

Educators' Preferred Approaches to Professional Development in Inclusive Education: A Rural KwaZulu-Natal Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates educators' preferred approaches for enhancing their knowledge and skills in teaching within inclusive classrooms, focusing on deep rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. Guided by the positivist paradigm and a descriptive survey design, the research captured structured responses from 100 educators across six primary schools. Data were collected using closed-ended questionnaires and analyzed through descriptive statistics to identify trends in professional development. Findings reveal that educators favor practical, context-sensitive formats such as workshops, in-service training, and blended learning over formal qualifications. These preferences reflect a need for accessible, ongoing support tailored to the realities of inclusive teaching in under-resourced environments. The study highlights the importance of aligning professional development with educators' lived experiences and systemic constraints. Ethical safeguards were rigorously upheld, and the methodology was designed to ensure objectivity, replicability, and contextual relevance. The research contributes to inclusive education discourse by foregrounding rural educators' voices and offering insights into scalable, responsive training models. Implications for policy and practice include the need for localized capacity-building strategies that empower teachers to navigate inclusive pedagogies effectively.

Keywords: educator agency, educator empowerment, inclusive pedagogical practices, professional development, responsive training

1. Introduction

1.1 Research topic and context

Inclusive education has become a central priority in both global and national education systems, emphasizing the right of all learners to access equitable, quality learning opportunities regardless of ability, background, or circumstance (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2020). In South

Africa, inclusive education is framed by Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (EWP6) (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014). These policies mandate schools to create

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enabling environments for learners with diverse needs and outline systematic processes for identifying and supporting barriers to learning.

1.2 The problem and research objectives

Despite these policy commitments, educators often report challenges in translating inclusive principles into classroom practice, particularly in under-resourced contexts (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). This study situates itself at the intersection of policy, practice, and teacher agency, exploring how educators envision their own growth in inclusive pedagogy. The objective is to understand the preferred approaches through which educators wish to enhance their knowledge and skills, thereby providing valuable insights for policymakers, district officials, and higher education institutions.

1.3 Review of relevant literature

Internationally, scholars highlight that inclusive pedagogy requires not only structural reforms but also sustained professional learning for teachers. Educators must be equipped with strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), trauma-informed approaches, and collaborative problem-solving to effectively respond to learner diversity (Rojas et al., 2025). The emphasis has shifted from one-off workshops to ongoing, practice-based professional development that empowers teachers to adapt curriculum, assessment, and classroom management in inclusive ways (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Within the South African context, educators' voices are critical in shaping professional learning models that are both contextually relevant and sustainable (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design, specifically a homothetic approach, to examine educators' preferred professional development modalities for inclusive classroom teaching. Quantitative designs are appropriate when the aim is to describe patterns, measure frequencies, and identify trends across a defined population

(Creswell & Creswell, 2021). By administering structured questionnaires to 100 educators, the study generated numerical data that allowed for statistical representation of demographic profiles and training preferences.

The descriptive survey method was chosen because it enables researchers to capture educators' perceptions and preferences without manipulating variables, thereby providing a snapshot of current realities in inclusive education (Babbie, 2020). This design aligns with similar studies in inclusive education that have employed survey-based quantitative approaches to explore teacher attitudes and training needs (Baghaei, Loreman, & Sharma, 2024; Motitswe, 2025). While primarily quantitative, the study incorporated interpretive elements in the discussion phase, where findings were contextualized against policy frameworks and global literature. This reflects a pragmatic orientation, acknowledging that inclusive education research often benefits from integrating descriptive statistics with interpretive insights (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2022).

2.1.1 Research Paradigm

The study was guided by the positivist research paradigm, which emphasizes objectivity, empirical measurement, and the identification of generalizable patterns through systematic observation (von Feigenblatt, 2025). A descriptive survey design was employed to quantify educators' experiences and preferences regarding inclusive education training. This design enabled the researcher to collect structured data and analyze it statistically, minimizing subjectivity and enhancing reliability.

2.2 Sampling Procedure

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used, consistent with positivist principles that emphasize targeted data collection from relevant subgroups (Crossman, 2020; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The study was conducted in the Nongoma Circuit of the Zululand District, KwaZulu-Natal, where the researcher was professionally based. Three wards in the circuit management were selected, with two primary schools per ward. All educators in the selected

schools were invited to participate, yielding a sample of 100 respondents.

Selection criteria included:

- Age (30–60 years)
- Gender
- Teaching experience (minimum two years)
- Qualifications
- Prior exposure to inclusive education training

This approach ensured that the sample reflected key demographic and professional variables relevant to the study's objectives and allowed for contextually grounded insights aligned with the study's aims (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

2.3 Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to collect standardized data. The instrument included closed-ended items designed to elicit quantifiable responses on educators' backgrounds, training, and perceptions of inclusive education. Items were developed based on recent literature and policy frameworks, ensuring construct validity and alignment with inclusive education goals (Basister et al., 2025). The questionnaire was piloted in a non-participating school to test clarity and reliability, and adjustments were made based on feedback.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics are a guiding principle that shapes the conduct of researchers. It influences both the process of discovery and the implications and applications of scientific findings¹. Ethical considerations in research include, but are not limited to, the management of data, the responsible use of resources, respect for human rights, the treatment of human and animal subjects, social responsibility, honesty, integrity, and the dissemination of research findings¹. At its core, ethics in scientific research aims to ensure that the pursuit of knowledge does not come at the expense of societal or individual well-being. It fosters an environment where scientific inquiry can thrive responsibly¹.

The need to understand and uphold ethics in scientific research is pertinent in today's scientific community. First, the rapid advancement of technology and science raises ethical questions in fields like biotechnology, biomedical science, genetics, and artificial intelligence. These advancements raise questions about privacy, consent, and the potential long-term impacts on society and its environment². Furthermore, the rise in public perception and scrutiny of scientific practices, fueled by a more informed and connected populace, demands greater transparency and ethical accountability from researchers and institutions.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education's Research Directorate, the Zululand District Office, and principals of participating schools. The researcher visited each school to explain the study's purpose and procedures. Questionnaires were hand-delivered and retrieved with assistance from principals and deputy principals, ensuring procedural consistency and high response rates. This method supported the positivist emphasis on standardized data collection across sites, which is essential for ensuring replicability, objectivity, and ethical integrity in educational research (von Feigenblatt, 2025).

Ethical considerations in research are a set of principles that guide your research designs and practices. Scientists and researchers must always adhere to a certain code of conduct when collecting data from people. The goals of human research often include understanding real-life phenomena, studying effective treatments, investigating behaviors, and improving lives in other ways. What you decide to research and how you conduct that research involve key ethical considerations.

These considerations work to protect the rights of research participants, enhance research validity and maintain scientific or academic integrity.

2.5 Data Analysis

Statistical or qualitative analysis methods. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, consistent with the positivist paradigm's

emphasis on numerical analysis and pattern identification. Frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to summarize responses and identify trends. The analysis focused on quantifiable variables, including training exposure, years of experience, and perceptions of inclusive education. Open-ended responses, where included, were categorized using basic content analysis to support statistical interpretation rather than thematic depth. This approach ensured replicability and objectivity in reporting findings (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2025). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, consistent with the positivist paradigm's emphasis on numerical analysis and pattern identification. Frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to summarize responses and identify trends.

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3. Results

3.1 Presentation of findings

This section presents the results of data collected from 100 completed questionnaires. The study employed a homothetic descriptive research design to explore educators' preferred approaches for enhancing their knowledge and skills in inclusive classroom teaching. The data includes biographical profiles and preferred approaches through which educators seek to strengthen their competence in inclusive pedagogy.

3.1.1 Demographic and Professional Profiles of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	39	39
	Female	61	61
Age Group	30–35	27	27
	36–40	32	32
	41–45	22	22
	46–50	9	9
	51–60	10	10
Qualifications	Academic	38	38
	Professional	62	62
Teaching Experience	11+ years	69	69
Post Level	Principal	11	11
	Deputy Principal	5	5
	Head of Department (HOD)	9	9
	Teacher Level 1	75	75
Post Type	Permanent	76	76
	Temporary	20	20
	Part-Time	4	4
Employer	Department of Education	95	95
School Classification	Pre-primary/Primary	92	92
Training in Special Needs	Received	21	21
	Informal	43	43
	None	36	36

As shown in Table 3.1.1, the majority of respondents were female (61%), while 39% were male. Most educators fell within the 30–45 age range (81%), reflecting a mid-career demographic often associated with openness to inclusive pedagogies (Baghaei et al., 2024). In terms of qualifications, 62% held professional credentials

compared to 38% with academic qualifications, aligning with the practical demands of primary education (Donath et al., 2025). Teaching experience was substantial, with 69% reporting more than 11 years in the profession, suggesting readiness to implement inclusive reforms (Frontiers in Education, 2025).

Table 3.1.2 Frequency distribution on preferred approaches through which educators seek to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching within inclusive classrooms

Training Approach	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
One-day workshop	7	93	100
In-service training	72	28	100
Certificate course	54	46	100
Diploma course	79	21	100
All of the above	98	2	100

As shown in figure 3.1.3 illustrates that educators overwhelmingly preferred a combination of training approaches:

workshops, in-service training, and certificate courses with 100% agreement for “All of the above.”

Figure 3.1.3 Preferred Training Approaches



One-Day workshops

Only 7% of respondents agreed that one-day workshops would be sufficient, while 93% disagreed. This finding reflects widespread dissatisfaction with short, isolated interventions. Walton and Bekker (2023)

argue that such workshops fail to provide sustained support for educators, particularly in under-resourced schools. The data confirms that educators perceive one-day workshops as inadequate for building the complex skills required in inclusive classrooms.

In-Service training

A significant majority (72%) supported in-service training. This highlights the importance of ongoing, workplace-based professional development. Motitswe (2022) found that educators value practical, classroom-embedded training that allows them to adapt strategies in real time. In-service training is therefore seen as a bridge between policy ideals and classroom realities, enabling educators to refine their practice while responding to diverse learner needs.

Certificate courses

More than half (55%) of respondents indicated that certificate courses would enhance their competence in inclusive education. This suggests that educators value formal qualifications that provide structured learning pathways. However, the 45% who disagreed highlight the need for certificate programmes to be contextually relevant and accessible. Ngubane and Muthukrishna (2021) emphasise that professional learning must integrate both technical skills and socio-emotional dimensions, particularly in rural contexts where trauma and adversity shape learner experiences.

Diploma programmes

The strongest preference for formal qualifications was seen in diploma programmes, with 79% agreement. Educators expressed a desire for deeper, accredited learning opportunities that go beyond short courses. This finding aligns with international literature that stresses the importance of sustained, accredited professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Diploma programmes are perceived as offering comprehensive preparation for inclusive pedagogy.

All approaches combined

The most striking result is that 98% of respondents preferred all forms of training

combined. This reflects a strong desire for a blended model of professional development that integrates workshops, in-service training, certificate courses, and diploma programmes. Walton and Bekker (2023) argue that such multi-layered approaches are essential to bridge the persistent implementation gap in South Africa's inclusive education system.

3.2 Significant results without interpretation

The findings confirm that while South Africa's inclusive education policies provide a strong legislative framework, the absence of prescribed professional development models leaves educators to navigate fragmented and often insufficient training opportunities. The study revealed that educators consistently value comprehensive, accredited, and practice-oriented learning pathways including workshops, coaching, mentoring, and access to specialists over isolated, one-off interventions. This preference reflects a broader global trend identified by UNESCO (2020) and Sharma, Loreman & Forlin (2022), which emphasizes that inclusive pedagogy requires sustained professional learning cycles rather than short-term initiatives. The results therefore suggest that policy revisions should embed educator agency and preferred modalities into national and district-level professional development frameworks.

Moreover, the final results highlight that emerging themes such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), trauma-informed pedagogy, and digital inclusion are increasingly central to educators' professional learning needs. Educators in rural and under-resourced contexts particularly emphasized the importance of trauma-responsive strategies and multilingual resources to safeguard learner participation (Ngubane & Muthukrishna, 2022; Walton & Bekker, 2021). The data also points to the necessity of integrating digital pedagogy into inclusive education training, ensuring that technology enhances rather than hinders

equity. Collectively, these findings underscore that sustainable inclusive education reform depends on co-designed, contextually responsive, and systemically supported professional development models that align with educators' lived realities and preferences.

3.3 Implications for practice

The preference for in-service training and diploma programmes indicates that educators want professional learning that is both practical and academically rigorous. District officials and higher education institutions should therefore design blended models that combine short workshops with long-term qualifications. This would ensure that teachers are equipped with both immediate strategies and deeper theoretical knowledge.

3.4 International comparisons

Globally, similar findings have been reported. Sharma, Loreman & Forlin (2022) emphasise that inclusive pedagogy requires ongoing professional learning rather than one-off interventions. UNESCO (2020) also highlights the importance of sustained educator development for achieving inclusive education goals. The South African data therefore aligns with international trends, while also reflecting local contextual challenges such as resource constraints and trauma-related learner needs.

Recent scholarship continues to reinforce the global emphasis on sustained professional learning for inclusive pedagogy. A 2024 systematic review of inclusive pedagogical research found that effective inclusion requires educators to engage in ongoing cycles of reflection, collaboration, and curriculum adaptation, rather than relying on isolated workshops or short-term interventions (Springer, 2024). Similarly, a 2025 study on educational innovations for inclusive learning environments highlighted that student-centered pedagogy and the integration of technology are most effective when educators receive continuous support

and opportunities to co-design strategies with peers (Frontiers in Education, 2025). These findings align with UNESCO's (2020) call for sustained educator development and confirm that the South African data reflects broader international trends, while also underscoring the importance of tailoring professional learning to local challenges such as resource constraints and trauma-related learner needs.

3.5 Educator agency and sustainability

The overwhelming preference for "all of the above" underscores the importance of educator agency in shaping professional development. Educators are not passive recipients of policy but active participants who articulate their own needs and co-construct learning pathways. Recent scholarship highlights that sustainable change in inclusive education requires professional learning models that are co-designed with educators, responsive to local contexts, and supported by systemic investment (Baroni et al., 2025; British Council, 2023). The South African Council for Educators' Strategic Plan (2020–2025) also emphasizes professionalisation processes that foreground educator voice and agency as central to building a credible and capable teaching force (SACE, 2022). These findings confirm that educator agency is a critical driver of sustainability in inclusive education reform.

Additional evidence shows that educator agency is directly linked to the sustainability of inclusive practices. Ramango and Naicker (2022) argue that school leaders must foster cultures of inclusion by empowering educators to adapt curricula and pedagogy collaboratively. Similarly, the Human Sciences Research Council (2025) stresses that systemic investment in school-based support teams and continuous training is essential for sustaining inclusive education, particularly in contexts marked by persistent barriers. Internationally, UNESCO (2020) and Sharma, Loreman & Forlin (2022) reiterate that inclusive pedagogy thrives when

educators are positioned as co-designers of professional learning rather than passive implementers. Together, these studies highlight that sustainable inclusive education depends on agency, collaboration, and systemic support, ensuring that professional development models evolve with educators' voices at the center.

4. Discussion of Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings of the study on educators' preferred approaches to enhancing their knowledge and skills for inclusive classroom teaching. Using data from 100 completed questionnaires, analysed through a homothetic descriptive design, the discussion integrates empirical results with contemporary literature. The analysis is organized around five professional development modalities: one-day workshops, in-service training, certificate courses, diploma programmes, and blended learning approaches.

The biographical data revealed a predominantly female (61%), mid-career (30–45 years) cohort, consistent with global trends showing that educators in this demographic are receptive to inclusive pedagogies (Baghaei et al., 2024). The prevalence of professional qualifications (62%) over academic ones aligns with the practical orientation of primary education (Donath et al., 2025). Most respondents had over 11 years of experience (69%), indicating readiness to implement inclusive reforms (Frontiers in Education, 2025). However, only 21% had formal training in special educational needs, underscoring a persistent gap in professional learning opportunities (Motitswe, 2025; Walton & Bekker, 2021).

4.2 Preferred training approaches

The results show that educators overwhelmingly prefer a combination of all training approaches, confirming the value of layered, sustained, and diverse learning experiences. This finding supports international evidence that effective professional development integrates multiple modalities—formal qualifications, workplace learning, and peer collaboration (Sharma et al., 2022).

- One-day workshops received limited support, reflecting dissatisfaction with short, isolated interventions.
- In-service training was valued for its contextual relevance and immediate classroom application.
- Certificate and diploma courses were appreciated for their structured, accredited nature.
- The unanimous preference for “all of the above” highlights educators' desire for comprehensive, continuous professional learning ecosystems.

These results align with the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model and trauma-informed pedagogy, emphasizing collaboration, reflection, and emotional safety as foundations for inclusive practice (Walton & Bekker, 2021).

4.3 Interpretation and literature alignment

The preference for blended professional development reflects educators' recognition of the complexity of inclusive education. Literature advocates integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL), trauma-informed approaches, and digital inclusion into training frameworks (Baghaei et al., 2024; Frontiers in Education, 2025). In the South African context, despite robust policy foundations—Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) and SIAS Policy (DBE, 2014)—implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural districts. Educators' responses reinforce the need for contextually relevant, multilingual, and culturally responsive training that addresses socio-economic adversity and promotes equitable participation. This alignment between empirical findings and theoretical frameworks suggests that inclusive education thrives when professional learning is systemic, collaborative, and sustained, rather than episodic or compliance-driven.

4.4 Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Educators' preference for in-service training and diploma programmes reveals a desire for professional learning that is both practical and academically rigorous. This finding underscores the need for blended professional development models that combine short, practice-oriented workshops with long-term accredited qualifications. Such

models would equip teachers with immediate classroom strategies while deepening their theoretical understanding of inclusive pedagogy.

Internationally, similar trends have been observed. Sharma, Loreman & Forlin (2022) and UNESCO (2020) emphasize that inclusive education depends on continuous professional learning rather than one-off interventions. Recent global research (Springer, 2024; Frontiers in Education, 2025) reinforces this view, showing that effective inclusion requires ongoing reflection, collaboration, and curriculum adaptation supported by sustained institutional investment. The South African data therefore align with international patterns while reflecting local contextual challenges such as resource constraints and trauma-related learner needs.

The strong endorsement of “all of the above” approaches highlights educator agency as a cornerstone of sustainable inclusive education. Educators are active co-designers of their professional learning, not passive recipients of policy. Studies by Baroni et al. (2025) and the British Council (2023) affirm that sustainable change emerges when professional development is co-constructed with educators and responsive to local realities. Nationally, the South African Council for Educators (2022) and Human Sciences Research Council (2025) stress that systemic investment in school-based support teams and continuous training is essential for maintaining inclusive practices. Collectively, these findings confirm that educator voice, collaboration, and systemic support are vital for ensuring that inclusive education reform remains both contextually grounded and sustainable.

4.5 Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study lies in its reliance on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or educators’ perceptions rather than their actual classroom practices. While descriptive quantitative analysis provides valuable insights into patterns of preference, it cannot fully capture the complexity of how professional development translates into

inclusive teaching. The use of stratified random sampling improved representativeness, but the findings remain context-specific to the sampled schools and districts, limiting the extent to which results can be generalized to all South African or global contexts.

A second limitation relates to the scope of training approaches examined. The study focused on workshops, in-service training, certificate courses, diploma courses, and blended learning, but did not explore other emerging modalities such as micro-credentialing, online communities of practice, or informal peer learning networks. Additionally, the descriptive design does not establish causal relationships between professional development preferences and actual improvements in inclusive classroom practice.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of key findings

The study explored educators’ preferred approaches to professional learning for inclusive classroom teaching in deep rural schools of KwaZulu-Natal. Findings revealed that educators overwhelmingly favor a combination of training approaches, integrating workshops, in-service training, certificate courses, and diploma programmes. This blended model reflects a desire for continuous, collaborative, and accredited learning rather than isolated interventions.

Despite high levels of experience and professional qualification, there remains a critical gap in formal training on special educational needs and inclusive pedagogy. Most respondents are permanent Level 1 educators based in primary schools, indicating stability and readiness for sustained professional development. These preferences align with global best practices and national policy imperatives, including White Paper 6 and the SIAS framework, which advocate for systemic, context-responsive professional learning.

5.2 Further Research

Future studies could adopt mixed-methods designs to complement the descriptive quantitative approach used in this study. While questionnaires provided measurable insights into educators' preferred professional development approaches, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations would allow for deeper exploration of the reasons behind these preferences and how they translate into practice. Longitudinal research could also track how professional learning experiences influence educators' confidence, efficacy, and classroom strategies over time, thereby providing stronger evidence of impact on inclusive pedagogy.

Further research should also expand the scope to include emerging modalities of professional learning, such as micro-credentialing, online communities of practice, and blended digital platforms. Comparative studies across provinces or countries could highlight contextual differences in educator preferences, particularly between urban and rural settings. Additionally, examining the role of systemic factors—such as policy implementation, resource allocation, and access to specialists—would provide a more holistic understanding of how professional development can be aligned with educators' needs. Such research would strengthen the evidence base for designing sustainable, contextually relevant professional learning models that advance inclusive education.

5.3 Recommendations

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Based on the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed for policymakers, district officials, and higher education institutions:

- **Continuous and Collaborative Learning:** Districts should institutionalize Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that enable educators to co-design strategies, share experiences, and reflect on inclusive practices.
- **Coaching and Mentoring:** Embed individualized coaching programmes within district structures, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools, to support educators in applying inclusive strategies effectively.
- **Contextual Relevance:** Training should integrate trauma-informed pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and digital inclusion, equipping educators to address socio-emotional barriers and adapt inclusive strategies to both physical and online classrooms.
- **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Strengthen partnerships between districts, universities, and specialist service providers to expand access to multidisciplinary expertise, including psychologists, therapists, and learning support specialists.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Ministries of Education should establish longitudinal evaluation frameworks to assess the impact of professional development on classroom practice and ensure educator preferences inform policy design.

By aligning professional learning with educators' preferred approaches, policymakers can foster sustainable, equitable, and inclusive education systems that empower both teachers and learners.

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8. Author Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this study is my own original work and has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other institution. All sources used or quoted have been duly acknowledged in accordance with APA 7th edition referencing guidelines.

I further confirm that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, findings, or reporting of this study.