



Exploring Readiness for Inclusive Education: Insights from Pre-service Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has become a central priority within global and national educational reform, yet the readiness of future teachers to enact inclusive practices remains a significant concern. This qualitative exploratory study examined how pre-service teachers at one university in Kazakhstan understood inclusive education and relational practices, how they perceived their preparedness and confidence to enact inclusive teaching, and what social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions they perceived as shaping their readiness. Data were collected from 53 pre-service teachers through 6 focus group discussions, 7 semi-structured individual interviews, and written reflections, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis generated three overarching themes: developing understandings of inclusive education, uncertainty about preparedness to teach inclusively, and conditions that constrain and enable inclusive practice. Participants generally understood inclusion in terms of fairness, participation, belonging, and responsiveness to learner diversity, although narrower disability-focused understandings remained evident. A central finding was a gap between commitment to inclusive principles and confidence in translating them into classroom practice. Readiness was also perceived as shaped by practical experience, pedagogical modeling, resources, class size, institutional conditions, and social relationships. Interpreted through relational pedagogy, the findings suggest that readiness for inclusive teaching extends beyond knowledge and positive attitudes to encompass relational responsiveness, practical capacity, and the conditions within which teaching occurs. The study highlights the need for teacher education in Kazakhstan to integrate inclusive and relational pedagogies more systematically across coursework and practicum experiences.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive education, pre-service teachers, teacher education, Kazakhstan, qualitative study, teacher preparedness.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become an important priority within international policy and educational reform, with growing emphasis on ensuring that all learners have equitable opportunities to participate and succeed (United Nations, 2018). Contemporary understandings of inclusive education extend beyond the earlier focus on students with disabilities and now recognize the need to include learners from diverse linguistic, cultural, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Altes et al., 2024; Haug, 2017; Mokotjo, 2024; Schuelka, 2018). In higher education, inclusive education has likewise been described as learning that is accessible, relevant, and responsive to students from varied backgrounds (UNICEF, 2024).

Despite these broader definitions, research in higher education continues to associate inclusion primarily with disability and special educational needs, while other dimensions of diversity receive less attention (Altes et al., 2024; Messiou, 2017; Shaw, 2024). Existing studies have also focused largely on students' experiences, whereas the perspectives and practices of educators remain comparatively underexplored, despite their central role in creating inclusive learning environments (Atanasova & Papen, 2025; Ongenaert et al., 2026). This issue is especially relevant in teacher education, where pre-service teachers are expected to develop not only an understanding of inclusive principles but also the confidence and practical capacity to respond to diverse learners in future classrooms.

These concerns are particularly significant in Kazakhstan, where teacher education has undergone several waves of reform, shifting from a Soviet-inherited model toward one increasingly aligned with international standards (Tastanbekova, 2018). Although educational modernization has been prioritized nationally, teacher education has only recently gained strategic attention (Makoelle & Kurakbayev, 2025). Current reforms aim to strengthen the structure and philosophy of teacher preparation in response to national needs and global expectations (Berikhanova et al., 2024).

Pre-service teacher education in Kazakhstan follows a concurrent model in which students prepare for teaching throughout their undergraduate studies, with additional vocational and postgraduate pathways available (Ospanova, 2024). However, recent scholarship has criticized university programs for being overly theoretical and insufficiently connected to classroom realities (Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2025). It has also been argued that elements such as critical thinking, inclusive pedagogies, and digital teaching approaches are not yet fully embedded in certain programs (Yeleussiz & Qanay, 2025). Characteristics of the Soviet-era system persist in some teacher education programs, where inclusive practices and contemporary teaching approaches may not yet be fully integrated into university-level instruction (McLaughlin & Ayubayeva, 2015). Concerns also remain about limited practicum experience and difficulties in responding to real classroom demands, including the needs of increasingly diverse learners (Nagibova, 2019; Yeleussiz, 2024).

At the same time, growing expectations for inclusive and multilingual education place additional demands on teacher preparation systems, which may struggle to fully integrate these

priorities into their programs (Gómez-Galán, 2020; Schmeichel et al., 2018; Zagona et al., 2017). Teacher education programs are also expected to prepare future teachers to foster intercultural dialogue and to value linguistic diversity in classrooms (Zhunussova & Ryspayeva, 2025). Together, these developments raise questions about how effectively initial teacher education prepares future teachers to respond to diverse learners and to translate inclusive principles into classroom practice.

Existing research has examined pre-service teachers' preparation for inclusive education, including qualitative studies of mentoring and collaborative approaches to developing inclusive teaching (Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2025). The gap addressed in this study is therefore not the absence of research on pre-service teachers themselves. Rather, there remains limited understanding in the Kazakhstani context of how pre-service teachers make sense of their readiness for inclusive education across interconnected dimensions: how they conceptualize inclusion, which practices they associate with inclusive classrooms, how prepared they feel to enact these practices, and what contextual barriers they anticipate in future teaching. Examining these dimensions together is important because understanding or endorsing inclusive principles does not necessarily mean that future teachers feel prepared to translate them into classroom practice.

To address this gap, the present qualitative exploratory study examines pre-service teachers' perceptions of inclusive education at one university in Kazakhstan. It explores their understandings of inclusive education and practices, their perceived preparedness to teach inclusively, and the barriers they anticipate when implementing inclusion. By examining these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a contextually grounded account of how understanding inclusive principles and feeling prepared to enact them in future classroom practice are related.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education is an approach that seeks to remove barriers and ensure that all learners can access, participate in, and benefit from education in ordinary classrooms (Slee, 2018; UNESCO, 2020; Wongkittirungrueang & Cheausuwantavee, 2025). It is conceptualized as a multidimensional and socially grounded process that promotes participation, belonging, and equity across diverse contexts, while also encompassing social justice and varying degrees of inclusion (Antoninis et al., 2020; Polat, 2011; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Within this framework, teacher preparation is central because teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and professional competence shape inclusive practice (Alsarawi & Sukonthaman, 2023; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018). Moreover, teacher agency is increasingly recognized as critical, enabling teachers to respond flexibly to diverse learners in complex classroom environments (Hutchinson, 2013; Li & Ruppar, 2021).

Despite this strong theoretical foundation, research indicates that pre-service teachers may hold positive attitudes toward inclusion yet feel unprepared to implement it in practice.

While support for inclusion may be positive, uncertainty remains about how to work with learners who have diverse and complex needs (Yu & Cho, 2022). Furthermore, evidence suggests that knowledge and skills do not necessarily translate into positive attitudes or effective practice, highlighting a persistent gap between understanding and enactment of inclusion (Florence, 2026). These findings suggest that teacher education must move beyond knowledge transmission to address the emotional, relational, and practical dimensions of inclusive teaching.

Against this background, a substantial body of research has examined interventions that integrate theory and practice. Studies show that combining conceptual knowledge with practical experience can enhance attitudes, self-efficacy, and readiness to implement inclusive strategies (Fairbrother et al., 2025; Lautenbach & Heyder, 2019). In addition, reflection, collaboration, and culturally responsive pedagogies have been identified as key mechanisms for developing inclusive competence and supporting engagement with diverse learners (Bennett, 2025; Wright et al., 2024). However, much of this work evaluates outcomes rather than examining in depth how inclusive understandings are constructed through pre-service teachers' experiences and interactions in teacher education contexts.

Emerging research highlights how interactional and reflective processes shape inclusive practice. Collaborative inquiry and action-oriented approaches can support the development of confidence, critical reflection, and adaptive teaching strategies (Arefian, 2022; Fairbrother et al., 2025). These findings suggest that inclusive competence is not simply acquired but is also developed through social interaction and situated learning. At the same time, broader structural challenges may constrain the development and implementation of inclusive practices, particularly when teacher education programs lack sustained focus on inclusive pedagogies and institutional support (Ajani & Ntombela, 2025; Atanasova & Papen, 2025). Recent frameworks also emphasize the need for innovative and context-responsive instructional design to support inclusive and sustainable practices (Gawlik-Kobylińska, 2026).

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has examined pre-service teachers' attitudes, competencies, and outcomes related to inclusive education. Qualitative studies have provided further insight into pre-service teachers' experiences and the processes through which inclusive practice may be developed (Arefian, 2022; Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2025; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2026). However, these studies are situated within particular interventions and educational contexts, leaving room for further examination of how pre-service teachers make sense of inclusion, preparedness, and anticipated barriers within their own teacher education contexts.

The present study is theoretically informed by relational pedagogy, which offers a lens for understanding inclusion as a fundamentally interactional and ethically grounded process in which learning emerges through meaningful relationships, care, and responsiveness to diverse learners. It integrates principles of social justice and care by emphasizing practices that support critical awareness, empathy, and equitable participation in educational contexts (Hanlon, 2024).

Relational pedagogy also recognizes that learning is inherently relational, shaped by trust, belonging, and reciprocal engagement between teachers and students (Gedzune, 2014; Su & Wood, 2023). Extending this perspective, relational approaches highlight that inclusion is not only about interpersonal relationships but also about recognizing how broader social, cultural, and material contexts influence who is valued and how participation is experienced (Gravett et al., 2021). These relational possibilities are shaped by wider structural conditions, as education systems may also reproduce inequalities and marginalization, particularly in contexts such as Central Asia, where social and economic factors continue to affect inclusive participation (Ozawa et al., 2024). This broader regional pattern of inequality and structural constraint is also evident in Kazakhstan, where inclusive education reforms continue to face implementation challenges.

In this study, relational pedagogy serves as an interpretive theoretical lens rather than a framework to be tested. It foregrounds relationships, interaction, and pedagogical enactment (Hickey & Riddle, 2024; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017), enabling readiness to be interpreted through belonging, recognition, responsiveness, and equitable participation. Readiness is also understood to develop through relational competence and experiences in professional preparation (Hepburn & Trompf, 2026; Plantin Ewe & Fjelkner Pihl, 2024; Tapp Jaksa & Friebe, 2026). Accordingly, relational pedagogy provides a basis for interpreting participants' understandings, preparedness, and the conditions that enable or constrain inclusive practice.

Inclusive education in Kazakhstan has advanced significantly in recent years, supported by policy reforms and a growing emphasis on equity and access. However, research shows that implementation remains uneven and is shaped by structural, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints (Allan & Omarova, 2022; Maulsharif et al., 2022; Zholtayeva et al., 2013). Persistent challenges include limited resources, gaps between policy and practice, and insufficient teacher preparation for inclusive settings (Agavelyan et al., 2020; Denivarova & Abdresheva, 2015). In addition, broader systemic factors, such as digital inequality and disparities between urban and rural contexts, continue to influence access to and participation in education (Lepeshev et al., 2026; Sariyeva et al., 2026). These conditions are particularly relevant from a relational perspective because opportunities for participation, belonging, and responsive teaching are shaped not only by individual teachers but also by the institutional and material environments in which teaching takes place.

Broader scholarship has also highlighted structural factors that shape inclusion and educational equity. Research in Kazakhstan has shown that rurality, unequal access to higher education, and disparities in school resources continue to affect students' opportunities and achievement (Amankulova, 2018; Smanova, 2021). Socioeconomic status has likewise been consistently linked to differences in students' learning opportunities and academic outcomes (Tan, 2024). At the policy and classroom levels, inclusive practice has been supported by frameworks that emphasize differentiated instruction and individualized support for diverse learners (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). Together, these studies show that inclusion is shaped not

only by teacher perceptions but also by broader social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions. From a relational perspective, these conditions matter because they influence learners' opportunities for recognition, participation, and belonging, as well as teachers' capacity to respond to diverse needs.

Although existing research has examined pre-service teachers and their preparation for inclusive teaching (Mamerkhanova et al., 2025; Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2025), less is known in Kazakhstan about how pre-service teachers understand readiness for inclusion across interconnected dimensions, including their conceptualizations of inclusion, understandings of inclusive practices, perceived preparedness, and anticipated barriers to implementation. This inquiry is especially pertinent as institutional reforms aimed at inclusion continue to progress and teacher education programs evolve in response to changing policy requirements (Togaibayeva et al., 2026). Examining these dimensions together can provide insight into how pre-service teachers understand the relationship between inclusive principles and their future enactment in classroom practice.

In this study, readiness for inclusive education refers to pre-service teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to apply inclusive principles in their future classrooms. It is examined through interconnected dimensions of conceptual understanding, perceived inclusive practices, confidence in responding to learner diversity, and anticipated barriers to enactment. Viewed through relational pedagogy, readiness is not treated solely as an individual attribute but as a situated capacity shaped by relationships, responsiveness to diverse learners, and the social, institutional, and material conditions within which inclusive practice occurs.

To address this gap, the present qualitative exploratory study examines pre-service teachers' readiness for inclusive education at one university in Kazakhstan. Drawing on relational pedagogy as an interpretive theoretical lens, the study explores how participants understand inclusion and relationally oriented inclusive practices, how prepared and confident they feel to enact these practices, and what contextual conditions they perceive as enabling or constraining inclusive teaching. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers understand inclusive education and the relational practices that support participation, belonging, and responsiveness to diverse learners?
2. How do pre-service teachers perceive their preparedness and confidence to enact inclusive practices in future classrooms?
3. What social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions do pre-service teachers perceive as enabling or constraining their readiness to implement inclusive education?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory case study design to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions of inclusive education at a university in Kazakhstan. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of

participants' views, experiences, and interpretations within a specific educational context (Tisdell et al., 2025; Yin, 2018). The study explored how participants conceptualized inclusive education, what practices they associated with inclusion, how confident they felt about implementing inclusive approaches, and what barriers they anticipated in future teaching contexts.

The methodological approach adopted in this study was inspired by the relational pedagogical perspective outlined above. Since relational pedagogy treats readiness not as a fixed characteristic but as a situationally and dialogically constructed capacity, the qualitative design of the research prioritized methods that could access participants' interpretive frameworks, contextual experiences, and emerging understandings.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 53 third-year pre-service teachers enrolled in the Foreign Language department: 2 Foreign Language programs at a university in Kazakhstan, comprising 42 female and 11 male students. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to provide relevant and information-rich insights into the research topic (Patton, 2014). All participants took part in 6 focus group discussions, with 8-9 participants per group.

Following the focus groups, 7 participants were purposively selected for individual interviews to explore emerging issues in greater depth and to capture diverse perspectives and experiences related to inclusive education. Confidence and attitudes were neither independently measured nor used as predetermined selection criteria. To protect anonymity, participants were assigned codes that indicated the focus group and participant number; for example, FG2-P3 refers to Participant 3 in Focus Group 2.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected through focus group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews, and short written reflections. Focus groups served as the primary instrument because they facilitate interaction and the exploration of shared and contrasting perspectives (Krueger, 2014). The focus groups and interview protocols were developed to explore participants' understandings of inclusive education, perceived preparedness for inclusive practice, and the conditions shaping implementation, drawing on recent studies in higher education (Atanasova & Papen, 2026; Ongenaert et al., 2026). The protocols were exploratory rather than designed to test predetermined constructs of relational pedagogy, which was subsequently used as an interpretive lens.

The 6 focus groups were held between September and December 2025 in quiet seminar rooms on campus. Each discussion lasted 55 to 75 minutes, averaging 65 minutes. The semi-structured guide explored participants' understandings of inclusion, practices for supporting diverse learners, preparedness and confidence, and the social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions that enable or constrain implementation. All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed, with participants' permission.

Following the focus groups, 7 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted between October and November 2025. These interviews provided an opportunity to examine personal experiences and views that participants may have been less willing to share in a group setting. Each interview lasted between 35 and 55 minutes, with an average of 44 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person. Semi-structured interviewing allowed flexibility while ensuring consistent coverage of key topics across participants (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews explored participants' understandings of inclusive education and practices for responding to diverse learners, their perceived preparedness and confidence to enact inclusive practices, and the conditions they believed could support or constrain implementation.

In addition, participants were invited to complete a brief written reflection after the focus groups. These reflections asked participants to comment on how their understanding of inclusive education had developed and what support they believed they still needed. The reflections therefore provided additional insight into participants' developing understandings, perceived readiness, and perceived conditions for future inclusive practice. Reflective responses provided supplementary data and supported triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Data Analysis

All recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy before analysis. Data from the focus groups, interviews, and written reflections were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021).

The transcripts were read several times to gain familiarity with the data. Initial coding was conducted manually by identifying recurring ideas, meaningful phrases, and issues relevant to the research questions. A total of 53 initial codes were generated, including understanding of diversity, lack of practical preparation, confidence to adapt lessons, collaboration, and resource limitations. Codes were compared across the three data sources and grouped into 8 subthemes, which were then refined into three overarching themes: understandings of inclusive education and relational practice; preparedness and confidence for inclusive teaching; and conditions enabling or constraining inclusive practice. Relational pedagogy was applied at the later interpretive stage rather than as predetermined coding categories, allowing themes to be interpreted through participation, belonging, responsiveness to learner diversity, and the conditions that shape inclusive practice.

NVivo 15 for Windows was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, and retrieve quotations. To enhance trustworthiness, the 53 initial codes, 8 subthemes, and three overarching themes were repeatedly checked against the original data. Data adequacy was assessed by examining the frequency of codes and meanings across the three data sources, considering both code and meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2016). The final three-theme structure was retained when further analysis reinforced existing patterns rather than generating conceptually distinct themes. Saturation was therefore treated as a matter of thematic redundancy and adequacy rather than a predetermined numerical threshold (Saunders et al., 2018).

Researcher Reflexivity

The researchers recognized that their educational backgrounds and familiarity with inclusive education could influence interpretation. As researchers' experiences and assumptions may shape qualitative analysis, reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the process (Berger, 2013). Collaborative reflexivity also enabled the examination of assumptions and alternative interpretations across the research team (Barry et al., 1999). All four authors reviewed and discussed the codes, subthemes, and themes, comparing interpretations with participants' original accounts before finalizing the thematic structure. Relational pedagogy was applied at the later interpretive stage to deepen theoretical interpretation rather than to impose predetermined categories on the data.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across focus groups, interviews, and reflections, as well as through repeated engagement with the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. The study was conducted at a single university in Kazakhstan. Hence, the results reflect a particular institutional context and may not capture the experiences of pre-service teachers in other settings. As teacher education programs can vary across institutions, caution is needed in applying the findings more broadly.

The research also involved a relatively small qualitative sample. While the use of focus groups, individual interviews, and written reflections provided rich, detailed data, the study was exploratory and not intended to produce statistically generalizable results. The data were based on participants' self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation of teaching practice. Participants may therefore have presented socially desirable views on inclusion and equality, and their stated beliefs may not always align with future classroom behavior. As many participants were still completing their teacher preparation, some responses reflected expectations about teaching rather than extensive practical experience.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis generated 53 initial codes, which were grouped into 8 subthemes and subsequently synthesized into three overarching themes: developing understandings of inclusive education, uncertainty in preparedness to teach inclusively, and conditions constraining and enabling inclusive practice. Together, these themes capture participants' understandings of inclusive education and relational practices, their perceived preparedness and confidence to enact inclusive teaching, and the social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions shaping their readiness for inclusive education. Relational pedagogy provided an

interpretive lens for examining how participation, belonging, responsiveness, and contextual conditions shaped participants' understandings of inclusion and readiness for inclusive practice.

Developing understandings of inclusive education

Participants' understandings of inclusive education were generally positive but varied in depth and emphasis. Across the focus groups, 43 of the 53 participants associated inclusion with equality, participation, and the view that all learners should study together regardless of difference. Fifteen participants framed inclusion primarily in relation to disability and special educational needs, indicating that narrower interpretations remained alongside broader understandings of inclusion. For example, FG2-P3 stated:

Inclusive education means teaching all students together, including students with special abilities (FG2-P3).

Twenty participants also approached inclusion through notions of fairness, equal treatment, and participation. FG1-P5 drew on a familiar comparison:

I think it is like the words "all inclusive" in a hotel. Everyone is included. All students work together, and the teacher treats them equally, with no favoritism (FG1-P5).

The individual interviews provided richer accounts of inclusion as a relational classroom experience rather than simply the placement of diverse learners in the same setting. 5 of the 7 interview participants explicitly described inclusion in terms of participation, belonging, recognition, safety, or responsiveness to individual learners. P1 emphasized psychological safety and recognition:

[...] when students feel safe to speak, even if they are shy or make mistakes. Nobody should feel invisible in the lesson (P1, Individual interview).

P2 similarly emphasized participation for quieter learners:

Some students are quiet, but they also need to feel that the lesson is for them, not only for active students (P2, Individual interview).

P3 focused explicitly on belonging and the recognition of individual contribution:

[...] a sense of belonging, when you feel part of the group yourself and your contribution is valued. However, as someone from another country, I do not yet feel I belong (P3, Individual interview).

Four international participants also described experiences of exclusion during group work, particularly when teachers did not address unequal participation. P3 explained that this experience would shape his future practice by encouraging him to pay closer attention to quieter or marginalized learners. Written reflections similarly extended inclusion beyond disability towards recognition and respect:

Inclusion is not only about disability. It is about making each learner feel important and respected (P4, Reflection notes).

Viewed through relational pedagogy, these accounts position inclusion not simply as access to the same classroom but as the creation of conditions in which learners can participate, feel safe and valued, experience belonging, and have their individual differences recognized. At

the same time, 15 participants used terms such as diversity, equality, tolerance, and inclusion interchangeably, indicating some uncertainty about the boundaries between related concepts. Their conceptualizations therefore appeared to be developing, with stronger relational and ethical awareness than pedagogical precision.

Uncertainty in preparedness to teach inclusively

Participants expressed strong support for inclusive education, yet a substantial proportion reported uncertainty about their readiness to implement inclusive practices in future classrooms. Across the focus groups and interviews, 35 of the 53 participants distinguished between understanding inclusive principles and knowing how to respond to diverse learners in practice. Their accounts suggested that conceptual understanding of inclusion was stronger than confidence in its practical application.

Fourteen participants recalled useful activities in university classes that modeled participation, reflection, or responsiveness to learner differences. FG3-P4 recalled a discussion-based activity in which the teacher used different occupations to encourage students to reflect on gender stereotypes:

The teacher showed us different occupations and asked whether men or women were better suited to each one and why. We discussed our different opinions and the stereotypes behind them. I liked this activity and later used it myself (FG3-P4).

This example illustrates how dialogic activities provide opportunities to question stereotypes, consider different perspectives, and reflect on assumptions that may shape others' inclusion.

P6 described a scenario-based task that encouraged empathy and moral reasoning:

I imagined a situation where two boys and Anne were friends. Anne and Bob were from low-income families; Anne's father was in prison, but Mike's father was rich and did not want them in the restaurant. I asked students what they would do (P6, Individual interview).

P5 similarly reflected on individual differences and the need to recognize diverse ways of learning:

We all have different needs and ways of learning. Some of my peers need particular support, while I find it difficult to understand a text without reading it aloud, although this can sometimes disturb others. I think recognizing these differences is also part of inclusion (P5, Individual interview).

These accounts illustrate emerging relational dimensions of participants' readiness, particularly dialogue, empathy, recognition of individual differences, and responsiveness to learners. However, 14 participants described these experiences as occasional rather than a consistent feature of their teacher preparation. 29 participants identified predominantly theoretical or teacher-centered university instruction as limiting opportunities to observe and practice inclusive pedagogy. P6 reflected:

We have different disciplines, but the content is often the same. I have not received much input from teachers. Sometimes all lessons look the same, and lecturing is overwhelming (P6, Individual interview).

Uncertainty was also evident in participants' assessments of their own preparedness. 35 participants expressed concerns about translating their knowledge of inclusion into practice with diverse learners. P7 explained:

I understand the concept of inclusion, but I am not sure how to apply it in a real classroom. For example, if one learner needs additional support, I do not always know how to adapt the task for that learner while keeping the whole class involved (P7, Individual interview).

P2 similarly linked confidence to practical teaching experience:

When I am in real school practice, I realize that theory is easier than reality. At university, we learn about inclusion and different teaching approaches, but in the classroom, students have different needs and levels of participation. I sometimes struggle to respond to everyone and adapt the lesson simultaneously (P2, Individual interview).

Written reflections reinforced the perceived divide between theoretical understanding and practical confidence:

I may not always recognize what every learner needs or know how to support one student without leaving others behind (P1, Reflection notes).

Viewed through the lens of relational pedagogy, readiness emerged as more than mere knowledge of inclusion. Participants' confidence was also shaped by opportunities to engage with diverse learners, practice responsive teaching, and experience pedagogical approaches that modeled dialogue, empathy, participation, and recognition. The findings indicate a gap between participants' support for inclusive principles and their perceived preparedness to enact them, with limited practical experience and inconsistent modeling of inclusive pedagogy contributing to uncertainty about future practice.

Conditions constraining and enabling inclusive practice

Participants identified a range of social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions they perceived as shaping their readiness to implement inclusive education. 38 of the 53 participants identified large class sizes as a significant constraint. In comparison, 27 cited limited material or technological resources, 24 discussed inflexible teaching approaches, and 31 reported insufficient practical preparation for working with diverse learners. These conditions were perceived not only as practical difficulties but also as constraints on teachers' capacity to respond to individual learners and to create opportunities for equitable participation.

Large class sizes were the most frequently identified constraint. Participants described difficulties with including all learners in classroom interactions and responding to individual needs when working with larger groups. FG1-P2 explained:

I wanted to involve all the students in the discussion, but the class was too large. Some students had to wait for a long time, others became impatient, and I could not give everyone an equal opportunity to participate (FG1-P2).

Material and technological conditions were another concern. 27 participants described limited access to appropriate resources as restricting their ability to adapt teaching to different learner needs. FG6-P3 explained:

There are infrastructural constraints. I cannot always use the methods or technology that would be most suitable for different learners. For example, I printed pictures for visual learners because I could not use video, even though video would have better supported the activity (FG6-P3).

Participants also identified interpersonal conditions that could either support or undermine inclusion. 16 participants described teacher–student relationships, teacher responsiveness, or unequal treatment as influencing whether learners felt recognized and included. FG2-P6 reflected on an experience of exclusion:

When I miss a class or arrive late, I sometimes feel that the teacher stops involving me in the lesson. Then I feel that I am present in the classroom but not really part of it (FG2-P6).

The interviews further demonstrated that participants understood inclusion as being shaped by broader social and linguistic conditions. P5 described how language anxiety could restrict classroom participation:

Sometimes students know the answer but stay silent because they are concerned about their accent or afraid of making a mistake. If they feel others might judge them, they choose not to participate (P5, Individual interview).

P3 similarly described how differences in social norms and patterns of interaction could constrain participation and a sense of belonging:

Sometimes I feel different from my groupmates. For example, they do not always invite me to social gatherings because we socialize differently. I also sometimes feel uncomfortable during group work because the way students communicate and collaborate here differs from what I am used to. Nobody excludes me directly, but these small things can make me feel that I do not fully belong (P3, Individual interview).

Reflections further revealed concerns about subtle forms of exclusion and unequal recognition. P6 described how exclusion could occur without being expressed openly:

Sometimes nobody says anything directly, but you can see that some learners receive less attention or are excluded from discussions and group activities. An inclusive teacher should notice this and ensure these students also feel respected and involved. Without attention to these small things, a student can be in the classroom but still feel excluded (P6, Reflection notes).

Participants recognized that readiness for inclusive practice depended not only on individual knowledge and intentions but also on enabling conditions, including manageable class sizes, adequate resources, practical preparation, responsive teacher–student relationships, and respectful peer interactions. Conversely, limitations in these conditions constrained opportunities for participation, a sense of belonging, and responsiveness to diverse learners. From a relational perspective, participants therefore understood readiness for inclusion as shaped by both their developing competence and the social, pedagogical, and institutional contexts in which inclusive practice occurs.

DISCUSSION

This study examined pre-service teachers' understanding of inclusive education and relational practices, their perceived preparedness and confidence to enact inclusive teaching, and the social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions that shaped their readiness. Overall, the findings highlight a distinction between valuing inclusion and being ready to enact it. Participants generally endorsed inclusive principles, yet their accounts suggested that conceptual support for inclusion did not consistently translate into pedagogical confidence or clarity about practice. This distinction is important because readiness for inclusive teaching involves more than positive attitudes; it also requires the capacity to respond to learner diversity in situated classroom contexts. Similar tensions have been identified internationally, where teachers may support inclusion while remaining uncertain about how to adapt, implement, and secure institutional support (Altes et al., 2024; Chow et al., 2024; Wray et al., 2022).

The first theme, *developing understandings of inclusive education*, suggests that participants were negotiating between broader, relational conceptions of inclusion and more traditional disability-focused understandings. From the perspective of relational pedagogy, the emphasis on participation, safety, belonging, recognition, and being valued indicates that inclusion was increasingly understood as a quality of educational relationships rather than simply as physical placement in a shared classroom. This is significant because it shifts attention from whether learners are present to whether they can participate meaningfully and feel a sense of belonging. This interpretation aligns with contemporary conceptions of inclusion centered on participation and belonging (Haug, 2017; UNESCO, 2024) and with scholarship showing that experiences of inclusion are shaped by intersecting inequalities related to class, migration background, gender, and place (Thomsen et al., 2026). At the same time, the persistence of disability-focused understandings suggests that broader relational conceptions of inclusion have not fully displaced more traditional deficit-oriented perspectives. Similar conceptual tensions have been reported in other contexts, where educators broadly endorse inclusion yet continue to associate it primarily with disability and special educational needs (Jia et al., 2024; Shaw, 2024).

Although participants recognized relational elements such as dialogue, participation, and learner differences, these elements were less evident in their understanding of pedagogical enactment. This suggests a gap between relational awareness and pedagogical capacity, as valuing inclusion does not necessarily equip pre-service teachers to adapt instruction, assessment, or participation. Similar research shows that educators may endorse inclusive principles while requiring clearer models of responsive practice (Moriña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). From a relational perspective, responsiveness therefore requires not only recognizing learner differences but also acting on that recognition in pedagogical practice.

The second theme, *uncertainty in preparedness to teach inclusively*, extends this gap to professional readiness. Participants' uncertainty about adapting teaching to diverse needs suggests that readiness involves not only knowledge of inclusive principles but also confidence

in making responsive pedagogical decisions. This aligns with evidence that self-efficacy develops through practice, modeling, and guided reflection rather than theoretical knowledge alone (Wray et al., 2022). When such opportunities are limited, positive attitudes may coexist with low confidence in differentiated teaching and classroom management (Chow et al., 2024; Zagona et al., 2017).

Participants' accounts of university preparation help explain the uncertainty identified in the second theme. The dominance of theoretical and repetitive instruction may provide knowledge about inclusion but offer limited opportunities to observe, practice, and reflect on inclusive pedagogy in authentic settings. This concern reflects wider critiques of teacher education in Kazakhstan as insufficiently connected to contemporary classroom demands (Ospanova, 2024; Tastanbekova, 2018), including limited practicum experience among novice teachers (Yeleussiz, 2024). From a relational perspective, future teachers learn about participation and responsiveness not only through course content but also through the pedagogies modeled during their preparation. Strengthening readiness, therefore, requires closer alignment among inclusive principles, university pedagogy, and practical experience.

The third theme, *conditions constraining and enabling inclusive practice*, demonstrates that readiness cannot be understood solely as an individual attribute. Large classes, limited resources, restricted access to technology, and inflexible learning environments may constrain teachers' capacity to respond to learner differences and support meaningful participation. Readiness, therefore, emerges as a contextually situated capacity, shaped in part by the environments in which teachers work. This aligns with research showing that resources, institutional procedures, and classroom organization influence the enactment of inclusive practice (Altes et al., 2024; Smith & Myers, 2024). In Kazakhstan, inequalities in digital infrastructure and educational provision further highlight this contextual dimension (Amirova et al., 2023; Bokayev et al., 2021; Durrani et al., 2023). From a relational perspective, such constraints may also limit opportunities for participation, recognition, and belonging.

The findings further show that inclusion is shaped by everyday social interactions and experiences of belonging. Anxiety about accents, fear of making mistakes, and subtle exclusion can limit participation even when learners are physically included. This is particularly relevant in Kazakhstan, where linguistic, cultural, and social differences can shape educational participation and a sense of belonging (Sariyeva et al., 2026; Mukanova & Akifyeva, 2025). Similar patterns internationally indicate that diversity alone does not ensure belonging without supportive relationships and institutional cultures (Gupta & Gomez, 2024; Tavares, 2024). From a relational perspective, inclusive competence therefore requires sensitivity to less visible forms of exclusion and responsiveness to linguistic, cultural, and individual differences.

The findings also have implications for how inclusion is embedded within teacher education. If readiness involves relational responsiveness and practical enactment, inclusion should be experienced across the program rather than taught as an isolated topic. This includes flexible approaches to participation, assessment, and feedback that are consistent with inclusive

assessment principles (Bain, 2023; Nieminen, 2024; Tai et al., 2021). Such modeling is particularly important where institutional priorities such as rankings, quality assurance, and competitiveness may limit attention to inclusive pedagogical reform (Tarman et al., 2026; Jia et al., 2024). Teacher preparation should therefore address not only what is taught about inclusion, but also how inclusive practices are modeled through university pedagogy.

The contribution of this study is to show that readiness for inclusive teaching extends beyond positive attitudes or individual confidence. It develops through conceptual understanding, relational awareness, practical experience, and enabling social, pedagogical, and institutional conditions. From a relational perspective, readiness involves responding to learner differences while supporting participation and a sense of belonging. In Kazakhstan, this underscores the need for closer alignment among inclusive policy, university pedagogy, and school practicum to bridge the gap between commitment to inclusion and readiness to enact it.

Future research

Future research could examine pre-service teachers' readiness for inclusive education across multiple universities and regions in Kazakhstan. Mixed-methods and longitudinal studies could explore how conceptual understanding, confidence, and relational responsiveness develop during practicum and early-career experiences. Including teacher educators, school mentors, and practicing teachers could further illuminate the conditions shaping inclusive practice. Intervention studies could also evaluate practicum redesign, case-based learning, collaborative teaching, and differentiated instruction as approaches to strengthening readiness for inclusive teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study examined pre-service teachers' readiness for inclusive education at a university in Kazakhstan. Participants generally associated inclusion with participation, belonging, recognition, and responsiveness to learner diversity, though narrower, disability-focused understandings persisted. A key finding was the gap between commitment to inclusion and confidence in applying inclusive principles in practice. Readiness emerged as a contextually situated capacity shaped by knowledge, relational responsiveness, practical experience, social relationships, and institutional conditions. Teacher education in Kazakhstan should therefore embed inclusive and relational pedagogies across programs, strengthen practicum and mentoring, and provide opportunities to practice responsive teaching. The findings highlight the need for closer alignment among university preparation, school practice, and the conditions in which future teachers will work.

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