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Diversity in Education: Conceptualisations of Preservice teachers at one South African University in KwaZulu-Natal Province

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Abstract

The study explored how Work Integrated Learning (WIL) bound preservice teachers from one South African university conceptualised diversity in education. The inquiry was premised on both local and international scholarship which increasingly advocates recognising and embracing diversity as a critical path to achieving inclusivity and advancing social justice in education. Anchored in the interpretivist paradigm; with a case study design and qualitative approach; the study elicited nuanced insights from 16 purposively selected WIL bound preservice teachers in rural KwaZulu-Natal Schools. A semi-structured questionnaire generated data; enabling participants to articulate their understandings of diversity in anticipation of their classroom practice during WIL. The Behaviourist Theory by J.B Watson and B.F Skinner and thematic analysis were employed to interpret the findings. The findings reveal a transitional level understanding of diversity; characterised predominantly by surface-level multifaceted identification of difference; with a few participants demonstrating moderate analytical engagement influenced by socio-cultural, historical and learned backgrounds. Nevertheless; the engagement was constrained; with negligible influence from recent scholarship focused on dismantling systemic inequalities in education. The study advocates taking advantage of WIL; whose experiential nature offers authentic lived encounter; complemented by structured workshops to deepen preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity. WIL can serve as a powerful pedagogical space for bridging the gap between recognition of difference and its meaningful pedagogical application. Therefore; preservice teachers may be better positioned to

align their practice with contemporary scholarship and global imperatives for inclusivity; thereby contributing to the cultivation of more equitable and socially just learning environments.

Keywords: behaviourist theory, diversity, inclusive education, rural schools, transitional

1. Introduction and Background

Globalisation has emerged as an unavoidable trend in contemporary society; shrinking the world and enabling interaction among people from diverse backgrounds. Schools; as mirrors of society; have consequently experienced an increase in learners of varied cultural religious and social orientations (Vandeyar, 2008). Recognising that education functions as an instrument of social transformation (Rowan et al., 2021); the demand for a community of teachers capable of engaging meaningfully with children from different cultural contexts becomes imperative. Such inclusivity is not only central to the provision of quality education and the improvement of living standards but also to the cultivation of global citizens who embody tolerance and foster peaceful coexistence. This vision resonates with Sustainable Development Goal 4; which advocates for inclusive; equitable and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). It underscores the importance of integrating diverse perspectives and experiences into educational practice; ensuring that every learner; regardless of background; has access to meaningful education (United Nations, 2015).

Higher education institutions; particularly universities; play a pivotal role in preparing prospective graduates with the attitudes; knowledge and skills necessary to serve their communities effectively. As Ferguson and Roofe (2020) argue; universities have a moral responsibility to contribute to local and regional development; functioning as living laboratories that advance the growth of host communities. Against this backdrop, the present study explored preservice teachers' understanding of diversity in education. It sought to establish whether, following instruction, student teachers are conscious of the issues they must attend to as they embark on WIL. WIL is an integral component of teacher education which bridges theory learnt in lecture rooms into practice in authentic classroom environments (Ajani & Govender, 2026). The students under study had completed four years of Educational Foundations and Professional Studies which exposed them to knowledge around curriculum, assessment, learning theories, language across the curriculum, classroom management, barriers to learning, and teaching strategies (Mukeredzi & Makwara, 2026). Specialisation modules taught students particular school subjects that they were enrolled for and how to teach these to learners in the classroom. WIL formed a major component of the B.Ed. course, spread across four years of the programme with stanzas of four weeks from first to third; and six months in fourth year. Student teachers investigated were therefore bound for six months period of WIL. These participants were deliberately targeted because they were entering teaching practice contexts where knowledge of diversity and inclusion is essential and could be further developed through mentorship and authentic school environments. Such awareness is essential not only for addressing the educational needs of all learners; but also; for fostering inclusive learning environments where

diversity is valued as a catalyst for innovation and social cohesion. The insights generated may inform the university's teacher development initiatives; ensuring that graduates are equipped to create classrooms where every learner feels recognised; appreciated and empowered to contribute.

2. Statement of the Problem

Diversity in education is widely acknowledged as a complex and multifaceted construct; encompassing demographic; cognitive; socio-economic; physical; functional; experiential; geographic and linguistic dimensions (Pahuja, 2024; Tamilarasi & Krishnakumar, 2024). Cognitive diversity refers to varied thought processes; perspectives and learning styles; while functional diversity relates to skills; expertise and educational backgrounds. Experiential diversity is shaped by individual's life experiences; cultural contexts and socio-economic positions. Geographic diversity reflects local; regional and international backgrounds; including rural–urban distinctions, while linguistic diversity highlights the influence of varied language proficiencies on human interaction. These dimensions intersect to create overlapping identities and complex demands within classrooms (Pincus & Ellis, 2021). While this holistic framework is well established; preservice teachers' understandings of diversity are not uniform; they are often mediated by personal beliefs; which can act as barriers to change unless disrupted by significant shifts in perspective (Vandeyar, 2008).

International scholarship demonstrates that teachers and young graduates continue to grapple with the complexity of diversity (Rowan et al., 2021). Moreover; conceptualisations of diversity are highly context-specific; shaped by local socio-cultural and institutional realities (Iniesto & Bossu, 2023). Yet; despite extensive global research, there remains limited empirical evidence on how preservice teachers in South Africa; particularly within KwaZulu-Natal's multilingual and multicultural context; conceptualise diversity in education. This is a critical gap to which the study will contribute as preservice teachers' beliefs and interpretations directly influence their classroom practice and learner learning and consequently learner outcomes. This underscores the importance of examining preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity; given their pivotal role in shaping learners' classroom experiences. This study offers a vital opportunity to advance the understanding of how student teachers conceptualise critical concepts that impact their teaching and learner outcomes; thereby making an important contribution to the field of education; social justice and society. Developing an understanding of how student teachers conceptualise diversity in education is fundamental for informing discussions and decisions by policymakers; teachers; education institutions and on teacher preparation. Failure to interrogate these conceptualisations risks perpetuating exclusionary practices; undermining equity; and weakening the broader goals of diversity; equity and inclusion that are essential for sustainable and prosperous societies (Jaiswal, 2024). Addressing this gap is therefore both a scholarly and practical necessity. Against this backdrop; this study investigates how preservice teachers at a South African university in KwaZulu-Natal conceptualise diversity in education; guided by the following research questions:

1. How do preservice teachers at a South African university in KwaZulu-Natal Province conceptualise diversity in education?
2. What implications do student teachers' conceptualisations have on classroom practice and teacher professional development?

3. Literature Review

Global interpretations of diversity are complex and multifaceted; shaped by cultural; legal and historical contexts (Tamilarasi & Krishnakumar, 2024). These dimensions not only inform preservice teacher identity but also influence pedagogical orientations; curricular content; retention and equitable access to learning opportunities. Semiao et al. (2023); in their study of teachers' perceptions in English schools; highlight the dual nature of cultural diversity in which it is simultaneously perceived as a challenge and an asset; mediated by teachers' own experiential backgrounds. This tension aligns with debates in South African contexts; where West, Evans, and Jordaan (2023) demonstrate that preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity are similarly shaped by socio-cultural legacies and institutional realities. They argue that while post-apartheid reforms created enabling conditions for diversity in inclusion; persistent inequalities continue to complicate classroom practice (Ajani & Govender 2026). Their findings underline that diversity is often understood in demographic and cultural terms; with limited engagement in intersectional dimensions such as race; gender; disability and class. This South African perspective parallels global debates; yet insists on contextual specificity; highlighting how historical injustices and systemic inequalities mediate preservice teachers' understandings of diversity. While diversity is acknowledged in South African scholarship; there remains a need to continuously revisit socio-cultural realities in different contexts for education to remain relevant. Cognisant of global discourse of diversity through intersectional dimensions such as race; gender; disability and class; it is noble to explore how these and other overlapping identities are being conceptualised by preservice teachers.

Legal interpretations of diversity are also anchored in international statutes and frameworks that advocate for inclusive education. The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) prohibits discrimination based on gender; race; language; religion; or social origin; guaranteeing access to primary; secondary and tertiary education (UNESCO, 1960). Similarly; Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) establishes education as a fundamental human right; calling for learning that fosters understanding; tolerance and friendship among nations and groups (United Nations, 1948). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (Articles 28 and 29) further emphasise the right to education without discrimination; underlining respect for cultural identity; languages and values (UNICEF, 1989). The rights of persons with disabilities are explicitly addressed in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which mandates reasonable accommodation; accessibility; communication and teacher training (United Nations, 2006). Likewise, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their

Families (1990) ensures access to education for children of migrant workers regardless of legal or social status (United Nations, 1990). These commitments are reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 4; which calls for inclusive; equitable and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2015). Collectively; these international instruments prohibit discrimination and provide the normative foundation upon which national policies are constructed (Tikly, 2020).

In South Africa; diversity commitments are embedded in the Constitution (1996); which guarantees the right to education (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Schools Act (1996) ensures equal access and prohibits discrimination (DoE, 1996); while the White Paper on Inclusive Education outlines strategies for learners with diverse needs (DoE, 2001). The Languages in Education Policy (1997) promotes multilingualism and mother tongue instruction (DoE, 1997) and the Higher Education Act advances transformation and inclusivity (CHE, 2016). Despite these robust frameworks, extant literature across diverse contexts highlights persistent misalignments between policy intent and classroom practice (Rusznyak & Walton, 2025). This study explores preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity, focusing on their understanding after instruction but before practicum, to reveal how global and national commitments to diversity are interpreted in teacher preparation.

Diversity in education cannot be fully understood without acknowledging historical legacies such as colonialism and the enduring influence of whiteness and institutional structures. A decolonial perspective; as Zembylas (2023) argues; highlights the role of colonial frameworks while offering intellectual and methodological interventions that dismantle neoliberal multicultural conceptions of diversity. These conceptions often rely on narrow cultural interpretations and deficit views of difference. Decolonial approaches therefore challenge the dominance of colonial ideologies in shaping culture; identity and society; while emphasizing the importance of historical context; indigenous knowledge systems; and the empowerment of marginalized voices. Practical applications of these ideas can be seen in initiatives such as Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education and efforts in South Africa to confront and move beyond apartheid discourses in education. Similarly; the notion of conflict diversity shifts attention from superficial celebrations of difference to the structural inequalities embedded in educational systems (Pincus & Ellis, 2021). This includes challenging power hierarchies where dominant groups such as the wealthy or majority ethnic communities shape curriculum design and resource allocation; while marginalized learners; including those with disabilities; face inaccessible infrastructure or bullying. Critical practices foster transformative inclusion by dismantling entrenched hierarchies. They involve redistributing resources; embedding equity into school culture and reforming teacher education to embrace diversity in its fullest sense. By situating preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity within both historical legacies and contemporary educational reforms, this study addresses a critical gap in South African scholarship; the need to understand how future educators negotiate the tensions between decolonial imperatives, structural inequalities, and classroom practice.

The different interpretations of diversity in education strongly influence how teachers practise in the classroom. Building on this understanding; the present study explores preservice teacher conceptualisations of diversity and how recent suggestions of dismantling hegemonic practices are translated into practice in teacher education. Rowan et al. (2021) concurs; noting that in teacher education, greater awareness of the knowledge claims underpinning scholarship enhances our ability to meet the needs of diverse students and their teachers.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Psychological Behaviourist Theory; originally advanced by J.B. Watson and later refined by B.F. Skinner and Bandura. Behaviourism holds that learning occurs through observing behaviour; with all actions understood as acquired habits (Zhou & Brown, 2017). It perceives behaviours as learned rather than innate and thus can be unlearned or replaced when undesirable. In this study; preservice teachers may adopt behaviours that promote diversity while discarding those that hinder inclusion. Behaviourists further argue that behaviour is shaped through conditioned interaction with the environment; where actions are linked to rewards or punishments (Zhou & Brown, 2015; Giannoukos, 2024). Rewards reinforce acceptable behaviours; while punishment weakens undesirable ones. Applied to teacher education, inclusive practices may be strengthened through praise; recognition, or assessment marks; while discriminatory practices may be discouraged through corrective feedback or rebuke.

Skinner emphasized the primacy of the environment in shaping behaviour, contending that individuals are moulded by external conditions rather than shaping them. Thus; preservice teacher's views of diversity are influenced by institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Behaviourist principles hold that learning occurs through study; experience, and observing socially valued behaviours (Giannoukos, 2024). Extending the theory; Bandura asserted the importance of modelling and imitation; underscoring the need for preservice teachers to observe inclusive practices during training. Scholars such as Engelbrecht & Muthukrishna (2019) affirm that attitudes toward diversity are shaped by institutional culture; and reinforcement of inclusion during WIL. Similarly; Rusznyak and Walton (2021) stress that teacher education programmes must intentionally reward inclusive pedagogy to ensure that learner diversity is enacted in classrooms, not merely theorized.

In relation to this study; the behaviourist framework provided the lens for interpreting preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity as they prepared for WIL. It enabled assessment of their understanding as they transitioned to practice; and highlights WIL as a space to reinforce; imitate; and apply diversity in inclusive behaviours while discarding those that undermine equity. Thus; the behaviourist theory; supported by both international and South African authorities, not only informs the analysis of data; but also highlights aspects that are lacking in conceptualisations and pathways to address them.

5. Methodology

This study; situated within the interpretivist paradigm; explored how preservice teachers understood diversity in education. Interpretivism examines how individuals make sense of their social world through meanings; experiences and perspectives; assuming reality is socially constructed and best studied through empathy; dialogue and interpretation (Myers, 2008; Nickerson, 2026). Guided by this paradigm; a qualitative approach was adopted; privileging dialogical methods that co-construct shared meanings (Myers, 2008). Data were generated through semi-structured questionnaires; chosen for their efficiency in reaching diverse participants and eliciting comprehensive insights (Kuphanga, 2024). These were administered simultaneously to all the 16 participants. This method proved cost-effective; flexible and suitable for gauging collective understandings.

Given the single-institution context; the study employed a case study design; valued for its capacity to provide in-depth contextual analysis of a bounded system (Bunkar et al., 2024). The university was treated as a unit of analysis; enabling rich exploration of preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity within its institutional setting. Sixteen purposively selected first-year preservice teachers bound for WIL participated. They were deliberately targeted as they were preparing for teaching practice contexts where knowledge of diversity is essential. Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of individuals most relevant to the research focus.

Ethical procedures were rigorously observed. Ethical Clearance was granted by the Institutional Research and Ethics Committee and written informed consent secured from all participants; ensuring voluntary and informed participation (Bouche, 2026). Participant identities were concealed; with data presented under numbers (Participant 1 to 16), thereby upholding confidentiality and respect for autonomy.

The study employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns in the data (Dahal, 2025). Recognised as a flexible yet systematic method; it captures both shared and divergent perspectives in qualitative inquiry. Following Dahal (2025), the process involved transcription and familiarisation; systematic coding; grouping codes into categories; grouping categories into themes and refining themes that reflected preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity. Themes were derived from participants' conceptualisations of diversity by identifying frequently highlighted characteristics. These characteristics were assigned collective labels to facilitate a deeper exploration of participants' responses within each category. The themes that emerged were organised into five broad categories: demographic; cultural; functional; contextual and inclusive. All data from the 16 purposively selected participants underwent these steps, culminating in a contextualised account of their interpretations of diversity in education

6. Findings of the Study

This study explored how preservice teachers at a South African university in KwaZulu-Natal conceptualised diversity in education as they prepared for WIL. The data generated produced two

key strands of analysis: preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity, and the implications of these understandings for WIL and teacher professional development. The findings are presented in detail below.

6.1 Overview of the Findings

The findings of this study are based on one of the four questions on inclusive education posed to participants, namely: *What is your understanding of diversity in education?* The results revealed that preservice teachers conceptualised diversity in education in varied ways, although certain shared features emerged. Table 1 below summarises each participant's conceptualisation(s); outlines the characteristics of difference that emerged from these understandings; and indicates the terms that contributed to each of the identified themes.

Table 1

Summary of Preservice Teachers' Conceptualisations of Diversity in Education

Participant	Conceptualisation of Diversity	Emerging Characteristics of diversity
Participant 1	*Diversity is whereby there are different (sic) race; gender; languages etc. diversity refers to culture and traditional. Also differences in race; culture; gender; ability are seen as strengths; not problem.*	Race; gender; language; culture; tradition; ability.
Participant 2	*Diversity include (sic) having different race; language; gender and colour in school or in the workplace. Diversity also include different type of people that have different beliefs or religion.*	Race, language, gender, beliefs and religion
Participant 3	*Diversity is something difference (sic) and human being to other people. Understanding gender; culture; religion.*	Gender; religion; culture.
Participant 4	*Means the different people and the recognition, respect to each other. People need to respect each other.*	Respect for each other
Participant 5	*Diversity refers to the different people in terms of culture; language and belief system. In South Africa we are also different in terms of what has been stated above. We have black people; white people and coloured.*	Culture; language; belief system; race.
Participant 6	*Means different people with different language; culture; colour etc. meets in a same place. Sometimes different people meets in a same place doing the same thing this is diversity.*	Language; culture, race place; doing same thing.
Participant 7	*My understanding of diversity it's a difference between humans like their race; culture; gender; age, ability in a given setting.*	Race; culture; gender; age; ability; in a given setting.
Participant 8	*Diversity is the combination of different ethnic groups and participating in SA we got numerous groups. Is the understanding of people (Sic) culture and how to cope and live with them.*	Ethnic groups; how to cope and live with them
Participant	*Diversity means our differences; language; culture; religion; race*	Language; culture; religion;

9	*and our background are not the same.*	race.
Participant 10	*My understanding on diversity is being unique and different. It's all about being uniform in all ways in life. Your language; background may all be different and unique and all of that uniqueness is captured under one word diversity.*	Unique and different; language
Participant 11	*Diversity refers to people's different cultural background. It refers to a situation where there are peoples from the different places with different beliefs and who speak different languages.*	Cultural; beliefs; language.
Participant 12	*My understanding of diversity is that all of us come from different backgrounds where all of us come from different backgrounds where we have different culture; religion; languages. I can say diversity is the difference we as individuals have amongst each other.*	Different backgrounds; culture; religion; language.
Participant 13	*Diversity I think means or involve different things or people from different backgrounds; culture's race etc.*	Backgrounds; culture; race.
Participant 14	*Diversity is who you don't judge someone about their gender and race. Culture and religion. Diversity teach (sic) to respect others beliefs. The (sic) is no need to judge a person about their gender.*	Not judging; tolerance; gender; race; culture; Religion; gender.
Participant 15	*Diversity refers to the organisation/ place that consist different people's (sic) from different culture; tradition; values. In many tertiary institutions (sic) have diversity with different people from different background.*	Difference in a place/organisation; culture; tradition, values; different backgrounds.
Participant 16	*It is when everyone is being insulted (sic involved) in the area. Refers to the different cultures; beliefs involved in a specific area and in University X there diversity because we are having different cultures.*	Everyone involved; culture; beliefs; in a specific area

Preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity; as presented in the table; reveal that the construct was predominantly framed around differences related to gender; race; age; background; ability; culture; traditions and values. Other unique conceptualisations highlighted aspects such as refraining from judgment based on difference; recognising differences across various spaces and acknowledging differences in ways of doing things. Taken together, these conceptualisations can be collectively grouped for deeper exploration into six themes: demographic cultural; linguistic; functional; contextual and inclusive.

Demographic understandings encompass traits such as race; gender; ethnicity; age; ability and uniqueness; while cultural interpretations include traditions; values; religion and multilingualism. This reflects critiques of teacher education curricula; where diversity is often addressed superficially rather than as a sustained pedagogical commitment (Ajani & Govender, 2026). Inclusive perspectives were associated with respect; tolerance and ethical engagement with difference; contextual diversity was linked to institutional services and workplace settings; and

functional diversity emerged from notions of collaboration and shared spaces. Applying behaviourist theory; preservice teachers' views of diversity emerge as conditioned responses to visible stimuli. Their emphasis reflects what is evident and reinforced within their environment and social interactions. This includes practices such as classifying individuals by physical traits; identifying cultures and languages; recognizing values; enacting tolerance and adhering to institutional cues. Yet; engagement with structural inequities remains limited, suggesting a lack of reinforcement in that domain.

Collectively; the findings affirm that preservice teachers' views align with scholarship framing diversity as a multifaceted construct encompassing demographic; cognitive; functional; experiential; geographic and linguistic dimensions (Pahuja, 2024; Tamilarasi & Krishnakumar, 2024). While participants used varied terms such as uniqueness; these consistently pointed to distinctions within the identified categories. However; legal perspectives or inferences were absent. Thus; preservice teachers' understandings remain largely surface-level and descriptive; centred on visible differences; with emerging recognition of ethical and institutional dimensions but limited engagement with structural inequities and intersectionality.

6.2 Preservice Teachers Conceptualisations of Diversity in Education.

6.2.1 Demographic Dimension

Demographic diversity emerged as the most dominant theme; encompassing race; gender; ethnicity; age; uniqueness and ability. Six participants identified race/colour; five mentioned gender and ethnicity, while ability was noted by two; and uniqueness and age by one each. This emphasis reflects the influence of preservice teachers' historical and cultural backgrounds, where race; gender and ethnicity remain central. Such orientations align with South African scholarship; which shows that conceptualisations of diversity are shaped by socio-cultural realities and historical legacies (Robinson & Zinn, 2007; West, Evans, & Jordaan, 2023.

Most participants conceptualised demographic diversity simply by listing categories such as race; gender and ethnicity; without further explanation. Only Participants 5 and 8 presented a deeper conceptualisation, contextualising their views within South Africa's socio-historical setting. Participant 5 noted, "*In South Africa, we are also different in terms of what has been stated above; we have Black people, White people and Coloured".* Similarly; Participant 8 emphasised ethnicity as follows, *"Diversity is the combination of different ethnic groups and particularly in S.A we got numerous groups".* These responses illustrate deeper understanding ingrained in historical and contextual experiences. These shape understandings in both society and schools. Given South Africa's apartheid legacy; it is unsurprising that race dominates demographic interpretations of diversity; a point supported by scholarship (Robinson & Zinn, 2007; West, Evans, & Jordaan, 2023).

From a behaviourist perspective; these conceptualisations reflect environmental conditioning and reinforcement. Skinner (1953) argues that perceptions and behaviours are shaped by external

stimuli and their consequences. In South Africa, repeated exposure to discourses of race; ethnicity and inequality through schooling; media and social interaction conditions preservice teachers to foreground these categories. Their emphasis on race and ethnicity thus represents learned responses to a socio-historical environment where such markers have been consistently reinforced as salient.

Ability; age and uniqueness were less frequently noted, with Participant 1 identifying age, Participant 7 highlighting *"culture; age; ability; in a given setting",* and Participant 10 emphasising individuality; "*My understanding of diversity is being unique and different; all that uniqueness is captured under one word, diversity"*. Though not fully elaborated; this emphasis suggests individuality as a valuable aspect of diversity. Together; these broader interpretations extend demographic diversity beyond simple word identification.

From a behaviourist perspective; such positive framing reflects reinforcement of difference as valuable within educational discourse. Classroom experiences that celebrate diverse abilities and languages act as stimuli; shaping beliefs that diversity enriches learning. This aligns with Bandura's contribution; which stresses that individuals learn not only through reinforcement; but also; by observing how diversity is rewarded in social and institutional contexts.

Thus; preservice teachers' demographic conceptualisations are shaped by South Africa's historical environment and reinforced by educational and social practices. Their emphasis on race; gender and ethnicity reflects behaviourist principles of stimulus; reinforcement and observational learning intersecting with historical legacies to produce dominant interpretations of diversity.

6.2.2 Cultural Dimension

Cultural diversity; like demographic; emerged as a dominant theme with three categories: culture; religion and language. Fourteen participants mentioned culture; while religion and language were each identified by eight. Examining these dimensions more closely is critical.

6.2.2.1 Culture

Culture as a definer of diversity emerged as the most common of all the identified dimensions in the study, with only two participants not mentioning it. The observation corresponds with available scholarship that diversity is often associated with socio-cultural concepts (Semiao et al., 2023; West, Evans, and Jordaan, 2023). Against this background the researcher was persuaded to explore deeply the degree and dimensions the participants conceptualised about culture. The findings are summarised in the table 2 below.

Table 2

Summary on Conceptualisations of Culture

Participant	Conceptualisation of Culture
Participant 1	*Diversity refers to culture and traditional(sic); also differences in race; culture; gender; ability are seen as strengths*
Participant 3	*Understanding gender, culture, religion...*
Participant 4	*Different cultures*
Participant 5	*...It include (sic) culture, language and belief system*
Participant 6	*Means a different people with different language; culture…*
Participant 7	*...difference in their race; culture...*
Participant 8	*...understanding of people(sic) culture and how to cope and live with them*
Participant 9	*...means our differences, language, culture, religion...*
Participant 11	*...refers to people's different cultural background...where there are people from different beliefs who speak different languages*
Participant 12	*...we have different culture; religion; language...*
Participant 13	*...different things or people from different backgrounds; cultures...*
Participant 14	*Diversity is when we don't judge someone about their gender and race; culture and religion...*
Participant 15	*...peoples from different culture; traditions; values.*
Participant 16	*..refers to different cultural belief that everyone feels involved in a specific area*

The table reveals that two participants (4 and 13) conceptualised culture in a simplistic manner, reducing it merely to difference. This observation resonates with existing scholarship, which cautions that diversity is often treated superficially and tokenistically (Ajani & Govender, 2026). Yet, other participants (3; 5; 6; 7; 9; 11; 12 and 15) extended their understanding by listing culture alongside interconnected aspects such as language; religion/beliefs; ethnic origin and values. Deeper level conceptualisation emerged among participants 1; 8; 14 and 16 who framed culture in terms of inclusion; contextual realities, adaptive strategies and empowerment.

These findings illustrate a spectrum of understandings; from simple views of culture as mere difference to more nuanced interpretations that emphasise interconnectedness; inclusion and agency. This progression underscores the importance of moving beyond tokenistic recognition of diversity toward richer; contextually grounded and empowering conceptualisations that can inform inclusive educational practice. From a behaviourist standpoint; the variation reflects reinforcement histories: superficial recognition persists when shaped by shallow stimuli; whereas richer conceptualisations emerge in environments that consistently reward complex; inclusive responses.

6.2.2.2 Religion and Language

After culture; religion and language emerged as the most frequently identified dimensions of diversity, each noted by eight participants. Religion was highlighted by Participants 2; 3; 5; 9; 11; 12; 14 and 16 while language was emphasised by Participants 1; 2; 5; 6; 9; 10; 11 and 12. Their detailed conceptualisations are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Participants' Conceptualisations of Religion and Language Dimensions

Participant	Conceptualisation of Religion	Conceptualisation of Language
Participant 1	……	*...different ...languages etc.*
Participant 2	*People have different beliefs or religion*	*.... different...language in school or workplace*
Participant 3	*Understanding gender; religions; culture*	……
Participant 5	*Different people in terms of culture; language and belief system*	
Participant 6	……	*...people with different language colour meets in the same place*
Participant 9	*Our differences; language; culture; religion...*	
Participant 10	……	*Your language; background...*
Participant 11	*People from different places with different beliefs... and speak different languages*	
Participant 12	*Different culture; religion; language*	
Participant 14	*Culture and religion... each to respect others beliefs*	
Participant 16	*Refers to different cultural; belief that everyone feels involved*	

As with the cultural dimension; participants' conceptualisations of language and religion ranged from simple to more nuanced. Simple views involved mere identification (e.g.; Participant 1 and 10 for language). In contrast, complex interpretations reflected relational perspectives (Participants 2 and 3 for religion; Participants 5; 9; 12; 14 and 16 for both), inclusive orientations (Participants 14 and 16), and contextual understandings (Participants 2 and 6 for language). These relational interconnections resonate with Olaitan's (2025) decolonising agenda; which recognises language; culture and identity as advancing epistemic justice. Overall; while some preservice teachers approached diversity through categorical recognition; others linked language and religion to broader relational; inclusive and contextual dimensions. The connection between language and culture underscores that language is not merely communicative but a carrier of culture; memory and identity (Olaitan, 2025). These findings highlight both the potential and challenge of teacher education; moving beyond surface-level recognition toward deeper; critical and contextually grounded understandings that prepare preservice teachers for multilingual and religiously diverse contexts.

6.2.3 Inclusive Dimension

The inclusive dimension demonstrates a deeper understanding of diversity among preservice teachers; as highlighted by five participants (1; 4; 8; 14 and 16). Although relatively few; it is encouraging to observe that some preservice teachers articulated conceptualisations that called for ethical consideration; resonating with the broader principles of inclusivity. For instance, Participant 4 observed that *"People need to respect each other",* while Participant 8 emphasised *"…culture and how to cope and live with them."* Similarly; Participant 14 noted that *"Diversity teach to respect others' beliefs; there is no need to judge a person…",* and Participant 16 stressed the *"…belief that everyone feels involved."* These reflections illustrate not only a desire to be accommodative but also an effort to craft strategies that embrace all individuals within diverse educational contexts. Participant 1 further advanced this perspective by viewing diversity as *"… differences in race, culture, gender, ability are seen as strengths; not problem".* Participant 1 framed differences not as deficits but as enriching and beneficial; reinforcing the perspective that diversity constitutes a source of strength within educational contexts; thereby illuminating an informed and empowered standpoint. Concertedly; these insights correspond with recent calls in both local and global scholarship advocating for inclusivity across the institutional spectrum (UNESCO, 2020); underscoring the importance of fostering respect; ethical engagement and empowerment in teacher education. These perspectives affirm that preservice teachers who adopt inclusive conceptualisations are better positioned to foster equitable; pluralistic and transformative educational environments.

6.2.4 Contextual and Functional Dimensions of Diversity

The study revealed diversity not only as individual traits but also as collective interaction within organisational settings; giving rise to two interrelated themes; functional and contextual diversity.

Functional diversity was described as individuals coming together for a shared purpose. Participant 6 moved beyond traits like language; culture and skin colour; noting that *"sometimes people meet in a same place doing the same thing — this is diversity."* Participant 15 added the institutional dimension: *"in many tertiary institutions … diversity [is] with different people from different backgrounds."* They further observed*, "Everyone feels involved in a specific area like University X. There is diversity because we are having different cultures."* These perspectives frame diversity as both purpose-driven and context-bound; showing it is shaped by institutional environments and collective goals. Thus, an institution can influence how diversity is embraced and conceptualised. This interpretation aligns with literature stressing the role of context in shaping diversity. Kolleck (2025) notes that institutional norms influence participation in education. The Behaviourist Framework similarly highlights that understandings are mediated by environments; embedding diversity within organizational structures. For preservice teachers preparing for WIL; this is crucial; each context presents unique dimensions of diversity that demand recognition; respect and pedagogical responsiveness.

7. Discussion of Key Findings

The research findings demonstrate that preservice teachers preparing for WIL at a South African university articulated varied conceptualisations of diversity in education. These were clustered into five categories; demographic; cultural; inclusive; contextual and functional; corresponding with dimensions identified in existing scholarship (Semiao et al., 2023; Pahuja, 2025). The interpretations ranged from relatively simplistic to moderately complex; suggesting that while foundational understandings have been established; further intellectual and pedagogical work is required to achieve comprehensive and nuanced engagement with diversity. The findings thus reveal a transitional stage in inclusivity; where preservice teachers are progressing from elementary interpretations toward intermediate levels of conceptualisation though they have not fully contextualised diversity within classroom practice; which ought to be their central focus as emerging educators. For example, although demographic dimensions such as age and ability were occasionally linked to classroom practice; they were not widely shared. Critical aspects such as disability; decolonial perspectives and legal frameworks underpinning inclusion were largely absent. The omission of disability is particularly concerning; given persistent global critiques of the misalignment between policy intent and classroom practice in serving learners with disabilities (Lucena-Rodríguez, 2025). From a behaviourist lens; this absence may be explained by limited exposure to reinforced practices of disability inclusion during training. Moreover; intersectionality was not evident in the participants' conceptualisations; despite its significance in addressing systemic inequalities within education.

The findings emphasise important implications for preservice teacher preparation and professional development. They highlight the need to reconceptualise teacher education so that diversity is not merely acknowledged as a demographic or cultural construct but is understood as a multifaceted; intersectional and practice-oriented framework. Behaviourist theory suggests that this re-conceptualisation must be operationalised through structured reinforcement (Zhou & Brown, 2015; Giannoukos, 2024). Therefore, preservice teachers should repeatedly observe inclusive practices; imitate them in WIL contexts and receive feedback that strengthens their behavioural repertoire. The subsequent section will elaborate on these implications for both preservice teachers and broader professional development initiatives**.**

8. Implications of Preservice Teachers' Conceptualisations of Diversity

Beyond offering preservice teachers their first substantive exposure to inclusive education Alvarez & Buenestado (2015); WIL can provide a critical site for transmitting underexplored or less understood dimensions of diversity that often hinder its full embrace in classroom practice. WIL thus benefits preservice teachers; learners; mentors and the broader school community by extending learning environments to encompass diverse perspectives and authentic; lived conditions. The findings of this study reveal notable gaps in preservice teachers' conceptualisations of diversity; underscoring WIL's potential to bridge these gaps by situating learning within real-world contexts.

From a behaviourist perspective; learning occurs through study; experience and the observation of socially valued behaviours (Giannoukos, 2024). While universities provide foundational exposure; WIL enriches this process by enabling preservice teachers to encounter reinforcement and modelling in authentic contexts. To maximise this potential; structured workshops prior to teaching practice are essential to hammer on expectations during WIL. Such preparation should emphasise use of culturally diverse examples; participatory pedagogies; adoption of indigenous languages and heritage-based illustrations that disrupt colonial scripts. Assessment must align with these goals; as Rusznyak and Walton (2021) argue; evaluation should reward inclusive practices and discourage exclusionary approaches; ensuring diversity becomes a lived classroom reality. Continuous assessment; through post-lesson conferences and written critiques; reinforces inclusive principles and supports their translation into practice. In this way; preservice teachers progressively deepen their conceptualisations of diversity; enacting inclusivity as a sustained pedagogical commitment rather than mere rhetoric.

9. Conclusion

The study sought explore how WIL bound preservice teachers from one university in KwaZulu Natal; South Africa conceptualise diversity in education. This is not only important in ensuring quality and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020) but also ensuring democratic citizenry (Banks, 2016). Understanding of diversity is particularly important for WIL bound preservice teachers as it prepares them for varied cultural; linguistic and socio-economic contexts (Tamilarasi & Krishnakumar, 2024).

The study reveals a transitional understanding of diversity in education; where participants recognized multiple dimensions of difference but engaged only at a subtle to moderate analytical level; with limited application in classroom practice. Five broad dimensions emerged; demographic; cultural; inclusive; functional and contextual; reflecting global scholarship that views diversity as multifaceted and evolving (Semiao et al., 2023; Pahuja, 2024; Tamilarasi & Krishnakumar, 2024). Within the demographic dimension; participants identified race; gender; age; ethnicity; ability and uniqueness. The cultural dimension included culture; religion and language; with culture most frequently cited (14 participants); followed by race; language and religion (8 participants each). Inclusive; gender; and ethnicity were noted by five participants; while functional and contextual dimensions were mentioned by only two participants each. This distribution highlights the predominance of demographic and socio-cultural framings of diversity; consistent with international and South African scholarship (Robinson & Zinn, 2007; West, Evans, & Jordaan, 2023).

The prominence of race; ethnicity and gender in participants' conceptualisations reflects South Africa's enduring historical legacies; particularly apartheid; which continues to shape educational discourse and identity. As Robinson and Zinn (2007) argue; diversity in South Africa is inseparable from its socio-political history; while West, Evans, and Jordaan (2023) emphasise that preservice teachers' understandings remain embedded in cultural and historical contexts. These

findings align with global debates; situating diversity as both descriptive and normative construct; requiring re-conceptualisation for meaningful pedagogical application. From a behaviourist perspective, the prominence of race, ethnicity and gender in participants' conceptualisations reflects how historical legacies, particularly apartheid have conditioned patterns of thought and reinforced social categories through repeated exposure. Against this backdrop, there is need for reconditioning in teacher education to create new stimuli and reinforcement to encourage inclusive practices beyond entrenched demographic categories.

Participants' interpretations of demographic diversity ranged from simple to moderately complex. Race; gender and ethnicity were most frequently cited; while age; ability and uniqueness were less mentioned. Most responses were surface-level, expressed as isolated terms; except for two who situated their views within South Africa's racial and socio-historical context. These participants connected demographic categories to apartheid's systemic legacies; showing deeper; contextualised understandings. This pattern reflects scholarship stressing the need to embed diversity within socio-political histories (Robinson & Zinn, 2007; West, Evans, & Jordaan, 2023).

The cultural dimension was widely recognised; with only two participants giving simple interpretations. Most demonstrated moderate analysis; making relational linkages and qualifying concepts in terms of inclusivity and context. These deeper insights likely stemmed from lived experiences; enabling connections between personal realities and learned constructs. This finding aligns with global scholarship emphasising the interplay of experiential knowledge and academic engagement in shaping teachers' understandings of diversity (Pahuja, 2024).

Jointly; the findings place preservice teachers in a transitional stage of conceptualisation; with most remaining at a descriptive level and a smaller group showing potential for critical; contextualised engagement. This reflects West, Evans, and Jordaan's (2023) observation that South African preservice teachers often recognise diversity superficially without translating it into pedagogy; highlighting the broader challenge of moving from recognition to application; a gap noted in both South African and international discourse (Tamilarasi & Krishnakumar, 2024). The inclusive dimension; identified by five participants; illustrates this shift; moving from naming differences to ethical considerations such as respect; non-judgment and viewing difference as strength. Some also linked these ideas to context and purpose; suggesting growing awareness of diversity's classroom significance. These traits align with Semiao et al. (2023); who describe such developments as progress toward genuine inclusion and authentic diversity in practice.

Be that as it may; the findings bemoan limited linkage of identified diversity concepts to classroom practice among WIL-bound preservice teachers. Critical pedagogical and cognitive components remain underexplored; while dimensions such as legal inferences; disability and decolonial practices; central in global discourse are notably absent. The lack of engagement with decolonial perspectives is particularly concerning; as such frameworks are vital for addressing systemic barriers to inclusion. From a behaviourist perspective, this gap reflects insufficient conditioning: preservice teachers have not consistently been exposed to stimuli, reinforcement, and corrective

feedback that embed inclusive practices into their professional inventories. WIL offers a crucial opportunity to reinforce inclusive practices through modelling; reinforcement and corrective feedback; consistent with behaviourist principles. Structured interventions; such as workshops for preservice teachers; mentors and school stakeholders; can support the acquisition and consistent application of inclusive pedagogies. In this way; WIL serves as a bridging mechanism; translating theoretical understandings of diversity into lived classroom practice, aligning with scholarship that positions WIL as a transformative space for enacting inclusive strategies (Robinson & Zinn, 2007; West, Evans, & Jordaan, 2023).

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The author declares that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare; write; or complete this manuscript. The author confirms that she is the sole author of this article and takes full responsibility for the contents therein.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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The author has no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

Informed Consent

Participants were informed of the study's purpose; procedures and potential benefits. It was also emphasised to them that their participation was voluntary; and they could withdraw at any time without any prejudice. They were also informed that there were not likely to be any risks. Participants signed a consent form before commencement of data generation. Ethical clearance was provided by the University's Research and Ethics Committee.

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was granted by the Durban University of Technology, Institutional Research and Ethics Committee (Approval No. IN-IREC01326).

Data Availability Statement

Available upon request: The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript.

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