' own confidence in applying the inclusive principles they had learned at university.

Theme two: Challenges and constraints faced by student teachers in the Implementation of inclusive teaching in rural schools

Despite their passion and commitment to inclusive teaching, student teachers faced multiple barriers that limited the consistent implementation of inclusive strategies. These challenges are discussed as follows.

Overcrowded classrooms

Findings revealed that large class sizes were one of the most prominent challenges, making it difficult to provide individualised attention or differentiated instruction (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024a). In their comments, student teachers mentioned that they had to manage classes of 40-60 learners in under-resourced classrooms.

"In my Grade 6 class, there were more than fifty learners, and it was very difficult to give individual attention. Even when I wanted to help struggling learners, the time was never enough because I had to manage the whole class." (Student teacher 2, male, BEd 3rd year)

"The number of learners in one classroom was overwhelming. I tried to use group work, but some learners still got lost in the crowd. It made inclusive teaching very challenging." (Student teacher 8, female, BEd 4th year)

Limited understanding of inclusive education among mentor teachers

Another significant challenge was the limited understanding of inclusive education among some mentor teachers, who often viewed inclusion as relevant only to learners with visible disabilities. Participants revealed that this narrow interpretation hindered their efforts to apply a broader, socially inclusive approach aligned with the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) policy on inclusive education, which promotes access and participation for all learners regardless of their (dis) abilities (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2021; Kanyopa & Chibaya, 2025). The participants of the study expressed their thoughts as follows.

"My mentor teacher believed inclusive education was only for children with disabilities. When I tried to use group work and peer support, she told me it was a waste of time and that I should just teach and move on." (Student teacher 6, male, BEd 4th year)

"Some of the teachers didn't understand what inclusion really means. They expected me to teach traditionally and not to 'spend too much time on weak learners,' as they called them." (Student teacher 3, female, BEd 3rd year)

Inadequate teaching and learning resources

Moreover, this study has found that South African rural schools have inadequate teaching resources, including a lack of textbooks, assistive devices, and visual aids, which further constrain inclusive practices (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b). Participants in the study reported the following.

"We didn't have enough teaching materials or visual aids. Sometimes I had to draw diagrams on the chalkboard instead of using charts or pictures, which limited how much learners could engage, especially those who learn better visually." (Student teacher 1, male, BEd 3rd year)

"It was frustrating when I wanted to implement inclusive activities but lacked resources. Even basic things like paper or crayons were not available, so I had to improvise with what was around the school." (Student teacher 7, male, BEd 4th year)

Cultural and language barriers

Additionally, findings revealed that student teachers faced language and cultural barriers in South African rural schools. Findings have shown that some cultural norms discourage learner participation (especially for girls in some communities), which has resulted in challenges in creating inclusive classroom environments.

"Most learners spoke isiXhosa, but the language of teaching was English. I had to explain things in both languages, and sometimes I wasn't fluent enough to translate certain terms accurately. It made teaching slower and stressful." (Student teacher 5, female, BEd 4th year)

"In some classes, boys dominated discussions because of cultural expectations. Some girls were quiet and hesitant to speak. It was difficult to encourage full participation without going against local norms." (Student teacher 4, female, BEd 4th year)

Nevertheless, the findings of this study also stipulate that student teachers in South African rural schools are experiencing emotional challenges when implementing inclusive practices, as in most cases, their efforts to make their lessons inclusive are not always appreciated by their mentor teachers. This was evidenced by the comment that says

"Some teachers thought I was just trying to impress university lecturers instead of teaching the normal way." (Student teacher 2, female, BEd 3rd year)

In essence, these participant reflections on both emerged themes provided valuable learning insights regarding the issue of inclusive education in rural school contexts. Student teachers reflected that rural school placements enhanced their professional resilience, creativity, and adaptability. Through their teaching practice period, they developed a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence learning. They recognised the importance of collaboration with peers, parents, and community members in supporting inclusive education.

Conclusions

To conclude, this study examined student teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive teaching strategies during their teaching practice in rural schools in South Africa. Findings revealed their commitment and creativity in promoting inclusion even under difficult rural conditions. However, the findings have shown several challenges that limit the full implementation of inclusive teaching. Participants in the study made considerable efforts to include all learners by utilising local resources, code-switching between English and local languages, and engaging learners through

group work and storytelling. These strategies helped them make lessons more meaningful and accessible despite limited resources. Therefore, this study recommends that universities and schools collaborate to prepare and support student teachers more effectively for their teaching practices. This study also emphasises the importance of proper training for mentor teachers to help them understand and promote inclusive education. As elaborated in the Learner Integration Wheel (LIW) theory of practice, teachers in schools cannot do it alone; thus, this study also calls for collaboration with parents from the school community and curriculum developers to work together to make inclusion in rural schools more sustainable.

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