

# Reconceptualising Educator Preparation for Inclusive Learning Environments: Evidence from a Ghanaian Teacher Education Institution

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**Abstract:** The shift toward inclusive education requires a fundamental rethinking of how educators are prepared to teach in diverse classrooms. In Ghana, while policies such as the Inclusive Education Policy (2015) mandate access to quality education for all learners, teacher preparation programmes have struggled to fully equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for inclusive practice. This study explored how a Ghanaian teacher education institution conceptualises and implements inclusive education in its pre-service teacher preparation. Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and critical pedagogy, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. Data were collected through document analysis, semi-structured interviews with 12 faculty members, and focus group discussions with 20 pre-service teachers. Findings revealed that while the curriculum integrates aspects of inclusive pedagogy, significant gaps remain in practical training, faculty capacity, and contextualised teaching strategies. The study underscores the need for a transformative approach that embeds inclusion across all aspects of teacher education. Recommendations include curriculum redesign to emphasise practice-based learning, capacity building for teacher educators, and stronger school university partnerships to create authentic inclusive teaching experiences. These insights contribute to the discourse on preparing educators for inclusive learning environments in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Education, Teacher Preparation, Ghana, Pre-Service Teachers, Teacher Education Institutions.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of global educational reform, founded on the principle that all learners regardless of disability, socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, or language have the right to equitable access to quality education within mainstream settings (UNESCO, 2020). This paradigm shift represents not only a commitment to human rights but also a recognition of the social and economic benefits of ensuring that every learner can participate meaningfully in education. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) have further reinforced this agenda, calling for education systems to embrace diversity and provide inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In Ghana, the introduction of the Inclusive Education Policy (2015) marked a significant milestone in advancing this vision. The policy underscores the government's

commitment to building an education system that accommodates the varied needs of all learners, including those with disabilities and other forms of vulnerability. It mandates schools to adopt inclusive practices that remove barriers to learning and participation, thereby promoting equity within classrooms. However, despite these policy advancements, evidence suggests that the implementation of inclusive education in Ghana remains inconsistent and uneven (Opoku et al., 2021; Agbenyega, 2018). Many classrooms lack the resources, trained personnel, and supportive environments needed to facilitate meaningful inclusion. Teachers often express frustration over large class sizes, inadequate teaching materials, and the absence of specialist support services, all of which hinder their ability to meet the diverse needs of learners (Anthony, 2011; Agbenyega, 2018).

A critical factor influencing the success of inclusive education is teacher preparation. Research consistently shows that teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills are decisive in

determining whether inclusive practices succeed or fail (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Forlin, 2018). In the Ghanaian context, studies indicate that many educators enter the profession with limited understanding of inclusive pedagogies, insufficient skills in differentiated instruction, and low confidence in managing diverse classrooms (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015; Opoku et al., 2021). These gaps often result in superficial or tokenistic inclusion, where learners with disabilities or other learning needs are physically present in classrooms but remain effectively excluded from full participation and learning.

Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) occupy a central position in addressing these challenges. As the primary sites for training pre-service teachers, they are responsible for equipping future educators not only with subject knowledge but also with the competencies required to create inclusive learning environments. This involves preparing teachers to design and implement differentiated instruction, utilise assistive technologies, foster positive attitudes toward diversity, and collaborate with families and communities to support learners' needs (Forlin, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2021). Despite this critical role, questions persist regarding how TEIs in Ghana conceptualise and operationalise inclusive education within their curricula. Are inclusive principles embedded across all aspects of teacher preparation, or are they confined to isolated modules? Do pre-service teachers have opportunities to apply inclusive strategies in real classroom contexts? And do teacher educators themselves possess the expertise and commitment needed to model inclusive practices?

These questions are particularly relevant given the growing international consensus that effective inclusion requires systemic change in teacher education, shifting from content-driven instruction to competency-based, practice-oriented approaches (UNESCO, 2020; Florian & Beaton, 2018). Against this backdrop, this study explores how a leading Ghanaian teacher education institution prepares pre-service teachers for inclusive learning environments. It examines the extent to which inclusive education is integrated into the curriculum, the pedagogical approaches employed, faculty attitudes and capacities, and the institutional supports available.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which positions learning as a socially mediated process occurring through interaction with more knowledgeable others within specific cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory's central concept, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), highlights the gap between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate guidance and support. This underscores the importance of scaffolding, where teachers and peers provide structured assistance that enables learners to reach higher levels of competence. Within inclusive teacher education, Sociocultural Theory stresses that the preparation of pre-service teachers involves collective, practice-oriented learning rather than isolated individual

development. Learning to teach inclusively emerges through social interaction, cultural tools, and shared experiences, as pre-service teachers engage in dialogue with peers and mentors, participate in authentic classroom experiences, and reflect critically on their practices in relation to the diverse contexts they encounter. The theory also emphasises the influence of context on educational practices. Ghana's multilingual and socio-culturally diverse classrooms present unique challenges and opportunities, requiring teacher education programmes to equip pre-service teachers with contextually relevant skills. Focusing on collaborative, situated learning experiences ensures that teacher trainees develop the capacity to respond effectively to diverse learner needs. Anchoring this study in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory situates inclusive teacher preparation as an interactive and culturally responsive process, where competence in addressing learner diversity is constructed through engagement with others and shaped by the environments in which teachers learn and practice.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the practices and perceptions surrounding inclusive education within a Ghanaian teacher education institution. The case study approach was considered appropriate because it facilitated an in-depth examination of the institution's approach to preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. It provided a holistic understanding of the complexities inherent in the institution's curriculum, pedagogy, and stakeholder perspectives (Yin, 2018). Employing this design enabled the researcher to capture the lived experiences of faculty and pre-service teachers, uncovering how inclusive education is conceptualised and implemented within the teacher education context.

The population for the study comprised individuals directly involved in teaching and learning within the selected teacher education institution, which is a leading public institution located in southern Ghana and widely recognised for its efforts in promoting inclusive education initiatives. The participants consisted of 9 faculty members, including lecturers in education, special education, and curriculum studies, as well as 20 final-year Bachelor of Education students enrolled in the institution's pre-service teacher education programme. Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience of inclusive education practices within the institution (Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy ensured that the data collected would be rich and contextually meaningful, as the selected participants were well-positioned to provide insights into both the strengths and limitations of the institution's approach to inclusion.

Data collection involved three complementary methods: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Document analysis focused on reviewing curriculum documents, course outlines, and institutional policy statements to understand how inclusion was embedded in the programme's design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members to explore

their conceptualisations of inclusive education, their teaching practices, and the challenges they faced in delivering inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, focus group discussions were held with pre-service teachers to gather their perspectives on the adequacy of their preparation for inclusive classrooms. These methods were chosen to provide multiple viewpoints and to enable triangulation of the data, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings.

Interview and focus group transcripts, as well as the analysed documents, were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content. Codes were generated both inductively, emerging directly from the data, and deductively, informed by the study's theoretical framework. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, leading to the identification of key themes relating to curriculum content, pedagogical practices, institutional challenges, and recommendations for improving inclusive teacher preparation. This systematic approach allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the data, revealing patterns and insights that addressed the study's research questions.

Ethical principles guided every stage of the research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution's ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their informed consent was obtained. Participation was strictly voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any point without facing any negative consequences. These ethical considerations ensured that the study was conducted with integrity, respect for participants, and adherence to established research standards.

#### IV. FINDINGS

##### ➤ Curriculum Integration

Analysis of curriculum documents revealed that inclusive education is present but largely confined to a single, standalone course, rather than being systematically integrated across all teacher preparation modules. Faculty participants openly acknowledged this limitation, noting that inclusion is treated as a discrete topic rather than a cross-cutting competency:

“We have a course on inclusive education, but it's only one semester. The rest of the programme doesn't really integrate inclusion into subject teaching. If you are a science or math major, for instance, you may never discuss how to adapt your lessons for diverse learners.”

This sentiment was echoed by pre-service teachers, who reported that while they were introduced to the concept of inclusion, they found little evidence of its application across subject-specific methods courses:

“Sometimes it feels like inclusion is only for special education students. When we go for methods classes in English or Maths, inclusion hardly comes up.”

These findings resonate with broader scholarship indicating that in many teacher education contexts, especially

across sub-Saharan Africa, inclusion remains treated as an ‘add-on’ rather than an embedded pedagogical principle (Forlin, 2018; Opoku et al., 2021). Forlin (2018) argues that genuine curriculum integration requires moving beyond tokenistic courses toward infusing inclusive principles into every aspect of teacher preparation, including subject pedagogy, assessment, and practicum. Without such integration, pre-service teachers often struggle to see inclusion as relevant to their future teaching practice, perpetuating the notion that inclusive education is a separate, specialised domain rather than a foundational approach.

##### ➤ Pedagogical Approaches

Although the faculty taught theoretical foundations of inclusive education, participants highlighted a significant gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competence. Pre-service teachers consistently expressed that their training lacked opportunities to develop hands-on strategies for supporting learners with diverse needs:

“We learn the theory, but when we go to teaching practice, we struggle with how to differentiate instruction for pupils with learning difficulties. The lecture notes don't prepare us for that reality.”

Observation of teaching sessions supported these perceptions, revealing a reliance on lecture-based delivery with limited use of interactive, practice-oriented methods such as microteaching, role-playing, or collaborative lesson planning. One student expressed frustration at the disconnect between coursework and classroom realities:

“During teaching practice, I had a pupil who couldn't read at all, but we had not really practiced how to support such learners. We just know the definition of inclusive education.”

This disconnect reflects critiques in the literature that teacher education programmes often overemphasise theory at the expense of experiential learning, which is essential for developing inclusive teaching skills (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Florian and Beaton (2018) argue that exposure to authentic, practice-based learning environments including co-teaching, classroom simulations, and reflective supervision is critical in building teacher confidence and competence in inclusion. The lack of such experiences in this institution suggests a need for curricular reform to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

##### ➤ Faculty Capacity and Attitudes

The data indicated variation in faculty expertise and attitudes towards inclusive education. While some lecturers demonstrated strong commitment to fostering inclusive values, others lacked confidence in their ability to prepare teachers for inclusion or were sceptical of its feasibility in under-resourced classrooms:

“We talk about inclusion, but in reality, our schools don't have the resources. Sometimes it feels like theory without practice because teachers in the field are overwhelmed.”

“I try to model inclusive strategies in my lectures, like group work and differentiated tasks, but I know some colleagues see it as extra work.”

These contrasting perspectives reflect findings in existing research that faculty beliefs significantly influence the quality of inclusive teacher preparation (Sharma et al., 2019). Sharma et al. (2019) emphasise that teacher educators themselves require ongoing professional development to gain the pedagogical skills and positive dispositions necessary to model inclusive practices effectively. Without such capacity-building efforts, pre-service teachers may receive inconsistent messages about the value and feasibility of inclusion, undermining their preparation for real-world classrooms.

#### ➤ *Institutional Support and Partnerships*

Institutional structures supporting inclusive teacher preparation appeared weak, particularly in relation to partnerships with inclusive schools. Participants noted that while the institution had some linkages with basic schools for practicum placements, these schools were not specifically selected for their inclusive practices, resulting in limited exposure to authentic inclusion:

“We need more exposure to real inclusive classrooms, not just theory in lecture halls. Some of us went for teaching practice in schools where there were no learners with special needs, so we didn’t really see inclusion in action.”

Faculty also highlighted the absence of formal collaboration between the institution and inclusive schools:

“If we had strong partnerships with inclusive schools, we could co-design practicum experiences and give students a realistic understanding of inclusive education.”

These findings align with international research stressing the importance of school–university partnerships in effective teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Darling-Hammond (2021) notes that such collaborations provide pre-service teachers with authentic contexts for applying theory, reflecting on challenges, and developing adaptive expertise in supporting diverse learners. Without these partnerships, teacher education risks producing graduates who are theoretically knowledgeable but practically unprepared for inclusive classrooms.

The findings collectively reveal a disconnect between policy rhetoric and practice in inclusive teacher education. While the institution demonstrates some commitment to inclusion through its dedicated course, fragmented curriculum integration, limited practice-based learning opportunities, uneven faculty capacity, and weak institutional partnerships hinder the preparation of pre-service teachers for the realities of inclusive classrooms. These results echo broader challenges in implementing inclusive education in developing contexts, where structural, pedagogical, and cultural barriers intersect (Agbenyega, 2018; Opoku et al., 2021). Addressing these issues requires systemic reform encompassing curriculum redesign, faculty development, and

stronger collaboration with inclusive schools to ensure that inclusion moves from theoretical aspiration to lived practice.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that while the Ghanaian teacher education institution examined has made notable efforts to integrate inclusive education into its curriculum, substantial gaps persist in translating policy aspirations into practical realities. The existence of a dedicated course on inclusive education signifies an important step toward recognising the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for diversity in classrooms. However, the study reveals that the approach remains fragmented, with inclusion treated as a discrete topic rather than a cross-cutting principle embedded across all aspects of teacher preparation. This lack of integration limits pre-service teachers’ ability to apply inclusive principles within subject-specific contexts, reinforcing earlier research that highlights the dangers of addressing inclusion superficially in teacher education programmes (Forlin, 2018; Opoku et al., 2021).

A critical concern emerging from the study is the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competence. While pre-service teachers acquire foundational knowledge about inclusive education, they lack adequate opportunities to practice and internalise inclusive strategies. The limited use of experiential learning approaches, such as microteaching, role-plays, and practicum placements in genuinely inclusive classrooms, hampers their readiness to respond effectively to diverse learner needs. This aligns with global literature emphasising the transformative potential of practice-based teacher education in developing the skills and confidence required for inclusive teaching (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2021).

The study also highlights variability in faculty expertise and attitudes, with some lecturers modelling inclusive practices while others express scepticism due to resource constraints and systemic challenges. Research shows that teacher educators’ attitudes profoundly shape pre-service teachers’ beliefs and practices (Sharma et al., 2019), underscoring the urgent need for sustained professional development initiatives aimed at equipping faculty with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to champion inclusion. Without such interventions, efforts to build an inclusive teacher education culture are likely to remain inconsistent and ineffective.

The absence of strong school–university partnerships emerged as a significant limitation in preparing teachers for real-world inclusive classrooms. The lack of structured collaboration with inclusive schools denies pre-service teachers’ authentic opportunities to witness and practice inclusive teaching in action. Strengthening these partnerships is essential, as such linkages have been shown to enhance teacher learning, foster innovation, and create a more seamless bridge between theory and practice.



➤ *Contribution to Knowledge and Inclusive Education*

This study contributes to understanding teacher preparation for inclusive education in Ghana, offering insights that enrich both theory and practice. It reveals that inclusion in teacher education remains fragmented, with isolated courses insufficiently preparing pre-service teachers for diverse classrooms. This finding provides valuable empirical evidence from a sub-Saharan African perspective, where research on systemic integration of inclusion is still limited. The study also advances theory by applying Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to demonstrate the value of socially mediated, practice-based learning environments in developing inclusive teaching competencies. This application extends the relevance of sociocultural theory to inclusive education, highlighting how collaborative and contextualised learning can bridge the gap between policy and practice. Practically, the research underscores the importance of faculty expertise, institutional partnerships, and experiential learning in building teacher readiness for inclusion. It offers actionable recommendations for embedding inclusive pedagogy across curricula, enhancing faculty capacity, and strengthening school–university linkages. The study reinforces the view that inclusion must be treated as a core value in teacher preparation and has implications for other low- and middle-income countries striving to implement inclusive education effectively.

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