

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From theory to practice: Exploring Nigerian student teachers' experiences of managing learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms

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Email: verena.letzel-alt@leuphana.de**Abstract**

Nigeria is committed to implementing inclusive education. Because special schools are few and inadequate, many parents enrol their children with special needs in nearby regular schools. Teachers must therefore be trained to provide learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their individual learning needs. An effective way of training future teachers is to link theory with practical teaching experiences while studying teacher training at university. Consequently, all Nigerian student teachers must complete a 14–16-week teaching placement. During this placement, student teachers encounter inclusive classrooms for the first time, where they must teach learners with and without special needs. Despite the increasing emphasis on inclusive education in Nigeria, there is limited research on how student teachers experience and navigate inclusive classrooms during their teaching placement. To bridge this gap, this study examines the experiences of 20 Nigerian secondary school student teachers during their placement. Structured interviews were conducted and analysed using qualitative content analysis. The results reveal that the main challenge student teachers face in inclusive classrooms is how to address students' challenging behaviour. Notably, many student teachers associate challenging classroom behaviour primarily with learners with special needs, highlighting a need for deeper understanding and training in inclusive teaching strategies. They also clearly stated that they need more competence in managing students with special needs. In this vein, student teachers claimed that there is a need for better teacher trainers as well as more support in schools. The student teachers valued their placements for helping them develop their competencies in managing learners with special needs. The student teachers felt able to 'accept' students with special needs and limit their harshness. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing teacher training courses, particularly in equipping student teachers with practical strategies for managing diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms.

KEYWORDS

disability, inclusion, inclusive education, learning disability, Nigeria, special needs education, teacher training, teaching practice

Keypoints

- This article reports student teachers' experiences of the 14–16 weeks practical teaching placement they undergo while at university, when they teach students with and without special needs in inclusive classrooms for the first time.

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- The main challenge student teachers face in inclusive classrooms is how to manage challenging behaviour. Notably, many student teachers associate challenging classroom behaviour primarily with learners with special needs.
- The student teachers stated that they lack competence in dealing with learners with special needs and need more competent teacher trainers as well as more support in schools. They reported that the roles within the professional teacher–student relationship are not clearly defined, resulting in student teachers feeling inferior to some of their students. In addition, the student teachers said that they needed to be better prepared to handle their emotions; many experienced pressure and stress throughout their first teaching placement. They also admitted that they had to learn to be patient.
- Student teachers found their placements highly valuable, as the experiences enabled them to develop competence in managing learners with special needs so that the student teachers felt able to accept them and limit their harshness.

INTRODUCTION

The world is shaped by diversity. People differ from each other according to their nationality, gender, language or religion. This reality is also mirrored in classrooms all across the globe; students within a learning group also differ from each other. Thus, in classrooms, it is relevant to reflect on the categories of differences that influence students' learning. Students differ in their cognitive or physical ability, in their language or socio-economic background as well as in familial support. Some students have special needs that must be considered when it comes to their educational pathways. (Despite the term 'special educational needs' being more common internationally, this article used 'special needs', which is more common in Nigeria.) In the past, students with special needs were excluded from regular schools. Those students had to attend special schools in which only students with disabilities and as well as the gifted were taught (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). However, with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, students with special needs and disabilities were granted the right to attend regular schools and receive inclusive education alongside their non-disabled peers in the same classroom (UNICEF, 2024).

Inclusive education is the most effective way to give all children a fair chance to go to school, learn and develop the skills they need to thrive. Inclusive systems require changes at all levels of society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). At the school level, teachers must be trained accordingly, buildings must be refurbished and students must receive accessible learning materials. At the community level, stigma and discrimination must be tackled, and individuals need to be educated on the benefits of inclusive education. At the national level, governments must align laws and policies with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and regularly collect and analyse data to ensure that children are reached with effective services (UNICEF, 2024).

Teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of inclusive education (Bada & Jita, 2023; Hattie, 2009). Teacher training needs to equip student teachers with ethical and emotional competencies as well as professional skills that will enable them to develop their students (Jibril, 2007). Within this study, 'student teachers' refers to pre-service teachers at university. Inclusive education means that all children are learning together in the same classrooms (UNICEF, 2024); consequently, educators worldwide teach a diverse student body within their classrooms. To successfully address student heterogeneity, teachers need the ability to diagnose their students' individual needs and have well-developed skills to differentiate their instruction according to the students' various learning needs (Dixon et al., 2014). Effective implementation of inclusive education necessitates that teachers are equipped with competencies to implement inclusive education; research shows that teacher quality is the most important factor in student learning outcomes (Rice, 2003; World Bank, 2020).

Research has already shown that the perceived quality of teacher training regarding the handling of heterogeneity predicts how often teachers implement inclusive teaching practices (Letzel, 2021; Hartwig & Schwabe, 2018). Besides accruing knowledge concerning concrete inclusive teaching practices, teacher education is crucial for developing positive attitudes, high self-efficacy expectations and reducing fear regarding inclusive differentiated teaching (Ahsan et al., 2012; Nwosu et al., 2021; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Jordan et al., 2010; Specht et al., 2016). In particular, attitudes and self-efficacy expectations influence the implementation and effectiveness in inclusive classrooms (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Hernandez et al., 2016; Miesera et al., 2019; Romi & Leyser, 2006). However, regular schoolteachers consider themselves inadequately prepared to deal with heterogeneity and struggle to implement differentiated teaching measures (Pozas & Letzel, 2019; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that teachers lack understanding of differentiated instruction (Whipple, 2012) as well as

the necessary training skills (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). According to Edwards et al. (2006), teachers receive little instruction on how to implement inclusive education within their teacher training. Thus, teachers report feeling insufficiently prepared to address heterogeneous learning needs (Idol, 2006; Prast et al., 2015). In contrast, special education teachers consider themselves better prepared to use inclusive pedagogical strategies (Moliner et al., 2011).

Overall, regular schoolteachers around the world seem to struggle with the implementation of inclusive teaching practices (Schleicher, 2016), possibly for similar reasons. However, in each country, different resources are provided for education in general and the implementation of inclusive education in particular. Considering that the quality of education is strongly related to the quality of teaching (Baumert & Kunter, 2011; Praetorius et al., 2018), it is meaningful to examine teachers within specific national contexts to identify their particular needs. Consequently, this information can be analysed and reflected upon to strengthen teacher training.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND TEACHER TRAINING IN NIGERIA

Teacher education is the foundation of quality in the educational system, which is key to unlocking different facets of development, especially in emerging nations (Jibril, 2007). The provision of high-quality teaching for students with different educational needs within one classroom demands well-educated and prepared professionals, who can diagnose certain needs and design learning opportunities based on their diagnoses (Van Geel et al., 2019).

However, teacher training in Nigeria has been considered highly inadequate, with many uncertified and improperly trained teachers (Ashby, 1960). More recent studies have indicated that teachers at all levels lack pedagogical competence (International Organisation for Migration, 2024; Umeora & Jacob, 2020; World Bank, 2020), resulting in few Nigerian teachers showing awareness of struggling students when observed in class (Pinnock, 2016).

The Nigerian national policy on inclusive education reflects the government's efforts to ensure that children with special needs are educated alongside their peers in regular classes. The policy states that inclusive education is 'about removing barriers to learning and involving all learners who otherwise would have been excluded through marginalisation and segregation; a process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity' (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 1). This policy has a significant impact on teacher education since it requires the appropriate training of teachers, without which inclusive

accommodation practices become impractical. It targets improving the capacities of teachers to be able to meaningfully teach children with diverse needs. Hence, one of the strategic plans includes the continuous training of teachers with appropriate inclusive pedagogical skills.

Student teachers' emotional maturity, physical capacity and communication skills are rarely considered during the admission process at most Nigerian universities or colleges of education (Ogunyinka et al., 2015). This is particularly important given that the complex tasks within the classroom – particularly the inclusive classroom – require emotional intelligence (Nwosu et al., 2021), effective communication skills (Aktepe et al., 2021) and even physical endurance. Furthermore, it is challenging to implement teacher education curricula due to the poor quality of instructors produced through in-service training (Ajani, 2022). Additional obstacles to teacher education in Nigeria include the unavailability of instructional facilities or sufficient experiences in school practice. Moreover, examination malpractice, a lack of funding, a lack of ICT knowledge and public attitudes towards teaching are further challenges (Akpan et al., 2009).

In Nigeria, increasing efforts have been made to enhance inclusive education, mainly focused on teacher training (Nwosu et al., 2024; Pinnock, 2016). Teachers in Nigeria are trained at teacher education faculties in universities or at universities/colleges of education. One of the major objectives of teacher education is to ensure that teachers have sufficient mastery of academic content disciplines and of pedagogy principles and their applications, including an enhanced capacity to respond to learners with special needs (Federal Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 13). This objective reflects an intentional effort to improve teachers' inclusive education pedagogical competence so that diverse groups of students can be educated in Nigerian classrooms. To this end, most universities and colleges of education include compulsory fundamental courses such as educational psychology and introductory seminars on special needs. However, research has noted that the introductory course in special education is grossly inadequate given that the content focuses on identifying special needs with little emphasis on pedagogies that ensure differentiated learning (Nwosu et al., 2024; Unachukwu & Nwosu, 2019).

To prepare student teachers for their profession, Nigerian student teachers have to undertake a compulsory teaching placement that lasts between 14 to 16 weeks. This placement sees student teachers sent to schools to gain their first teaching experiences and practical skills. Recent research conducted at this teacher training phase shows that the teaching experience determines whether student teachers will succeed in their later educational careers (Bada & Jita, 2023). Furthermore, research in this field reports that student teachers' professional skills

improve following placement; however, student teachers also perceive a number of placement challenges, including classroom management, environmental challenges, inadequate orientation and instructional and supervisory issues (Francis & Anyaegbunam, 2016; Okonkwo & Chikwelu, 2017). Within this initial exposure to a real teaching practice, student teachers face children with diverse needs, including those who need extra support to cope in regular classes. Omede and Momoh (2016) assert that the frustration and incompetence teachers exhibit in teaching learners with special needs in regular classes is prompted by the fact that they may not have been exposed to pedagogies for inclusiveness. Similarly, researchers have found that many teachers are uncomfortable and unconfident in inclusive education practice (Nimante & Kokare, 2022), but student teachers who have been exposed to inclusive education pedagogies report feeling competent in practising inclusive education (Troll et al., 2019; Yildirim Hacıbrahimoğlu, 2022).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Though efforts have been made to focus on the implementation of inclusive education, these efforts and the resulting progress have generally been judged to be below expectation (Pinnock, 2020). Most of the issues associated with students' learning outcomes have been linked to teachers' lack of pedagogical skills (World Bank, 2020), making it of utmost importance to have effective teachers to implement inclusive education in Nigeria. In this context, the present study investigated the value of the teaching placement that links theory with practice in Nigerian secondary school-teacher training. Up until now, there has not been any research into student teachers' experiences during their first placement. The study asked:

1. Which experiences do Nigerian secondary school student teachers gain on placement in dealing with heterogeneous learning groups in inclusive settings?

The insights garnered offer information on the quality of Nigerian teacher training and the challenges student teachers face on placement. Recommendations to improve teacher training are made based on the findings.

METHODS

Sampling and data collection

To provide an in-depth understanding of student teachers' experiences on placement, a qualitative approach was implemented, specifically, a phenomenological approach using fully structured interviews, including essence questions (Creswell et al., 2007). According to

Creswell et al. (2007), essence questions are used to gain information about the essence of a person's experience of a phenomenon (in this case, teaching placement as part of pre-service teacher training at university). Fully structured interviews have the advantage of producing better comparable data, as every participant has been asked the same questions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Moreover, as this study holds an explorative design, the interviewees' unabridged answers were of interest rather than a dialogic exchange (Husband, 2020). Additionally, objectivity and validity are higher in fully structured interview situations (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

For this study, 20 students from the Department of Educational Foundations of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Nigeria) were recruited. All the participants were in the second semester of their third year of teacher training, which is when they go on placement. In Nigeria, teachers must study at university for eight semesters (four years) – except those with advanced certificates, such as the Nigeria certificate in education – in order to receive their bachelor's degree. The interviewed student teachers were aiming to work in secondary schools. A purposive sampling technique (Robinson, 2014) was adopted. All the schools where the students were on placement were inclusive schools, meaning that students with special needs were acknowledged as part of the student body and school community. The student teachers who voluntarily took part in the face-to-face interviews were over 18 years old and consented to take part in this research. The participants were provided with all confidentiality matters regarding the study as well as the opportunity to stop the interview if they did not want to continue. The recorded interviews were saved within a password-secured personal computer system. During the interpretation and presentation of their responses, the personal identities of the respondents were removed. After their interview, the recording was played to the respondent. Altogether, 20 30-minute individual interviews were conducted in English.

Instrument

All the participants were asked the same interview questions. The interview protocol comprised topics such as *challenges while teaching inclusively* and *recommendations to improve the teacher training*. To ensure the questions' content validity, five expert researchers in the field of inclusive education from the Department of Educational Foundations of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Nigeria) were asked to rate the relevance of the interview questions (Polit & Beck, 2006). Hence, the expert researchers ascertained how suitable the questions were according to the unambiguity of the questions and the simplicity of the language. The experts' suggestions were

considered and implemented. There was no pilot testing of the items.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and examined using qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Mayring & Frenzl, 2019). Given its content-structuring linear-regulated approach, QCA is considered a mixed methods approach. In an initial qualitative step, categories are assigned to the text. For the next qualitative step, text passages are assigned to the categories. This is followed by a quantitative step in which the researchers work through the many text passages and analyse the frequencies of codes within each category (Mayring & Frenzl, 2019). Quantification is used to reveal where priorities are placed. As this study inductively explores student teachers' placement experiences in inclusive classrooms, it is important to know the number of main and subcategories (Mayring, 2014). In this vein, as a method of content analysis, codes taken from the text material were counted and their frequency compared with the occurrence of other elements (Mayring, 2014).

Following the QCA steps, the interview transcriptions were systematically analysed, and the main and subcategories were identified. Transcriptions of each category were coded and developed using the computer software MAXQDA (VERBI software, 2024).

RESULTS

To answer the research question, a category system was inductively explored. First, content structuring was performed by exploring the main categories. Second, the main categories were extended into subcategories. To ensure the analysis's objectivity, an intercoder reliability coefficient of 0.83 was computed (Holsti, 1969; Mayring & Frenzl, 2019). One hundred and forty-one units of meaning (defined as text passages consisting of one or more full sentences) were extracted from the material, resulting in three main underlying categories: challenges perceived while teaching on placement, recommendations to improve teacher training and student teachers' perceived development during placement. These three main categories were extended by subcategories. The lowest number of codes identified within the interviews was three, whereas the highest number was 15.

Main category 1: Challenges perceived while teaching on placement

The first main category contains the most codes (71), indicating the great and vast challenges student teachers face throughout their first teaching experiences (Table 1).

These challenges could be grouped into three subcategories: the struggle with learners with special needs, a lack of support during their placement and problems adjusting to the school environment. Of these, struggling with learners with special needs was the biggest subcategory with 44 codes.

The student teachers reported different struggles they experienced when being in contact with students, especially with students with special needs: Remarkably, the student teachers reported difficulties with student behaviour when being overtly asked about teaching students with special needs on placement. Additionally, they expressed an inability to handle difficult student behaviour in class (22 codes within the subcategory *struggling with learners with special needs*). They mentioned that they did not know how to deal with disrespectful or distracting behaviour. Given their lack of classroom management strategies, some student teachers reported that they punished the students roughly. Examples of this include 'shouting at students', 'scolding them', 'force[ing] them to stand up', or 'flogging them' (eight codes within the subcategory *struggling with learners with special needs*). The participants reported that students threatened them or that they feared that students would 'deal with them outside the school premises'. This shows that the relationship between student teachers and students is suboptimal. Effort is needed to define and strengthen the positions within this relationship. The student teachers reported seeing themselves as inferior to the students (eight codes within the subcategory *struggling with learners with special needs*). Some student teachers reported that they 'could not handle students aged 16, because of their height', indicating that some of the participants feared some of their students' physical presence. Additionally, the student teachers reported that some students 'just felt that no one can [sic] intimidate them'. This reflects unclear roles within the educational context. Teacher training should address the professional relationship between teachers and students. Moreover, schools must put effort into manifesting professional relationships and role allocations.

One student teacher said that they struggled on placement because they did not know how to handle learners with special needs and disabilities, as the following quote explicates:

TABLE 1 Main category 1 subcategories.

Main category	Subcategory	Number of codes
Challenges perceived while teaching on placement	Struggling with learners with special needs	44
	Lack of support	15
	Adjusting to the school environment	12
		71

'I think the faculty should enlighten such students preparing for their TP [teaching practice]. They should let them know that there are some students who find it difficult to learn, that everybody is not the same. They should be made aware of the learning capacity of each student. They should also be taught the strategy to use to handle such students.'

The student teacher mentioned that they did not expect the heterogeneity of the student body, especially the differences in students' cognitive ability. Moreover, the student teacher explained that they had not been equipped with strategies to meet the needs of students who learn more slowly than others. Their statement infers that the university's teacher training preparation was not sufficient for the implementation of inclusive education. Moreover, it is striking that student teachers identify disruptive behaviour as part of a student's disability:

'They should give more orientation on what is going on in these schools, how to handle the stress – not telling us what we're supposed to do there and what we're not supposed to do there. They should give us insight on how to handle students with such disability[ies], like disruptive behaviour.'

The interview material featured not only statements about teaching learners with special needs but also demands for common teaching strategies and methods for students not diagnosed with special needs. The student teachers reported that they struggled to get the students' attention and did not know how to deal with students who did not attend class at all. These issues could possibly be solved at the school level. However, there do not seem to be established measures at the school level to address student absenteeism.

The second subcategory contains codes pertaining to the lack of support for student teachers on placement. Although the student teachers reported that they could consult the school principal and other teachers when they encountered problems, in most cases, they were not provided with appropriate support. The student teachers gave the example of asking advice on how to deal with students with special needs. Some teachers advised the student teachers to ignore such students or to *'let them be'*. Additionally, student teachers reported that the students in class also showed challenging behaviour towards their class teachers and also their school principals. Furthermore, issues regarding weak administrative staff could be found in the data, as the following quote shows:

'In the school where I went to, the administration was totally bad; everyone was doing as it pleases them. When you take the matter to the principal, they would be like they would

handle it, but at the end of the day nothing would be done about it. It's now left for you to go on.'

This statement shows that student teachers at some schools were left alone with their challenges, even though they asked for help. If student teachers were provided with adequate support, they could gain more valuable experiences, insights and solutions that could strengthen their professional competencies.

Lastly, the student teachers reported that they had difficulties adjusting to the school environment (12 codes). Within this subcategory, teachers described that they first had to accustom themselves to the school environment, including poor classroom facilities, huge class sizes and administrative procedures. Moreover, the student teachers reported that they had to fill out lesson plans – a standardised form provided by the faculty in which student teachers record procedures.

Main category 2: Recommendations to improve teacher training

The second main category comprises student teachers' recommendations to improve teacher training (Table 2). After their placement, the student teachers provided feedback on the quality of the university's preparation.

The interviews revealed that there are aspects to improve to better prepare student teachers for teaching in inclusive learning groups on placement. This main category contains 34 codes. First, student teachers claimed that their teacher training did not prepare them well for the reality of teaching inclusive classrooms. The student teachers lamented that they lacked information, skills and knowledge about teaching inclusive learning groups. Again, within this subcategory, they mentioned that they did not know how to handle difficult behaviour. Moreover, the students complained about

TABLE 2 Main category 2 subcategories.

Main category	Subcategory	Number of codes
Recommendations to improve teacher training		34
	More preparation is required on what to expect on placement	11
	Need for more competent lecturers/teachers on placement	11
	Competencies should be fostered on how to manage students with special needs	9
	Emotional competence should be fostered	3

lacking competencies that both in-service teachers and their lecturers at university have. Additionally, with regards to the lack of competent teacher educators who 'go deep' and not only 'summarise topics', one student teacher proposed building multiprofessional teams to educate them in their teacher training:

'I suggest that the faculty of education should provide training. They should also do that and provide special teachers for these things to come and teach us how to handle such students.'

This quote shows that student teachers would have valued being taught by professionals who are accustomed to students with special needs. The university lecturers do not seem to have the appropriate knowledge that is required.

Furthermore, the student teachers once again insist on the need for better preparation in terms of teaching diverse student bodies, including students with special needs. The student teachers claimed that they needed better preparation when it comes to their emotions in relation to teaching inclusive classrooms. The student teachers perceived 'tension' prior to going on placement. Moreover, they reported perceived 'stress' around teaching students with special needs as well as the fact that they would need to practice 'patience' to manage these students.

Main category 3: Student teachers' perceived development during placement

Our participants' responses revealed the insights they gained during their placement. Overall, they felt that they developed professional teaching competencies, which points to the value of placements during university-based teacher training. The third main category can be subdivided into four subcategories (see Table 3).

TABLE 3 Main category 3 subcategories.

Main category	Subcategory	Number of codes
Student teachers' perceived development during placement	Placement develops professional competencies	13
	Perceived success in teaching students with special needs	12
	Change in teaching method: limit harshness and befriend students	8
	Experiencing heterogeneity among students	3

A total of 13 codes could be found in the interviews, reporting that students value placement, as they saw that it helped develop their professional competencies. The student teachers mentioned that there is considerable room for improvement and suggested more practical phases within their studies. One student teacher suggested 'they should bring secondary school students to the micro-teaching lab'. Bringing secondary school students to the universities before student teachers go on placement would help prepare the student teachers better for the reality that awaits them in schools. They would get to know some students and their expectations within a safe environment first, before going to unfamiliar schools and classrooms. Another student teacher suggested that 'the secondary school students could evaluate' their teaching after placement. This shows that some student teachers are interested in receiving feedback on their teaching performance to support their further development.

The interviews offered that the student teachers perceived they gained 'a lot of knowledge apart from the theoretical side' during their placement. Apart from knowledge, student teachers mentioned that they reflected and developed their teaching in front of a class, in particular, when dealing with students with difficult behaviour that, in our participants' eyes, derived from having special needs:

'I received the training of being outspoken and not scared of the crowd in my TP [teaching practice] experience, so I think I can handle them.'

What this student teacher's quotation describes is something that only results from teaching practice and cannot be achieved by a solely theoretical education. The student teacher realised that teacher performance in front of the class is important and that a certain performance is needed to withstand the teaching situation. The student teacher deemed it important to embody strength and self-confidence while teaching.

The participants identified many of the challenges student teachers face on placement; however, some also perceived themselves as successful in managing students with special needs (12 codes).

'Yes, of course, because I undergo practice, the TP [teaching practice] that we did and with the knowledge we got from school here, I was able to accept and access some students.'

This student teacher mentioned that placement helped them accept students with special needs just as they are. Moreover, it shows that the student teacher found ways to meet certain needs. The student teacher linked their success to their placement and what they learnt from this practical experience. Another student teacher reported that 'they taught us classroom management, things we

should do'. This shows that placement offers the chance to acquire basic competence in managing and perceiving the learning group as a whole, not only learners with special needs.

The third subcategory offers interesting information on an important development student teachers went through. Eight codes revealed that the student teachers changed their approach to students. The participants reported that they acted harshly when managing students with special needs at the beginning but that they changed their behaviour, for example, to befriend those students:

'When I noticed their attitude, I limited my harshness and tried to get to know them one by one because they were many and when I knew them, they stopped disturbing.'

The student teacher stated that they '*noticed their attitude*', meaning that the student teacher after some time was able to address the students' needs in contrast to just restricting unexpected behaviour. Thus, the student teacher also was able to adjust their own (teaching) behaviour. The participants highlighted the individual needs that students with special needs have, and thus, showed interest in their students. The student teacher noticed that this kind of behaviour was more effective than just punishing those students. Consequently, the students with special needs felt seen, which led to fewer interruptions. This statement also shows that there were many students with special needs in the class. This underlines the importance of a high-quality teacher training that prepares student teachers for their futures as teachers in schools.

Responses from our participants further revealed the positive impact placement had on their professional development (three codes). The student teachers mentioned that they realised on placement that students differ from each other. This insight could lead to appreciating that different students have different needs that should be addressed with different teaching practices. This represents the main idea of learners with and without special needs learning together within the same classroom, and thus, inclusive education. The recognition of differences is the first step towards professional and more inclusive teaching.

'I understood that people are different, so I decided to make them my favourite to encourage them to put in more effort, I decided to make them the centre of attention. I also gave them special assignments to help their retentive memory. I also specifically asked them questions after classes.'

The fact that the student teacher observed differences between people (in this case, between students) led to

a different teaching approach. The student teacher decided to encourage students with special needs and put effort into their learning processes. Additionally, the student teacher provided '*special assignments*' for those students to help them learn better. After class, the student teacher invested time in students with special needs. All these actions were rooted in the insight that students differ and require different learning opportunities. This insight would not have been possible if there had not been the chance to practice teaching in a real classroom.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to shed light onto teacher training in Nigeria, specifically towards inclusive education and on placement as a compulsory part of training. The results reveal the challenges student teachers face during their first teaching experience, suggestions how to improve teacher training at university and how the student teachers perceived their professional development as a result of placement.

Through the use of code quantification (Mayring & Frenzl, 2019), this study tried to show where student teachers set their priorities in evaluating their placement in general and in relation to their first teaching experiences in inclusive classrooms in particular. The results demonstrate that the student teachers' top priority to address in the interviews were the challenges they faced when teaching in inclusive schools for the first time ($n=71$), especially their struggle with learners with special needs ($n=44$).

Teacher training must equip future teachers with ethical, intellectual and emotional competencies (Jibril, 2007). This study showed that this list can be extended to incorporate pedagogical or teaching competencies that are best developed through a combination of theoretical *and* practical approaches. The study's results reveal that students lack teaching competence as they are not trained in professional teaching measures to deal with difficult student behaviour and special needs specifically. Moreover, this study showed that student teachers lack competence to handle their emotions. It is important for teacher training courses to consider this in future curricula. The student teachers experience stress and tension because of their first teaching experiences. Furthermore, it has been shown that some of them fear their students (because of physical inferiority) or their reaction outside of the school.

Dixon et al. (2014) state that teachers must be able to diagnose their students' needs and, based on that, provide differentiated instructions for learning. The interviews show that some student teachers notice the diversity of the student body, which means that they can adapt their teaching to those special needs. However, the fact that only three relevant codes could be extracted from the material hints that only a few student teachers

have this competency. Instead of adapting their teaching, some student teachers punish students with special needs who show difficult behaviour and disturb student teachers' teaching. This shows that student teachers are not equipped with solution strategies and lack knowledge about inclusive teaching practices that could be implemented instead of just reacting to negative behaviour, in some cases violently.

Previous research has shown that teacher training is crucial for developing positive attitudes, high self-efficacy expectations and reducing fears regarding inclusive education (Ahsan et al., 2012; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Jordan et al., 2010; Specht et al., 2016). The present study's results reveal that these factors have not been considered accordingly in Nigerian teacher training before student teachers' placements. Student teachers report that they feel inferior to their students, which points to low self-efficacy expectations (see also Nimante & Kokare, 2022). Moreover, they fear some of their students; thus, they link inadequate student behaviour with special needs, which represents a negative attitude. Additionally, negative attitudes towards teaching and the profession exist in public, which is represented in this study by some students' behaviour towards their teachers (Akpan et al., 2009). Student teachers report that students do not treat them respectfully and they feel like '*no teacher can intimidate them*'. The implementation of a professional teacher–student relationship depends on a changed and evolved public attitude towards teaching.

The student teachers stated that they are not equipped with strategies to deal with students with special needs, which hints at a lack of pedagogical competence (IOM, 2024; Omede & Momoh, 2016). Hence, they demand better preparation within their educational studies. However, the results reveal that placement helps some students perceive themselves as more competent, stronger and less anxious. As student teachers notice that they lack strategies and concrete teaching methods and practices to deal with a diverse learning group and students with special needs, some suggest that within their teacher training they should be educated by special education teachers that are more competent in addressing special needs and diversity professionally (Moliner et al., 2011).

Oluwatosin and Bolanle (2023) state that teaching practice with rigorous supervision and evaluation is crucial for successful teacher training. The student teachers value their practical experiences and perceive improved competencies. Some student teachers even demand additional placements. However, the results of this study reveal that student teachers lack professional supervision from principals and teachers when asking for advice. The staff at schools need improvement not only in their teaching but also in their supervisory roles of student teachers on placement at their schools. When asking for advice on dealing with students with special needs, some

qualified teachers recommend just ignoring these students, which shows that in-service teachers do not seem to be aware of adequate inclusive teaching practices and lack pedagogical competence.

Our results show that student teachers want placement evaluation from their students. This feedback could help student teachers reflect upon and adjust their teaching. This finding highlights an inadequate feedback process that needs improving. Strengthening the support structures and evaluation processes for student teachers on placement could improve the outcomes of the practical phase tremendously.

Even though some teaching students report improved professional competence, including in managing students with special needs (Troll et al., 2019), this study also points to challenges student teachers face on placement (Francis & Anyaegbunam, 2016; Okonkwo & Chikwelu, 2017). A lot of these challenges could be prevented with adjusted teacher training, as student teachers claim that they were not told what to expect on placement. Better communication between schools and universities might help shrink the gap between what is taught theoretically and what is needed in practice. However, the biggest challenge student teachers experience is the struggle with students. This finding needs to be reflected and addressed urgently in Nigerian teacher training.

In 1960, Ashby stated that teachers in Nigeria are un-certified and improperly trained. Despite attempts to improve the quality of teachers, almost 65 years later, teacher training in Nigeria still requires significant improvement, which the results highlight. More recent studies that declare the introductory course in special education within teacher training inappropriate seem to have been proven right by the results of this study (Nwosu et al., 2024; Unachukwu & Nwosu, 2019).

Furthermore, the results reveal student teachers' experiences of poor quality instructors at the university level as well as the school level. They report incompetent teachers and principals at the schools where they did their placements (see also Ajani, 2022). The quality of teacher training can only improve if there are competent instructors at both universities and schools who can support student teachers. Ydo (2020) calls inclusive education a 'collective responsibility'. Moreover, Letzel-Alt and Pozas (2023, p. 16) raise the question of how we can 'best support our students in this current world of global challenges, if we are not learning together and from each other?'. Taking these two quotes into consideration, the solution to Nigeria's need for competent professional staff in teacher training and schools might be a global one: countries that have more staff versed in educational science could help Nigerian staff develop their competencies. When being professionally trained, Nigerian staff could disseminate their competencies further, which inherently would affect teaching quality at universities and schools.

Limitations of the study and implications for future research

As with every approach, the qualitative approach used in this study has several limitations. First, the results of this study must be interpreted with caution in terms of their representativeness. The sample consisted of 20 student teachers enrolled in one teacher training course at one university. Thus, the findings might not apply to all teacher training courses at all universities in Nigeria. However, the fact that many findings from previous research have been confirmed shows that the findings deserve to be taken seriously. To test whether the findings are representative, this qualitative study using the same instrument could be conducted with different samples. Also, the findings could serve as a basis for a quantitative approach that uses a bigger sample.

Another limitation is the mono-perspective of this study design: only student teachers were interviewed. It would make the insights more comprehensive if different perspectives, such as students', teachers', principals' or university lecturers', were included. In addition, it could be interesting to conduct observation studies with objective observers to prevent the results from being affected by social desirability. The fact that the interviewees were interviewed by a university lecturer could have influenced their answers. Additionally, the interviews only offer perceptions rather than objective facts. More research needs to be conducted about inclusive education in Nigeria, as inclusive teaching and managing students with special needs have rarely been examined historically.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the urgent need to reform teacher training for inclusive education in Nigeria. The fact that student teachers are not equipped with inclusive practices leads to several avoidable challenges for students with special needs. The problem of a lack of staff to provide better teacher training could be solved in a cooperative way by bringing together Nigerian and international professionals to co-create innovative models that are contextually and globally informed to train teachers for inclusive teaching. The implementation of inclusive education – which is a global duty – can only be realised with adequate teacher training and professional development courses for in-service teachers. This study offers insights for actionable reforms within teacher training programmes in Nigeria. The results should be reflected upon and incorporated into future teacher training curricula. This might initiate changes that help student teachers be more professionally prepared for their futures as high-quality inclusive teachers. Stakeholders, such as teacher education institutions, policymakers and international partners, should consider this study's findings and reform the teacher education curriculum

to equip student teachers with the competence and confidence required to teach inclusively in Nigeria.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.


DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.


ETHICS STATEMENT

Our institution does not require ethics approval for reporting individual cases or case series.

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