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Reimagining teacher education for inclusive education in Southern Africa: Ubuntu perspective

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Countries in Southern Africa have taken efforts to implement inclusive education. While policies exist and some efforts are made around inclusion in schools, limited attention has been given to the work required of teachers to actualise inclusivity. What is missing are mechanisms that can enable teacher education to develop inclusive pedagogical proficiency in future teachers. This study reimagined teacher education for inclusive education in Southern Africa through Ubuntu philosophy that positions disability as the moral and analytical basis of inclusivity. A qualitative conceptual-policy analysis approach was used to analyse the regional Policy Framework on Care and Support for Teaching and Learning. The analysis was theoretically guided by critical disability perspectives and Ubuntu relational ethics. The analysis showed that disability is framed in the policy framework as intersecting with multiple forms of vulnerability, and that inclusivity is conceptualised as a multisectoral agenda. However, the policy framework under-theorises teacher education for ethical decision-making, reflexivity and collaborative practice in crisis-affected contexts. This article argues that reforming teacher education to support inclusive education requires more than policy adherence. It also requires educating relational and reflexive teachers grounded in Ubuntu ethics by strengthening disability inclusivity as the foundation for such transformation.

Contribution: The Ubuntu framework has been primarily applied in school research. There is limited application of this framework in teacher education research. This creates a lacuna in understanding how school teachers are expected to practise Ubuntu, yet their training has not adequately prepared them. Therefore, this study applies the Ubuntu framework to teacher education by linking disability, inclusive education and Ubuntu ethics to offer insights that can inform debates on teacher education development in Southern Africa.

Keywords: inclusive education; polycrisis and educational equity; SADC CSTL policy framework; teacher education reform; Ubuntu ethics.

Introduction

Teacher education in Southern Africa is being reshaped amidst an increasingly complex *polycrisis*. A 'polycrisis' entails the overlap of crises like climate change, economic instability and technological disruption. Such overlap can compel teacher education systems to continually adapt, often straining resources and reducing stability in training programmes. It also requires future teachers to be prepared for more complex, uncertain classrooms, prompting programmes to include broader skills such as resilience, adaptability and interdisciplinary thinking. UNESCO (2020) explains that polycrisis is a convergence of persistent poverty, deepening inequalities, fragile public systems, public health shocks, climate stress and ongoing struggles over epistemic justice in postcolonial education systems. In a polycrisis context, inclusive education is no longer a marginal pedagogical concern but a central question of social justice, democratic participation and human dignity. Nowhere is this more evident than in how education systems respond to disability, which remains one of the most structurally entrenched forms of exclusion (UNESCO 2021).

Despite policy commitments to inclusion, learners with disabilities in Southern Africa continue to experience disproportionate exclusion from access, meaningful participation and educational success (Chitiyo & Dzenga 2021), particularly when disability intersects with poverty, gendered disadvantage, rurality, linguistic marginalisation and psychosocial vulnerability. These intersecting vulnerabilities are not accidental. They are produced through historical inequalities and contemporary governance arrangements that fragment care, support and learning into discrete sectors and technical interventions. Teacher education sits at the heart of this dilemma.

Teachers are expected to implement inclusive education in classrooms characterised by scarcity, overcrowding, limited specialist support and weak intersectoral coordination, yet they are not adequately prepared to navigate these realities in ethically grounded and contextually responsive ways (Mokhampanyane 2024; Motitswe 2025).

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Policy Framework on Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) represents one of the region's most ambitious attempts to respond to these challenges by emphasising holistic learner well-being, intersectoral collaboration and system-wide responsibility for educational inclusion (SADC 2015). In their editorial to a special issue on CSTL in sub-Saharan Africa, Pather, Msiza and Pillay (2025) note:

> The main aim of the CSTL framework is to create schools that function as inclusive centres of care, learning and support. The intention is to strengthen protective factors in schools to promote children's well-being and reduce risk factors. CSTL aims to create, amongst others, schools that build on the strengths of learners and educators and have appropriate infrastructure with good water and sanitation. It also aims to create safe, supportive schools, primarily through a range of services that are discrimination-free, involve parents and caregivers, and work through partnerships with multiple stakeholders. (p. 1467)

From Pather et al.'s summary of the CSTL framework above, it is clear that CSTL recognises that barriers to learning are social, structural and relational, not merely individual. However, the framework's transformative potential depends on how teachers are prepared to understand, interpret and enact inclusion in everyday practice (Mosito, Mosia & Buthelezi 2025). This makes teacher education critical for rethinking not only what inclusivity entails but also whose knowledge, values and ethics underpin it. Meanwhile, research on inclusive education in Africa has generated important insights into policy development, systemic barriers and implementation challenges (Grech 2011; Walton 2018). Research has also highlighted the limitations of transplanting Global North models of inclusivity into contexts characterised by distinct socioeconomic realities and knowledge traditions (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou 2011). In teacher education, studies have tended to focus on competencies, attitudes and technical skills for accommodating diverse learners, usually framed within individualised understandings of disability (Forlin & Sin 2017).

What remains under-theorised, however, is the ethical and epistemic labour required of teachers to practise inclusivity in conditions of chronic uncertainty and systemic fragmentation. In particular, there is limited conceptual work that positions disability not as a specialised category at the margins of teacher education, but as a generative perspective through which broader injustices in education systems become visible and contestable.

Furthermore, while Ubuntu has been widely discussed as an African philosophy of relationality, personhood and communal responsibility (Ewuoso & Hall 2019; Mbiti 1969; Metz 2011), it is invoked primarily rhetorically rather than systematically integrated into teacher education theory and policy analysis. Therefore, this article offers an Ubuntu-informed conceptual reframing of teacher education for inclusive education that places disability at the moral and analytical centre of educational justice. The article reads the SADC CSTL Policy Framework as an ethical and political text whose silences, particularly regarding teacher subjectivity, reflexivity and epistemic hybridity, require critical engagement. In so doing, the article gives insights into how inclusive education can function simultaneously as an ethical under-labourer and a structural catalyst for strengthening teacher preparedness in Southern Africa's polycrisis. The specific objectives are to:

- Examine how disability is positioned in inclusive education discourses and policies in Southern Africa, with particular reference to the SADC CSTL framework.
- Theorise the contribution of Ubuntu to an ethically grounded and contextually responsive model of teacher education for inclusive education.
- Propose conceptual directions for teacher education reform that go beyond technical conformity towards relational, adaptive and critically reflexive practice.

Literature overview

The global expansion of inclusive education has been accompanied by a tendency to frame inclusion as a matter of more technical adaptation (strategies, competencies and compliance mechanisms) and less of an ethical and political project. International policy discourses, including those advanced by UNESCO (2020), acknowledge inclusion as a question of justice and participation, but in practice, teacher education programmes reduce inclusion to a repertoire of methods for managing diversity (Forlin 2010). Critical scholars have argued that this technicist orientation risks hollowing out the inclusion of its normative force. Armstrong et al. (2011) demonstrate how inclusion is operationalised as a policy slogan that obscures deep structural inequalities, especially in postcolonial contexts where educational systems are shaped by historical dispossession and contemporary austerity. In teacher education, this situation manifests as an emphasis on individual teacher competence, divorced from the social, relational and institutional conditions that make inclusion possible or impossible. In Southern Africa, this limitation is particularly acute. Walton (2018) demonstrates that inclusive education reforms coexist with overcrowded classrooms, weak intersectoral coordination and limited specialist support. This produces what can be termed 'policy optimism and practice paralysis'. Teacher education, under these conditions, is tasked with an impossible burden: preparing teachers to enact inclusion without preparing them to navigate systemic fragility, ethical dilemmas and relational complexity (Mosito et al. 2025).

Disability research has played a crucial role in exposing the conceptual weaknesses of mainstream inclusive education discourse. Critical disability studies reject deficit-based

and medicalised understandings of disability, instead emphasising that exclusion arises from the interaction between impairment and socially produced barriers (Shakespeare 2014). Shakespeare says:

> In the first edition of this book, I demonstrated that the 'strong' social model is not the only progressive account of disability, and explained how there is a family of social approaches to disability, of which the British social model is just one example: others include the North American minority group approach, the social constructionist approach, the Nordic relational model. All of these approaches reject an individualist understanding of disability, and to different extents locate the disabled person in a broader context. To varying degrees, each of these approaches shares a basic political commitment to improving the lives of disabled people, by promoting social inclusion and removing the barriers that oppress disabled people. (pp. 1–2)

From Shakespeare's perspective, disability is not a marginal issue but a diagnostic lens that reveals how educational systems organise normalcy, value and belonging. Research has further highlighted disability as an intersectional phenomenon. Mitra, Posarac and Vick (2013) demonstrate that disability in low- and middle-income countries is deeply entangled with poverty, gender, rurality and limited access to public services. In African contexts, these intersections are intensified by colonial legacies that continue to shape epistemic hierarchies and resource distribution (Grech 2011). What remains underdeveloped, however, is the integration of disability as a foundational organising principle in teacher education theory. Much of the literature treats disability as one category among many forms of learner diversity (Hollenweger 2008 calls these 'administrative categories'), rather than as a generative standpoint from which broader injustices in schooling can be interrogated.

This conceptual marginalisation mirrors the lived experiences of learners with disabilities, whose exclusion continues despite formal inclusion policies.

Many scholars agree that the central deficit in teacher education for inclusive education is not a lack of techniques but a lack of ethical and epistemic grounding. Forlin and Sin (2017) note that teacher preparation programmes globally tend to prioritise attitudes and skills while neglecting deeper questions about values, power and professional judgement. This critique addresses broader concerns about epistemic injustice in education. Postcolonial scholars argue that dominant models of teacher professionalism privilege Eurocentric norms of knowledge and rationality, thereby marginalising indigenous and community-based ways of knowing (Ngubane & Makua 2021). In African contexts, this epistemic imbalance is especially problematic, as it undermines locally rooted ethical traditions that could offer more relational and context-responsive approaches to inclusion.

Consequently, Ubuntu emerges not as a cultural option but as a philosophically relevant resource for rethinking teacher education (Olawumi, Mavuso & Duku 2024). But, as Metz (2011) cautions, Ubuntu is invoked more rhetorically than theoretically, celebrated in abstract terms while remaining disconnected from institutional practices and professional formation. The challenge, therefore, is not whether Ubuntu is relevant, but how it can be systematically mobilised to reconfigure teacher education for inclusive education.

Theoretical framework

Tagwirei (2020) notes that Ubuntu is commonly encapsulated in the aphorism *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons). While frequently cited, this formulation is largely under-theorised. Philosophically, Ubuntu articulates a relational ontology in which personhood is not an intrinsic property of isolated individuals, but an emergent quality constituted through ethical relations of care, reciprocity and responsibility (Ewuoso & Hall 2019). Metz (2011) advances Ubuntu as a fully-fledged moral theory, arguing that right action is that which promotes harmonious relationships characterised by mutual aid and shared identity.

Crucially, this conception does not deny individuality but situates it in a moral ecology of interdependence. From this standpoint, harm is not merely individual injury but the fracturing of relational bonds. When applied to education, Ubuntu disrupts dominant meritocratic and individualist paradigms. It shifts the evaluative focus from individual achievement to communal flourishing and from procedural competence to ethical responsiveness. Teaching, within an Ubuntu framework, is not merely the transmission of knowledge but a moral practice oriented towards sustaining human dignity under conditions of vulnerability (Ngubane & Makua 2021). Metz (2011) says it all:

> I submit that it is up to those living in contemporary Southern Africa to refashion the interpretation of ubuntu so that its characteristic elements are construed in light of our best current understandings of what is morally right. Such refashioning is a project that can be assisted by appealing to some of the techniques of analytic philosophy, which include the construction and evaluation of a moral theory. A moral theory is roughly a principle purporting to indicate, by appeal to as few properties as possible, what all right actions have in common as distinct from wrong ones. What (if anything) do characteristically immoral acts such as lying, abusing, insulting, raping, kidnapping and breaking promises have in common by virtue of which they are wrong? (p. 536)

We live in contemporary Southern Africa, and we need to undertake this refashioning project. The emphasis is that disability occupies a distinctive position in an Ubuntu-informed framework because it exposes the limits of abstract relational ideals when confronted with material inequality and systemic exclusion. If personhood is constituted through social relations, then the marginalisation of persons with disabilities represents not only social injustice but also a moral failure of the community itself. Critical disability studies and Ubuntu converge in their rejection of atomistic conceptions of the self (ed. Mutanga 2023). However, Ubuntu

advances disability discourse by emphasising obligation rather than merely accommodation. Inclusion, from this perspective, is not a discretionary act of benevolence but a constitutive requirement of ethical community. As Metz (2011) argues, societies organised around Ubuntu are morally diminished when they fail to incorporate the most vulnerable into shared social life. In Southern African education systems shaped by colonial legacies, disability thus becomes a useful analytic entry point. It reveals how historical patterns of exclusion are reproduced through contemporary policy-practice disjunctures, resource inequities and fragmented care infrastructures (SADC 2015). Thus, the theoretical view in this article is that disability is not peripheral to inclusion. It is the point at which the ethical credibility of inclusive education is tested.

In this framework, teacher education for inclusive education is reconceptualised as a process of cultivating relationally grounded and critically reflexive professionals capable of navigating ethical complexity. Drawing on the CSTL framework's emphasis on collaboration, mentoring and induction (Pather et al. 2025), teacher education is shaped by epistemic hybridity, where multiple knowledge systems intersect. Epistemic hybridity refers to the blending and interaction of different knowledge systems (such as indigenous, local and Western academic traditions) to create more inclusive and context-relevant ways of knowing. It typically includes forms of knowledge such as scientific (formal or academic), indigenous (community-based and ancestral), experiential (learned through practice) and cultural or spiritual understandings. In the African context, Ubuntu plays a key role in hybridity by emphasising relational knowledge, community wisdom and shared humanity. In return, these help integrate individual and collective ways of knowing into a more holistic educational approach. Epistemic hybridity resists the hierarchy that privileges formal pedagogical knowledge over community-based understandings and lived experiences of disability.

Instead, it affirms that inclusive practice emerges through dialogue among professional expertise, indigenous ethical traditions and the voices of learners and families. This resonates with Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) argument that conceptual frameworks should integrate normative commitments with empirical realities to guide meaningful professional action. Thus, Ubuntu provides the ethical glue that holds this hybridity together. It legitimises collaborative professionalism not merely as an efficiency strategy, but as a moral imperative grounded in shared responsibility. Teachers, in this view, are not isolated implementers of policy but relational agents embedded in networks of care that span schools, communities and social sectors.

The theoretical framework advanced here reframes teacher education for inclusive education as an ethical project anchored in Ubuntu, with disability functioning as its critical compass. Inclusion is no longer understood as a technical response to difference, but as an ongoing moral practice of sustaining human dignity under conditions of inequality and uncertainty. This framework is used as an analytical lens to examine the SADC CSTL Policy Framework, challenging teacher education programmes to move beyond compliance-oriented models and to nurture ethical judgement, relational accountability and epistemic openness. The analytical questions that guided the reading of the policy document centred around how disability is positioned, how Ubuntu can be applied and possible epistemic directions in teacher education. The analysis focused on dimensions of the policy related to inclusive teaching. In doing so, it positions Ubuntu not as a cultural embellishment, but as a rigorous philosophical foundation for reimagining inclusive education in Southern Africa's polycrisis.

Research methods and design

This study adopted a hybrid conceptual-policy analysis design, grounded in an interpretive qualitative approach.

Conceptual analysis clarifies and defines key ideas, whereas critical policy analysis examines how those ideas are interpreted, represented and enacted in policy contexts. These approaches complement each other by linking theoretical clarity with contextual critique, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of both the meaning of concepts and their potential practical implications in education systems. Yanow (2007) observes that:

> [*T*]he use of qualitative methods in policy research is not new. Academic scholars and policy analysts have for some years been venturing out into the 'field' as ethnographers or participant-observers to study first-hand the experiences of legislators, implementors, agency clients, community members and other policy-relevant stakeholders. Others have based qualitative studies on in-depth interviews with various policy actors, and still other studies draw on legislative, agency, and other documents. (p. 405)

The study undertook a theoretically informed re-reading of the SADC CSTL Policy Framework to examine how teacher education for inclusive education is conceptualised in Southern Africa. Conceptual analysis is an established approach for advancing theory, clarifying assumptions and generating new analytic frameworks in education research, especially when empirical gaps are rooted in epistemic or ethical under-theorisation rather than in data absence (Maxwell 2012; Ravitch & Riggan 2017). Specifically, the study combined document analysis, critical disability studies and Ubuntu-informed normative theory to conceptualise teacher education for inclusive education. This design is appropriate given the study's aim to reposition disability from the margins to the moral and analytical centre of teacher education reform and to interrogate the ethical work demanded of teachers operating in systemic crisis.

The study is set in Southern Africa, with particular reference to countries in the SADC. Profound socioeconomic inequalities characterise the region, including historically stratified education systems and uneven access to health, social welfare and specialist educational services (UNESCO 2020).

Teacher education systems in this context operate under conditions of chronic resource constraints, policy overload and competing accountability demands while simultaneously being tasked with realising ambitious inclusion and equity agendas. The policy and practice environment shaping the study is defined by the SADC CSTL Policy Framework, which seeks to integrate education with health, social protection and community-based services to address barriers to learning holistically (SADC 2015). This framework provides a regionally grounded yet diverse setting through which broader questions of inclusive education, teacher education, disability and the relational ethics of support and care can be examined (Mosito et al. 2025).

Yanow (2007:413) remarks that 'there are many more forms of interpretive (qualitative) approaches to policy research than there is space to discuss here'. Analysis in this study followed a thematic and interpretive process consistent with qualitative document and conceptual analysis. Themes were identified through an iterative process of close reading and coding of the SADC CSTL Policy Framework, thereby allowing recurring patterns, key concepts and underlying assumptions to emerge inductively. The interpretation of these themes was further informed by theoretical constructs from CSTL and Ubuntu, which provided analytical perspectives emphasising relationality, holistic support and the interconnectedness of individual and community well-being.

Firstly, the text was read iteratively to identify dominant framings of disability, inclusion and teacher professionalism. Secondly, these framings were critically examined through the perspectives of critical disability studies and Ubuntu ethics to surface assumptions, silences and tensions. Thirdly, analytic themes were synthesised into an integrated conceptual framework. Throughout the process, analytic memos were used to refine interpretations and ensure coherence between theoretical claims and source material. Rigour was established through transparency of analytic logic and theoretical triangulation (Maxwell 2012). Because this study is conceptual-policy analysis and based exclusively on publicly available documents, it did not involve human or animal subjects and therefore did not require institutional ethical clearance.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

The findings demonstrate how disability is positioned in the SADC CSTL Policy Framework, how inclusion is conceptualised, and where significant epistemic and ethical gaps emerge in relation to teacher education. These findings are presented in five themes:

- Disability as a nexus of intersecting vulnerabilities
- Inclusion as a systemic and holistic, not individualised concept
- The central but under-theorised role of teachers
- Collaborative professionalism and intersectoral coordination
- Disability inclusion as a policy commitment with implementation gaps

Disability as a nexus of intersecting vulnerabilities

A central finding of the analysis is that the CSTL framework does not treat disability as an isolated category of disadvantage. Instead, disability is positioned in a broader ecology of intersecting vulnerabilities that collectively shape educational exclusion across the SADC region. The policy explicitly identifies children with disabilities as one of several groups who experience compounded barriers to access, retention and learning outcomes: 'Children in the following, often overlapping, categories are more likely than others to experience limited access to education, erratic school attendance and sub-optimal outcomes… those with disabilities' (SADC 2015:5).

Importantly, the policy highlights the *relational* nature of exclusion by emphasising that barriers 'often co-occur amongst especially vulnerable groups of children, thus aggravating their educational exclusion' (p. 2). Disability, therefore, functions as a revealing prism through which poverty, rurality, gender, linguistic marginalisation and health-related adversity become transdisciplinary and not discrete phenomena. The CSTL framework further highlights the severity of disability-based exclusion by citing UNESCO's characterisation of disability as 'one of the least visible but most potent factors in educational marginalisation' (p. 6). This framing resonates with critical disability perspectives that locate exclusion not in impairment itself but in systemic arrangements that fail to accommodate diversity.

Inclusion as a systemic and holistic, not individualised concept

The second major finding concerns how inclusion is conceptualised in CSTL. Instead of adopting an individualised or deficit-oriented approach, the policy frames inclusion as a systemic responsibility requiring coordinated action across sectors. The framework defines barriers to education broadly as: 'Factors, whether social, economic, cultural, pedagogic or other, that impede children's educational outcomes' (p. iv). This expansive definition resists narrow pedagogical interpretations of inclusion and situates educational exclusion within broader social and institutional contexts. Schools are envisioned as places of integrated and comprehensive care and support through which learners access a full package of services necessary for meaningful participation in education. The 'essential package of care and support' (p. 10) constitutes a key structural articulation of inclusion. It integrates curriculum support, teacher development, psychosocial support, health, nutrition, social assistance and community involvement (Christopher & Pinias 2025).

Crucially, the policy framework insists that: 'The comprehensive set of services is all equally important for the

realisation of the desired educational outcomes and must be afforded the same priority status' (p. 10). This finding highlights that inclusion in CSTL is not reduced to classroom-level accommodation but is embedded in a holistic conception of learner well-being. While this systemic vision is strong, the policy falls short of articulating how teachers should be epistemically and ethically prepared to enact such complexity in practice.

The central but under-theorised role of teachers

A third key finding concerns the positioning of teachers within the CSTL framework. Teachers are repeatedly identified as important actors in identifying vulnerability, supporting learners and sustaining inclusive schooling.

For example, the policy mandates that:

> Ministries of Education are required to oblige teachers … to monitor enrolment and attendance by all children … and to respond … through investigation and the provision of support necessary to address the causes underlying these cases. (Policy Statement 6:20)

Similarly, CSTL requires education systems to provide 'support to teachers to identify and support vulnerable children' (Policy Statement 10:21). These statements affirm teachers' central role as relational agents working at the interface between learners, schools, families and external services.

However, the analysis reveals a worrisome shortfall. While teachers are assigned extensive responsibilities, the framework provides limited theorisation of the ethical reasoning, critical reflexivity and epistemic hybridity required to fulfil these roles. Teacher development is largely framed in instrumental terms (training, support and deployment) without sustained engagement with how teachers negotiate moral dilemmas, competing accountabilities and culturally diverse understandings of disability and care.

Collaborative professionalism and intersectoral coordination

The fourth theme concerns collaboration and coordination. Care and Support for Teaching and Learning strongly emphasises collaborative professionalism across education, health, social welfare and community structures. The education sector is accorded 'primacy' and is required to act as a coordinator and conduit for services delivered by other sectors.

Schools are described as uniquely positioned to serve as delivery hubs because they are physically accessible and widely distributed and embedded in communities. The policy further mandates the establishment of national and local coordination structures and referral networks to support integrated service delivery. The policy framework states:

> In turn, this requires that CSTL be mainstreamed within the education systems of Member States. It requires, in addition, that the education and other sectors work together to provide a package of services through schools as coordinated sites of service delivery. As custodians of CSTL, Ministries of Education are required to lead the coordination of the efforts of stakeholders, including other Ministries and Departments, development partners, civil society, and community-based partners. The effective inclusion of the full diversity of role-players requires that they all not only know, but commit to, and account for, the fulfilment of their respective roles and responsibilities. (p. 24)

This statement emphasises CSTL's structural ambition and its recognition that inclusive education cannot be achieved through isolated sectoral interventions. Nevertheless, the analysis indicates that while collaborative structures are extensively detailed, the framework underplays the professional learning and identity work teachers must undertake to function effectively in these networks. Collaboration is treated primarily as a governance and coordination challenge and not as a relational and epistemic practice requiring sustained cultivation.

Disability inclusion as a policy commitment with implementation gaps

A final result relates specifically to disability inclusion. The CSTL framework explicitly identifies disability as a key barrier to education and affirms the principle of non-discrimination:

> Interventions at policy, programme and service delivery levels should ensure that children and all those targeted by CSTL programmes receive equal attention and services regardless of sex, language, religion, socio-economic status, geography, cultural group, ethnicity and disability, membership of a marginalised group, or other grounds. (Guiding Principle iii:17)

Yet the policy simultaneously acknowledges that across Member States, disability-inclusive commitments mostly fail to translate into funded and resourced programmes: 'Many national education policies recognise disability as a key barrier to education. However, the translation of broad policy statements into funded and resourced programmes… is markedly absent' (p. 14). This admission constitutes a critical finding. Disability inclusion is normatively endorsed but structurally fragile. The gap between principle and practice vindicates the argument that inclusion cannot be sustained through policy acquiescence alone but requires a deeper ethical and conceptual grounding in teacher education.

Discussion

Care and support for teaching and learning as a systemic and relational vision of inclusivity

This study demonstrates that the SADC Policy Framework on CSTL offers one of the most systemically articulated visions of inclusive education in Southern Africa.

Importantly, CSTL does not treat disability as a peripheral or specialised concern but rather positions it as a central

axis through which educational exclusion is produced, intensified and normalised. Disability is framed as intersecting with poverty, gendered inequality, rural marginalisation, linguistic exclusion and psychosocial adversity, thereby revealing inclusion as a deeply structural and relational challenge rather than a technical pedagogical adjustment. This framing resonates strongly with African and Global South critiques of education policy that accentuate historical injustice, uneven development and relational harm as constitutive features of exclusion (Grech 2011; UNESCO 2020).

This systemic positioning of disability is significant as it seeks to disrupt Global North epistemologies that individualise disadvantage and depoliticise inequality while privileging African thought as plural, relational and historically situated. Care and Support for Teaching and Learning's understanding of disability aligns with this posture by rejecting deficit-based explanations and by locating educational marginalisation in broader socio-economic and institutional ecologies.

In this sense, CSTL affirms inclusive education as an ethical and political project concerned with educational justice, dignity and social repair and not just a narrow compliance with global policy templates.

Tensions in teacher agency and policy enactment

The analysis also reveals a critical tension that is highly relevant to the concerns of Southern Africa and other Global South–oriented discourse. While CSTL offers a strong multisectoral and holistic architecture for inclusion, it under-theorises the ethical, epistemic and professional labour required of teachers who must enact this vision under conditions of chronic scarcity, policy fragmentation and institutional fragility. Teachers are positioned as key agents of inclusion, responsible for identifying vulnerability, coordinating support and sustaining learner participation, yet their preparation is largely framed in instrumental and managerial terms. These risks reproduce what scholars have long critiqued as technicist governance logics that overload frontline professionals while obscuring the moral, relational and epistemic demands of practice (Walton 2018).

This finding echoes broader Global South critiques of inclusive education policy. International frameworks frequently espouse inclusion as a moral commitment but translate it into technical checklists, competencies and coordination mechanisms at the level of implementation. In postcolonial contexts such as Southern Africa, this gap is particularly consequential. Teachers operate in classrooms shaped by overcrowding, limited specialist support, uncoordinated intersectoral collaboration and competing survival imperatives. Without explicit ethical grounding, inclusion risks being reduced to procedural compliance rather than lived relational work. Such an outcome would contradict both the spirit of CSTL and the region's epistemic commitments, which insist on grounding knowledge production in lived realities and moral accountability.

Ubuntu as an ethical and epistemic perspective for inclusivity

The Ubuntu perspective advanced in this article makes a distinctive contribution. Ubuntu, understood as a relational ontology and moral philosophy (Ewuoso & Hall 2019), offers a normative grammar capable of deepening CSTL's inclusive vision in ways that are consonant with African epistemologies. Ubuntu's emphasis on relational personhood, mutual care and shared responsibility (Metz 2011; Tagwirei 2020) reframes inclusion not as an optional intervention but as a constitutive requirement of ethical community.

Disability, in this framework, becomes a critical moral test. When learners with disabilities are excluded, it is not only individuals who are harmed, but the moral fabric of the educational community itself is diminished. This argument aligns closely with the common insistence that African philosophies should not be mobilised symbolically or nostalgically but rather engaged as living, reflexive and dynamic intellectual resources (see Olawumi et al. 2024, in the case of teacher education). Instead of invoking Ubuntu as a cultural cosmetic, this study integrates it as a substantive ethical framework for teacher education, joining the likes of Mosito et al. (2025) and Olawumi et al. (2024) in such proposals. Ubuntu complements CSTL's holistic orientation by stressing the relational and moral work that sustains inclusive systems. It also challenges dominant Global North perspectives on teacher professionalism that prioritise individual competence, neutrality and procedural rationality over communal accountability and ethical judgement.

Disability as a generative analytical perspective

The study further extends critical disability discourse by positioning disability not merely as one category among many forms of learner diversity but as a generative analytic perspective through which broader injustices in education systems become visible. This move is consistent with African and decolonial traditions of thought that understand vulnerability as relational and historically produced. Disability, in this sense, exposes how colonial legacies, contemporary austerity and epistemic hierarchies converge to structure exclusion in schools (Grech 2011). By centring disability, the study resists the Global North's tendency to fragment inclusion into discrete categories. Instead, it affirms a more integrated and justice-oriented conception of education, consistent with contemporary African thought, as articulated in Ubuntu philosophy.

Implications for teacher education and decolonial futures

The implications for teacher education policy and practice in Southern Africa are substantial. Teacher education reforms should move beyond technical alignment with

inclusion policies towards cultivating ethically grounded and critically reflexive professionals. Disability inclusion should function as a core organising principle of teacher education curricula, not as a marginal or specialised topic. Ministries of Education and teacher education institutions should integrate Ubuntu-informed relational ethics into professional preparation, mentoring and induction through curriculum revisions that incorporate the principles of CSTL. This would strengthen both teacher educators and teachers' capacity to work collaboratively across sectors and communities, as envisaged in CSTL, while grounding such collaboration in moral responsibility rather than administrative obligation.

To actualise these aspirations, empirical research is needed to investigate how teachers already enact Ubuntu values in inclusive practice, especially in contexts of compounded vulnerability. Recognising and systematising these practices would align inclusive education more closely with African lived realities and epistemologies.

European and Global North inclusive education epistemologies have dominated Africa because they have been privileged over our indigenous African thoughts and ways of being. Remember, Metz (2011) calls for the Ubuntu refashioning project championed by those who live in Southern Africa. Therefore, inclusive education in Southern Africa cannot be meaningfully advanced without privileging African ethical frameworks, Global South epistemologies and the lived socio-historical conditions of schooling. There is an expressed need for a decolonial reimagining of teacher education for inclusive education that is relational, reflexive and responsive rather than technocratic or derivative through positioning disability as a moral and analytical anchor and Ubuntu as an ethical reach.

Strengths and limitations

Methodologically, the study's conceptual and interpretive approach aligns with commitment to epistemic plurality and reflexivity. Through a critical reading of an authoritative regional policy framework, the study treats policy as an ethical and political text rather than a neutral technical instrument (see Yanow 2007). This approach makes visible not only what CSTL articulates but also what it silences, particularly regarding teacher subjectivity, epistemic hybridity and moral agency. Such analytic work is essential in contexts where empirical data alone cannot address deeper epistemic and ethical gaps in policy and practice.

Meanwhile, the study's limitations must be acknowledged. As a conceptual-policy analysis, the study does not draw on empirical data from teachers, learners or teacher educators and therefore cannot make claims about how CSTL is enacted in specific national contexts. Consistent with African interpretive traditions, however, the findings should be understood as analytically generative rather than empirically exhaustive. They provide a conceptual vocabulary and ethical orientation that can inform future empirical research grounded in national realities. For one to contextualise the policy analysis herein with empirical evidence, a good starting point would be articles in the Special Issue of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* on CSTL in sub-Saharan Africa (c.f. Christopher & Pinias 2025; Mosito et al. 2025; Pather et al. 2025).

Conclusion

This study aimed to re-envision teacher education for inclusive education in Southern Africa by centring disability in educational justice from both conceptual and moral perspectives. It critically engaged with the SADC Policy Framework on CSTL, applying a Global South epistemic perspective. The analysis showed that in CSTL, disability is viewed as a point of intersecting vulnerabilities, not just an isolated difference, emphasising inclusion as a systemic, relational and justice-driven project rooted in historical and socio-economic inequalities in the region. This approach departs from the deficit-focused and individual-centric models common in many Global North policies. The study also theorised Ubuntu as a meaningful ethical and ontological framework for teacher education within inclusive education, highlighting its focus on relational personhood, mutual care and communal responsibility. This offers a moral foundation for inclusion amidst resource scarcity, uncertainty and institutional fragility. Ubuntu shifts the view of inclusion from a voluntary choice to an ethical duty and highlights the moral effort teachers should invest as relational agents in communities of care. Additionally, the study proposed alternative directions for reforming teacher education, moving away from technical compliance towards developing critically reflective, ethically grounded and contextually responsive professionals. Inclusive education, therefore, functions both as a means to expose structural injustices through disability and as a way to enhance teacher preparedness during times of multiple crises. Overall, the study contends that disability inclusion is not a supplementary feature but the essential foundation for building a just, relational and decolonial-inspired transformation of teacher education for inclusive education in Southern Africa.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Ben de Souza: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

There are no data associated with this publication. The document analysed in this article is publicly available online.

Disclaimer

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