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Reflecting on Inclusion: Lecturers' Experiences of Creating Inclusive Learning Spaces in Higher Education

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Abstract

As a signatory to national and global education frameworks, South Africa has committed to building an inclusive higher education system rooted in equity and access. Despite improvement in students' access to higher education, several institutional structures still reflect colonial legacies and reinforce epistemic and pedagogical exclusion. Lecturers are expected to embody inclusive pedagogies in their classrooms, often without the proper resources, capacitation, or institutional support. This creates emotional and intellectual challenges, especially for those working with students from historically marginalised contexts. This article explores the lived experiences of three lecturers in a South African faculty of education as they reflect on how they create inclusive learning spaces in their practices. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the study draws on interviews and institutional documents to understand this phenomenon. This study is guided by three interrelated theoretical lenses: reflective practice, ethics of care, and decolonial critique. Data were analysed using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM). The findings reveal three main concerns: the institutional barriers that constrain inclusive teaching; the emotional and ethical labour involved in teaching with care; and how critical reflection can act as a form of pedagogical resistance. These narratives show that inclusion is not simply about policy implementation but also the essence of the everyday relational work lecturers do in classrooms. The study calls for universities to recognise and support the discharging of inclusive epistemic practices and to pay attention to the emotional-ethical dimensions of praxis as part of meaningful transformation and decolonisation of higher education.

Keywords: Epistemic justice, Ethics of care, Higher education, Inclusive teaching, Reflection.

Introduction and Problem Statement

In the context of post-apartheid transformation, inclusive education has become a national imperative in South African higher education. The country's legislative and policy frameworks, including the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996), call for equitable access, participation, and university success. However, despite these formal commitments, many institutional structures continue to exclude, marginalise, and fail to accommodate students whose needs fall outside dominant norms (Govender & Naidoo, 2023) This paper emerges from recognising that implementing inclusive practices often falls on lecturers navigating rigid curricula, high student numbers, limited resources, and shifting institutional expectations (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

While inclusive teaching is promoted through policy discourse, little attention is given to how lecturers experience this mandate. With minimal support, they must accommodate linguistic, cultural, economic, and cognitive diversity. According to Adonis and Silinda (2021), the discrepancy between institutional rhetoric and the lived realities of academic staff highlights the need to better understand how inclusion is practised and resisted at the level of everyday pedagogical decision-making. While there is growing literature on inclusive education, much focuses on student experiences, institutional policy shifts, or curriculum reforms (Oswal et al., 2025; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022).

The voices of lecturers expected to bring inclusion to life in the classroom are often missing. Their daily struggles, reflective practices, and emotional labour are seldom centred in research or policy. This lacuna matters because it hides the real work of inclusion, the relational, ethical, and intellectual efforts that lecturers invest, often without recognition or proper institutional support. By foregrounding their experiences, this study responds to that gap and argues that lecturers' voices are central to any serious conversation about transformation and inclusion in South African higher education. This study explores how three lecturers reflect on their inclusive teaching strategies, emotional investments, and ethical commitments within a South African university.

This approach resonates with the work of Walker and Boni (2020), who emphasise human development and agency within education, and with Malecka and Boud's (2023) notion of epistemological access as a key dimension of inclusion. As mentioned by Ngidi and

Mncwango (2022), language remains a significant barrier for many students, particularly those entering university without strong proficiency in the language of instruction. In such cases, lecturers are not only teaching content but also mediating access to academic participation. Their role is therefore critical to student success, mainly when supported by inclusive pedagogy and an ethic of care (de Kerk, 2022). As Piketty (2021, in UNESCO, 2017) notes, ensuring broad access to quality higher education is central to reducing inequalities and advancing social justice.

Despite policy intentions and increasing access, structural inequality persists, including how students with disabilities or those from under-resourced schools are supported (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Ainscow, 2020). When institutional cultures do not fully embrace inclusion, students often encounter exclusionary practices that undermine their academic potential and sense of belonging (Nichols, 2023). Focusing on lecturers and narratives, the article contributes to broader conversations on academic staff development, pedagogical justice, and transformation in higher education.

Literature review

In South Africa and around the world, institutions of higher learning are responsible for being inclusive spaces where students from different backgrounds and learning styles are supported. Inclusion and respect for diversity should be core values of each institution (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusive education involves students, teachers, and the broader learning community (Volmink, 2018). It entails providing a healthy learning environment that promotes students' self-worth, confidence, and achievement. Inclusive practices primarily focus on students at risk of marginalisation or underperformance for various reasons. An institution's lack of inclusive spaces can make students feel unwelcome or as if they do not belong, particularly those who do not fit into the perceived norm (Nichols, 2023). Ainscow (2020) argues that the South African concept of *ubuntu*, which emphasises shared humanity and caring, aligns closely with the goals of inclusive education. Without an ethos of caring and community (as embodied in *ubuntu*) in educational institutions, inclusion will likely be absent, and students may be neglected when they face academic or personal challenges.

Many students in South Africa from disadvantaged backgrounds or those living with disabilities still find it difficult to access higher education. (Charimba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Ndlovu &Woldegiorgis, 2023; Duma & Shawa, 2019). This has happened even though the country has been a democratic state since 1994, where the right to access education is entrenched in the constitution. Since 1994, the government has introduced and made changes

in policies in higher education to ensure that students have access and can be supported to succeed. Despite all these amendments, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still faced with challenges such as funding, accommodation and support.

Improvements, such as funding for university fees and accommodation, even though not enough, have included greater access to higher education and support for vulnerable students, such as those with disabilities, as well as funding opportunities for students from low-income families. Davids and Waghid (2024) observe that since 1994, the number of students in South African higher education has increased by about one million, reaching roughly 20% of the 18–23 age group. This enrolment growth has offered opportunities to many previously excluded youth, and is viewed as a way to change higher education and promote democratisation (Davids, 202). According to Davids and Waghid (2024), expanding participation in higher education gives South Africa's growing young population a chance to improve their lives and reduce inequality. However, other studies (Badat, 2020; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022) argue that massification alone has not reduced inequality.

Badat (2020) notes that although more students enter university, this has not translated into equal success rates. Far fewer students graduate than enrol, and dropout rates remain high. Increased access without sufficient support can lead to unequal outcomes. As Booysen (2021) points out, many students gain entry but struggle to succeed due to a lack of academic and emotional support. Historically, students with disabilities were often excluded from higher education or seen as incapable of coping with university demands (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Today, institutions of higher learning are required to provide access and support to students with disabilities and to have dedicated inclusion policies. Many countries, including South Africa, have mandated such policies since the 1990s.

Governments worldwide have shown commitment by passing legislation that promotes inclusion in educational institutions, protecting students who previously might have been considered "unsuitable" for mainstream education (Ainscow, 2020). As a result, inclusive education is receiving global attention. When universities are accessible and supportive to all students, it is a victory for social justice in education. Piketty (2021), as cited in UNESCO 2017), posits that providing broad access and support in higher education increases students' chances of academic success and can help decrease dropout rates. This further advocates for inclusive education.

Prevailing Discourses on Inclusive Teaching in Higher Education

Transformation Discourse

The moral and constitutional imperative drives the transformation discourse in South African higher education to dismantle apartheid legacies and ensure that institutions become inclusive spaces. This discourse is rooted in equity, access, and redress. It is reinforced by national policies such as the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) and the Constitution (RSA, 1996). Scholars such as Badat (2009) and Soudien (2010) argue that meaningful transformation must go beyond demographic change and address structural inequalities embedded in university cultures. Despite efforts to widen participation, many students, especially those from rural, under-resourced, or historically disadvantaged schools, continue to experience alienation and marginalisation within higher education institutions. As seen in the narratives of lecturers in this study, transformation remains partial and uneven, often reduced to compliance measures rather than deep pedagogical reform. Lecturers are expected to 'do transformation' without systemic support, leading to emotional, ethical, and institutional burden of responsibility.

Care and Relational Pedagogy Discourse

This discourse foregrounds the emotional, interpersonal, and ethical labour of inclusive teaching. Grounded in Noddings' (2003) ethic of care and supported by recent work on relational pedagogy (Ainascow, 2020), this discourse highlights that inclusion is not only a technical or academic concern, but also a profoundly human one. Lecturers must demonstrate empathy, responsiveness, and sensitivity to students' varied needs and backgrounds. South African higher education includes first-generation university entrants, students living with disabilities, or those negotiating linguistic and cultural challenges (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). This discourse reframes inclusion as a practice of care, suggesting that the quality of relationships in the classroom is central to academic success and student belonging (Ainascow, 2020).

Epistemic Justice Discourse

Epistemic justice discourse challenges the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and interrogates whose voices, experiences, and ways of knowing are legitimised within higher education. As discussed earlier, inclusion cannot be meaningful without addressing epistemic exclusion, the systematic silencing of students from marginalised linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds (Babu et al., 2025). In the South African university context, lecturers often teach within inherited curricula that centre Western epistemologies, while students' lived realities, particularly Black, first-generation, and working-class students, remain peripheral

(Govender, 2023; Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). These epistemological hierarchies reinforce unequal classroom dynamics, where students may feel their knowledge is not valued or invisible.

Decolonial critiques contend that higher education does challenge who is included and how knowledge is produced and validated (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). In this framing, inclusion becomes a transformative project that disrupts taken-for-granted pedagogical norms and opens space for multilingualism, lived experience, and culturally relevant knowledge. Epistemic justice, therefore, is not an add-on; it is foundational to inclusive and socially just higher education. De Klerk (2022) posits that within this discourse, lecturers are called to critically engage with curriculum design, assessment practices, and classroom interactions. The argument is that inclusion is shaped not only by what knowledge is valued, but also by how that knowledge is transmitted, both of which impact students' sense of belonging.

Empirical Literature

Research from both Global North and Global South contexts shows that inclusive teaching in higher education remains a challenge, despite growing policy attention. Several studies point to a disjuncture between institutional inclusion policies and actual teaching practice. For example, Willemse et al. (2025) found that while Dutch lecturers were committed to diversity in principle, they struggled to implement inclusive methods due to limited collaboration, lack of training, and absence of shared language about inclusion. Similarly, Svendby (2024) observed that many lecturers feel overwhelmed by the increasing diversity of student populations and that disability inclusion, in particular, is often sidelined. Both studies highlight the institutional gap in lecturer support and professional development.

From a Global South perspective, Nawire et al. (2025) reported that despite formal inclusion policies at the University of Nairobi and UCL, practical implementation remains weak, with both staff and students noting limited progress. This echoes the findings of Korkie et al. (2025), who showed that South African lecturers often feel underprepared to teach inclusively, citing time pressures, curriculum constraints, and lack of training as main reasons. Pre-service teachers also struggled to translate inclusive theory into practice. In a related review, Altes et al. (2024) confirmed that while most lecturers value inclusion, institutional and individual barriers such as inadequate resources, lack of skills, and emotional burnout continue to block progress.

Bellacicco et al. (2025), working with disabled graduates in Italy, found that inclusive teaching depends heavily on the interpersonal skills and attitudes of lecturers. Where lecturers

were caring, open, and relational, students were more likely to disclose their disabilities and access support. This study makes a strong case for relational pedagogy as a foundation for inclusive practice. Together, these studies point to a global pattern: inclusion is often left to individual lecturers, who are expected to 'make it work' in rigid systems with minimal support. However, there is a growing recognition that inclusive teaching involves more than technical strategies; it requires emotional labour, cultural responsiveness, and deep institutional change. While much of this work has focused on student experiences, fewer studies have centred on the perspectives of lecturers themselves, especially in teacher education spaces in South Africa. This article responds to that gap by focusing on how lecturers navigate the emotional, ethical, and institutional demands of inclusive teaching in a post-apartheid university context.

Analytical framing

This study draws on three overlapping theoretical lenses: reflective practice, ethics of care, and decolonial critique. Together, these frameworks help make sense of how inclusive teaching is understood and enacted by lecturers working in a higher education context marked by inequality, diversity, and ongoing transformation. Inclusion in South African universities is not just about access to classrooms, but also about how students are treated, whose knowledge is respected, and whether they feel they belong. These theories allow us to explore inclusion beyond policy language, focusing on the everyday ethical, relational, and political work done by lecturers.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice refers to the process where educators pause to think carefully about their own teaching, values, and classroom choices. Dewey (1933) believed that reflection makes teaching more thoughtful and responsive, while Schön (1983) explained how educators reflect in action, making decisions in the moment while teaching. In South African universities, reflective practice goes beyond technical improvement; it becomes a way for lecturers to question inherited norms that may exclude or silence some students. As Waghid (2020) argues, reflection in our context is not just personal; it is political. It allows educators to become aware of how their teaching might be reinforcing inequalities and gives them space to try different, more inclusive approaches. In this study, reflective practice emerged as a strategy that helped lecturers centre their students' realities, especially when institutional structures did not support them.

Ethics of Care

An ethic of care focuses on building respectful, trusting relationships between lecturers and students. Noddings (2003) describes care as not only about kindness but also about responsibility and responsiveness. According to Ndluvu and Adewoye (2024), in South Africa, many students face challenges that go beyond academics, such as hunger, financial pressure, trauma, or struggling with English as a second language. In these cases, teaching must include care. It means lecturers show empathy, listen, and adjust their teaching to respond to students as humans who should be treated with respect. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) argue that caring teaching practices can resist the cold, competitive culture that often exists in universities. Teaching with care becomes a way to protect students from falling through the cracks. This also connects strongly to *Ubuntu*, which reminds us that we become human through others, and that inclusion means seeing and valuing each other's dignity.

Decolonial Critique

Decolonial critique helps us understand how colonial ideas and systems still shape universities today. Even though apartheid has ended, many of the structures and ways of knowing in higher education still reflect colonial values. Scholars like Mbembe (2016), Heleta (2016), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argue that true transformation means we must ask hard questions: Whose knowledge is being taught? Whose languages are valued? Who gets to belong in the classroom? In this study, lecturers tried to shift this by bringing in local knowledge, using multilingual strategies, and creating space for students' lived experiences. This reflects Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)(Ladson-Billings, 1995), which encourages teachers to include learners' cultural identities and experiences in their teaching. CRP pushes against standardised teaching by making learning more meaningful and affirming for students from marginalised backgrounds. When used in South African classrooms, especially in teacher education, CRP becomes part of a decolonial practice that helps lecturers challenge whose knowledge counts and make space for African, working-class, and multilingual perspectives.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study was located within the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism allowed exploring how lecturers experience and make sense of inclusion within their specific teaching and institutional contexts (Yin, 2013). In particular, this paradigm is well-suited for studying how participants reflect on and interpret their role in creating inclusive spaces in higher education.

Research Design

A qualitative, narrative inquiry approach was employed, allowing for deep engagement with lecturers' lived experiences of inclusive teaching. The design enabled the researcher to capture the emotional, ethical, and professional dimensions of lecturers' work, as they spoke freely about their understandings of inclusion and their pedagogical practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a faculty of education in a Western Cape Province university in the Republic of South Africa that offers undergraduate (pre-service teachers) and postgraduate degrees in education. This institution was selected due to its role in preparing future teachers. Three female lecturers, referred to as "Zandra," "Busi," and "Cindy," were purposefully selected due to their experience in the Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase teacher training programme. By selecting these lecturers teaching in multiple phases, the goal was to ensure that the data captures inclusive education practices across the faculty. Each lecturer has over ten years of university teaching experience. This small sample allowed for rich, in-depth engagement with the subject matter (Albertyn, 2024). While the study focused on three lecturers, all identified as women, this was not an intentional exclusion of male voices but a reflection of who responded to the call for participation and who were willing to share their narratives in depth. Their experiences offer important insights into how gendered expectations may intersect with the emotional and pedagogical labour of inclusion. At the same time, the absence of male participants is acknowledged as a limitation. This means that the findings may reflect particular gendered understandings of care, responsibility, and resistance in the academic space. Future research should include broader gender perspectives to enrich the findings further.

Table 1: Study participants

Name	Race	Gender	Age group	Work experience
Zandra	Coloured	Female	60-65	+ 20 years
Busi	Black	Female	30-39	+10 years
Cindy	White	Female	40-49	+10 years

Data Collection

Data were collected using two primary sources: semi-structured narrative interviews and institutional document analysis. The interviews, guided by open-ended questions and prompts, were informed by the ethic of care and aimed to uncover how lecturers embed inclusive values in their teaching. Interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were conducted face-to-face and via Microsoft Teams. These were recorded and transcribed by the researcher, after which it was presented to the participants to verify the transcripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity. In addition to interviews, institutional documents such as faculty module guides, university policies, and teaching development reports were reviewed. These documents were not coded line-by-line but were used to provide contextual background and to help interpret participants' narratives in light of official discourses on inclusion. The documents offered a lens through which to compare institutional rhetoric with the lived realities described by the participants.

Data Analysis Procedure

The Constant Comparative Method (CCM) was used to analyse the interview transcripts and institutional documents (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This iterative process involved reading, comparing, and categorising data to identify recurring themes across the narratives. Data were organised into thematic categories that reflected the lecturers' strategies and challenges in fostering inclusive teaching practices (Riessman, 2008).

Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were employed to ensure validity and trustworthiness. Triangulation included participant triangulation, drawing from three lecturers, and researcher triangulation, which involved peer review of codes and categories (Kerfoot & Winberg, 1997; Maree, 2019). Reflexivity was maintained throughout, with the researcher journaling interpretations and doubling. These methods enhanced interpretive integrity, while the use of document analysis further strengthened contextual depth.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Western Cape's Higher Degree Committee (ethics reference number: HS2/9/90). The second ethics were obtained from the research ethics committee of the university where this study was conducted (ethics reference number: EFEC 3-01/2024). All participants gave written informed consent and were assured

of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequence.

Findings

Theme 1

Promoting Connection, Belonging, and Responding to Individual Needs.

The lecturers narrated their strategies to ensure that they were inclusive in their practices and that inclusion was promoted in their lectures. The lecturers mentioned how they create inclusive spaces that make students feel welcome and support their needs. The lecturers emphasised self-reflection on their conduct and continuous improvement of their teaching practice to better serve students' needs.

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 …"*

This extract from Zandra illustrates a commitment shared by the other two lecturers. They strive to create a classroom atmosphere where students from different backgrounds and with varying learning needs feel 'seen' and valued as part of the academic community. Such practices align with Noddings' (2003) ethic of care, where teaching involves more than delivering content, as it requires emotional presence and responsiveness to student needs. Lecturers' narratives confirm that care and recognition are central to inclusion in higher education (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). This is particularly important in South Africa, where historical inequalities still shape student experiences (Heleta, 2016). Zandra's emphasis on reflection highlights the value of what Schön (1983) terms 'reflection-in-action,' where teaching becomes an iterative and self-critical practice.

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 …"*

Likewise,…. 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…"*

These reflections show that demonstrating care for students is fundamental, especially in a teacher preparation context. The lecturers believe that pre-service teachers learn how to be caring, inclusive educators by experiencing care from their lecturers. Their narratives echo Dewey's (1933) idea that teaching is not only cognitive but also deeply moral and relational. As the literature shows, inclusion is not simply about access but about fostering belonging, safety, and affirmation in spaces where students' identities are recognised (Davids & Waghid, 2024). In this way, the lecturers' actions become political and ethical acts, a form of resistance to exclusionary academic cultures that have historically marginalised working-class, Black, and disabled students (CHE, 2021).

The commitment to reflection, care, and respect shown by Zandra, Cindy, and Busi demonstrates that inclusion is not something done to students. Still, something co-constructed with them through dialogue, empathy, and critically reflexive practice.

Theme 2

Accommodating Diverse Students in Higher Education

The second theme pertains to how lecturers accommodate and support various students and the challenges they encounter. All three lecturers described efforts to ensure their diverse students are supported and prepared to become inclusive teachers who can help diverse learners in schools. However, implementing inclusive practices at the university does not come without challenges.

Busi explained: "…*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 quite a few physically challenged students. I remember when a student in a wheelchair was in a lift on the way to a lecture …"*

Zandra added: "…*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 ..."

Cindy noted: "…*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 are teaching…"*

These experiences show persistent structural barriers that compromise the goal of inclusion. They align with Badat's (2020) and Booysen's (2021) research, who argue that meaningful support structures remain underdeveloped while access to higher education has increased. Despite institutional policies promoting inclusion (DHET, 2013), lecturers report that buildings remain inaccessible, and there is little investment in professional development for diversity.

Moreover, from a decolonial perspective, the institutional inaction represents an epistemic and structural failure to transform inherited colonial systems that were never designed for the inclusive, pluralistic student body of post-apartheid South Africa (Davids, 2021). Inclusion is undermined not only by outdated infrastructure but also by institutional cultures that fail to engage with questions of power, race, and disability in meaningful ways. Despite these challenges, lecturers attempt to accommodate students through personal advocacy and informal support. Zandra's mention of raising concerns in staff meetings and Busi's referrals to student support services show how lecturers take responsibility for inclusive teaching, even without structural backing. These efforts reflect Bozalek and Boughey's (2012) argument that lecturers must often resist institutional resistance through pedagogical agency.
The lecturers' accounts also raise critical questions about institutional commitment. As Davids (2021) noted, universities must do more than adopt inclusive language; they must back this up with tangible resources and action. The fact that inclusion remains largely dependent on individual lecturer initiative points to an ongoing gap between policy rhetoric and institutional transformation.

This theme shows that while lecturers are deeply committed to accommodating student diversity, they are challenged by broader systemic failures. Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis (2024) argue that inclusive teaching will remain an aspiration rather than fully realised without institutional transformation, including infrastructure upgrades, staff development, and leadership accountability.

Theme 3

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.

Busi shared: "…*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…"*

The above statement affirms that inclusion is not only about teaching practices or care ethics by lecturers; the institution's policies and environment play a critical role in shaping how students experience belonging and safety. The unavailability of gender-neutral bathrooms represents a structural exclusion that disproportionately impacts transgender and gender-nonconforming students. As Nichols (2023) argued, learning institutions are responsible for ensuring that all students, regardless of gender identity, feel protected and respected. Even without ideal institutional support, the lecturers take steps within their classrooms to foster a climate of respect.

Cindy shared: "…*I encourage students to respect each other. I always tell them they must respect other people's values and choices…*"

Cindy's statement illustrates a proactive approach to inclusion. By explicitly setting expectations of respect, she models inclusive teaching and prepares pre-service teachers to do the same. This aligns with Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic justice, which treats others as knowers with dignity, regardless of how they present or identify.

Zandra also recalled:

"…*I remember a few years ago, we had a student here who was different in how he dressed. Before that student's teaching practice, he experienced difficulties, and I recommended that he consult a psychologist for help…"*

Zandra's narrative highlights the tension between inclusive intentions and systemic enforcement of conformity. Although she attempted to support the student, the institutional response was exclusionary. The outcome, the student dropping out, speaks to the tangible harms of policies that do not accommodate diversity. Her response also reflects reflective resistance, a refusal to ignore the ethical harm caused by institutional rigidity (Davids & Waghid, 2019). The experiences narrated by the lecturers point to the layered complexities of promoting respect in teacher education. These stories echo calls for a decolonial orientation in higher education that challenges colonial binaries and values diverse identities as legitimate and worthy of affirmation (Heleta, 2016; Le Grange, 2016). Ultimately, lecturers not only teach content, but they also cultivate attitudes. Their actions serve as a living curriculum for pre-service teachers, embedding social justice, empathy, and acceptance values. As Stites et al. (2018) contend, teacher preparation must ensure that no learner is discriminated against and that educators are equipped to build inclusive and caring classrooms. The findings suggest that while institutional transformation remains incomplete, lecturers continue to model what such transformation could look like in practice.

Discussion

This study highlights how inclusive teaching in South African universities often starts with individual lecturers, not institutional directives. These lecturers practise inclusion through small but powerful acts of care, reflection, and resistance, even as they face major structural and epistemic barriers. Their narratives show that inclusion is deeply relational. Lecturers build trust, affirm diversity, and respond to students' lived experiences, aligning with Noddings' (2003) ethic of care. This also echoes Bellacicco et al. (2025), who found that students with disabilities felt safer disclosing their needs when lecturers were empathetic.

Caring practices, as Bozalek and Boughey (2012) argue, can challenge the performative, competitive culture in higher education. Reflection also emerges as central. Zandra's daily reflections align with Schön's (1983) model of adaptive teaching. Reflective practice allowed lecturers to remain responsive and reimagine their roles. This contrasts with Willemse et al. (2025), who noted a gap between lecturers' beliefs about inclusion and their actual teaching. In this study, lecturers were not just thinking about inclusion; they were doing it.

Inclusion comes at a cost; participants described being overwhelmed, unsupported, and expected to carry the work alone. This reflects findings by Korkie et al. (2025) and Svendby (2024), who observed that lecturers struggle under time pressure and feel unprepared for

inclusive teaching. The institutional failure to support inclusive practices echoes broader critiques of South African higher education, where transformation often remains rhetorical (Badat, 2020; CHE, 2021). Students are also marginalised epistemically. Lecturers recounted how students' accents, writing styles, or cultural knowledge were dismissed as "unacademic". This aligns with Davids' (2021) concept of epistemic injustice and Heleta's (2016) critique of persistent Eurocentrism in universities.

Attempts to decolonise curricula faced resistance from institutional quality assurance systems. Ubuntu provides a distinctly local response. As Le Grange (2016) explains, it challenges the individualism of neoliberal academia by centring dignity, reciprocity, and community. The lecturers' pedagogies were not just about inclusion; they were about rehumanising the university. Ultimately, this study confirms what Davids and Waghid (2024) argue: inclusion cannot rest on individual effort alone. For it to be sustainable, universities must provide training, revise curricula, support epistemic justice, and shift their institutional culture. The lecturers in this study are already doing the work, but support from university management is needed to make the lecturers' work easier.

Conclusion

This article has shown that inclusive teaching in South African higher education is sustained through care, reflection, and small acts of resistance by lecturers working within often rigid and unequal institutional systems. While inclusive policies exist, much of the real work of inclusion happens in the classroom through human connection, ethical judgment, and pedagogical risk-taking. The study highlights that inclusion is not something added onto teaching; it is teaching. And yet, this labour remains largely invisible and unsupported. If universities are serious about transformation, they must move beyond symbolic commitments. Inclusive education is already happening in our South African learning institutions and classrooms, not through grand reforms, but in the quiet, committed efforts of lecturers who choose to teach with dignity, humility, and justice, and must no longer go unnoticed. Inclusion needs to be structurally recognised, emotionally supported, and epistemically grounded in the lived realities of students and lecturers alike.

Recommendations

Accruing from the findings of this study, it is recommended that there is a need to recognise inclusive teaching in promotion and performance systems, valuing care, relational practice, and responsiveness as core academic work, not extra. Establishing communities of practice where

lecturers can share strategies rooted in reflection, care, multilingualism, and contextual responsiveness is essential. Supporting curriculum transformation by integrating African epistemologies, language diversity, and socially just pedagogies into mainstream teaching and learning would have a positive impact on inclusion education in South Africa.

Declarations

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is declared by the author.

Ethics declaration

This research strictly adhered to the Helsinki declaration, and an Ethics Committee Approval was obtained from the University of the Western Cape Ethics Committee and the university where the study was conducted.

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Data Availability Statement

The data for this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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