Through Their Eyes: A Focus Group Discussion of Diversity and Equity in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT: Preparing teachers for diverse classrooms remains a central concern in educational research. This qualitative study examines how preservice teachers in Flanders, Belgium experience the ways diversity, equity, and social justice are addressed in their teacher education programs. Drawing on focus groups with 18 preservice teachers and using stimulus materials such as a "cake metaphor" and participant-selected objects, we conducted a thematic analysis of coursework and internship experiences. Findings highlight differences in how diversity is integrated across programs and underscore the importance of structured reflection and community-based placements in supporting more equitable classroom practices.

Keywords: Multicultural teacher education, diversity and equity, preservice teachers, field experiences, focus groups

Schools in Europe, including Flanders, are increasingly characterized by ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Across national contexts, educators are

expected to teach students whose languages, migration histories, and social positions vary widely. While diverse classrooms can provide opportunities for meaningful learning and cross-cultural exchange, they can also reproduce inequality when teachers are not adequately prepared to respond to differences in equitable ways (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2018). Teacher education therefore plays a central role in shaping how future teachers understand diversity and how they act upon it in schools.

A substantial body of research has examined how teacher education can prepare teachers for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Studies have explored culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014), linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas & Villegas, 2010, 2013), multicultural coursework (Gorski, 2009), and curriculum reform in teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Zeichner, 2010, 2022). Other work has focused on field experiences and community-based placements as important contexts for developing more informed perspectives on students and families (Arabacı Atlamaz, 2022; Guillén & Zeichner, 2018; Hallman & Rodriguez, 2015; Hamilton & Margot, 2019). In addition, research on whiteness and race-evasion has examined how institutional norms and racial positioning shape teacher preparation (Carter Andrews et al., 2021; Jupp et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2001, 2016; Solomon et al., 2005).

Despite this extensive scholarship, important questions remain. Much of the literature focuses on policy frameworks, program design, or specific aspects of intended preservice curricula. Fewer studies examine the *attained* curriculum (van den Akker et al., 2006): how preservice teachers themselves experience, interpret, and make sense of diversity-related preparation within their programs. Research has documented models of integration, course structures, and field placement designs (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Zeichner, 2010), yet less attention has been given to how these structures are perceived by preservice teachers, particularly in European contexts.

Within this broader international discussion, the Flemish context provides a relevant setting to examine these questions. In Flanders, classrooms—particularly in urban and semi-urban areas—reflect increasing linguistic and cultural diversity linked to migration and socioeconomic stratification. At the same time, Dutch is positioned as the primary language of schooling, and multilingual practices are often treated as challenges to be managed rather than resources to be built upon (Agirdag, 2010; Pulinx et al., 2017). These dynamics create a context in which tensions and questions about language, belonging, and educational equity are highly visible in everyday school life. Examining preservice teachers' experiences in this setting therefore contributes to international debates about how monolingual norms and institutional traditions shape equity-oriented teacher preparation.

This study addresses this gap by examining how preservice teachers in Flanders describe and interpret their preparation for diversity, equity, and social justice. Rather than analyzing official curricula alone, the study foregrounds participants' lived experiences of both coursework and internships. Using an emergent focus group design, we created space for participants to reflect collectively on their programs, supported by stimulus materials such as the "cake metaphor" and participant-selected objects and portfolios. In doing so, the study seeks to understand not only how diversity is formally organized within teacher education, but also how it is experienced in practice.

The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do preservice teachers describe the ways diversity, equity, and social justice are addressed in their theoretical coursework? (2) How do preservice teachers encounter and make sense of diversity and inequity in their internship experiences? By foregrounding preservice teachers' perspectives in a predominantly White Flemish context, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on how best to prepare teachers for today's multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

Teacher Education for Diversity and Equity

Preparing teachers for diverse classrooms has become a central concern in education systems across the world. In many countries, including across Europe, classrooms are shaped by linguistic diversity, migration, and varied social and cultural backgrounds. Scholars have long demonstrated that these differences are central to everyday teaching, influencing how teachers communicate with parents, how they explain subject matter, and how they organize classroom work (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Hollins, 2015; Zeichner et al., 2015).

Previous studies suggest that teaching in diverse classrooms requires several dynamic and interconnected forms of knowledge. To create more equitable classroom practices, teachers need general knowledge of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity; strong and critical subject knowledge; and knowledge of pedagogical forms that draw on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Dursun et al., 2021; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2005). Severiens et al. (2014) further identify five essential areas of expertise for teachers in diverse settings: language development, pedagogy, social interaction and identity, parental involvement, and engagement with schools and communities. Together, this scholarship highlights that inclusive teaching involves understanding how students' cultures, languages, and experiences are connected to learning in concrete classroom situations.

At the same time, researchers have repeatedly noted that knowledge alone is not sufficient. Teachers' expectations, assumptions, and everyday interpretations of classroom events shape how they respond to students (Sleeter, 2008). Teacher education therefore involves more than introducing concepts; it also requires attention to how preservice teachers think about difference, fairness, and responsibility in schools. The question is not simply whether diversity appears in the curriculum, but how teacher education supports future teachers in recognizing and responding to inequality in their schools and classrooms.

Integrating Diversity Across Coursework and Field Experiences

Preparation for diversity in teacher education takes place through both coursework and field experiences. Research on teacher preparation has consistently emphasized that what preservice teachers learn depends not only on content, but also on how programs structure learning across university courses and school placements (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Zeichner, 2010, 2022). Studies in multicultural and linguistically responsive teacher education further

highlight that attention to diversity must extend beyond isolated discussions and connect theory, methods courses, and field experiences (Gay, 2010; Lucas & Villegas, 2010, 2013; Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Although most teacher education programs acknowledge the importance of diversity and equity, research shows that the way these themes are framed and integrated within the curriculum matters significantly (Gorski, 2009; Severiens et al., 2014; Zeichner, 2010). Some programs address diversity through a single required course or optional module, while others integrate it across multiple subjects and over several years, including both methods courses and foundational studies (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner et al., 2015).

Murrell et al. (1997) describe this distinction as an information-centered model versus an integrative-generative model. The information-centered (or "add-on") approach introduces diversity through a specific course, leaving the rest of the curriculum largely untouched (Zeichner, 2010, 2022). Scholars have criticized this approach for its limited influence on preservice teachers' longer-term beliefs and classroom practices (Garcia & Kleyn, 2013; Kea et al., 2006). In such cases, racism, inequality, and discrimination may be discussed in theory but remain disconnected from subject teaching and everyday classroom decisions.

By contrast, the integrative-generative model weaves diversity-related content across courses and over time. Questions of equity are addressed not only in dedicated sessions, but also within subject methods, assessment, classroom management, and internships (Kea et al., 2006; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Research suggests that programs in which diversity is revisited across courses are more likely to be associated with stronger understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse learners and more reflective beliefs about students' languages and backgrounds (Dursun et al., 2023a, 2023b; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Zeichner, 2015, 2022).

Field experiences play a central role in how preservice teachers come to understand diversity in practice. While coursework introduces concepts and frameworks, internships are often the settings where student teachers observe how schools are organized, how classrooms are managed, and how differences among students are addressed on a daily basis. Through observation, lesson planning, and classroom teaching, they encounter the routines and expectations that shape school life. However, research suggests that simply placing preservice teachers in diverse classrooms does not automatically lead to more inclusive teaching (Hamilton & Margot, 2019; McDonald et al., 2013). Without structured support, internships may reinforce existing biases and practices, including grouping, language separation, or deficit-oriented explanations of student performance (Sleeter, 2008).

For this reason, several scholars argue that field experiences should be closely connected to coursework and supported through reflection and guided discussion (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2010, 2015). Reflection in this sense is not incidental or informal. It involves scheduled seminars, guided discussions led by teacher educators, and opportunities to examine specific classroom situations in relation to theory. When preservice teachers are encouraged to analyze what they observe, raise questions, and connect classroom situations to theoretical perspectives, internships can become sites of meaningful learning.

Within this broader discussion of structured field experiences, community-based placements have received particular attention. Studies suggest that when preservice teachers engage in work with community centers, homework support programs, or initiatives linked to local organizations, they often develop broader understandings of students' lives beyond the classroom and more nuanced perspectives on families, cultures, and languages (Abrica, 2024; Arabacı Atlamaz, 2022; Guillén & Zeichner, 2018; Hallman & Rodriguez, 2015; Yuan, 2018). As with coursework, the impact of these experiences depends on how they are structured and whether opportunities for reflection are provided.

Whiteness and Race-evasion in Teacher Education

In addition to formal coursework and structured internships, preservice teachers are also shaped by what is often described as the *hidden curriculum* of teacher education. Beyond official syllabi and planned field experiences, institutional routines, everyday interactions, and unspoken expectations communicate messages about what counts as "good teaching," which language practices are considered appropriate, and how concerns about inequality are treated (Apple & Apple, 2004; Gorski, 2009). These implicit messages do not appear in course outlines, yet they influence how future teachers understand classroom practices, expectations for students, and what counts as equitable teaching.

Scholarship on whiteness in teacher education helps to examine these dynamics. Researchers have shown that in contexts where the majority of preservice teachers and faculty are White, institutional norms often reflect unmarked cultural assumptions (Sleeter, 2001, 2016; Solomon et al., 2005; Carter Andrews et al., 2021). Expectations such as monolingual instruction, individual responsibility for achievement, or the idea of "treating everyone the same" may be presented as neutral, even when they contribute to unequal outcomes.

Research examining how whiteness shapes teacher identity further suggests that race-evasive ways of discussing diversity are common in teacher preparation (Jupp et al., 2019; Jupp et al., 2023). These include emphasizing sameness over difference, attributing disparities primarily to individual effort, or avoiding direct discussion of racism and structural inequality. Rather than treating these responses as individual failings, this literature situates them within broader institutional contexts that shape how preservice teachers learn to speak about diversity.

Given that the majority of participants in the present study were White Flemish preservice teachers, this scholarship provides an important lens for examining how diversity and inequality are addressed—or left unaddressed—within teacher education programs. It helps situate participants' responses within broader institutional and cultural contexts rather than interpreting them as isolated individual views. It also supports an analysis of how preservice teachers interpret classroom practices when those practices conflict with ideas of equity discussed in coursework.

Methods

This study investigates how preservice teachers experience the ways diversity, equity, and social justice are addressed in their teacher education programs. Because the focus lies on lived experience, interpretation, and meaning-making, a qualitative design was most appropriate (Blaikie, 2010; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Rather than examining formal curricula or policy documents, the study centers on what students describe as the attained curriculum: how they interpret, negotiate, and make sense of diversity in both coursework and internships.

Focus group discussions were selected to capture not only individual perspectives but also how participants co-constructed meaning through interaction. As Morgan et al. (2008) argue, focus groups generate data through group dialogue, allowing participants to respond to, challenge, and build on each other's accounts. Given the normative and sometimes sensitive nature of discussions around race, language, and inequity, the group format also made visible how ideas were collectively shaped, reinforced, or unsettled.

The research questions were informed by existing scholarship distinguishing between the intended curriculum and the attained curriculum in teacher education (van den Akker et al., 2006). The focus group questions were designed to invite participants to reflect on how they experienced diversity across both coursework and internships. During the instrument vetting and rehearsal sessions, the wording of the questions was refined to ensure they encouraged open reflection and discussion rather than short, evaluative responses.

Focus Groups: Designing for Emergence

Following Morgan et al. (2008), the study adopted a strategy of designing for emergence. Rather than treating the focus group as a site for collecting responses to predetermined questions, we aimed to create what Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) describe as a "deliberative, dialogic, and democratic space" (p. 887), where participants could actively shape the direction of discussion.

Several design elements supported this emergent approach within and between focus groups. Within groups, we employed an "hourglass" model: starting with broad opening questions, moving to more specific themes, and returning to broader, open-ended reflections (Morgan et al., 2008). We also introduced stimulus materials to spark interaction. One was the "cake metaphor," where participants were invited to draw a cake in response to the question: *"If your teacher education was a cake, what would it look like?"* This exercise served as an opening activity and supported shared discussion. In addition, participants brought an item—such as lesson materials, a portfolio excerpt, an article, or a short media example—that reflected their experiences of diversity in teacher education. These materials helped keep the conversation grounded in concrete situations rather than general statements.

We also allowed the design to evolve across the focus groups. After the first two sessions, the research team reviewed the early discussions and noted

recurring issues and questions that participants raised (Figure 1). We then adjusted the discussion guide for later sessions so we could return to these issues in more depth, while still leaving room for participants to introduce new concerns and examples.

Participants, Research Team, and Settings

Participants in this study were preservice primary and secondary teachers in their final years of teacher education, drawn from programs across Flanders. To capture the diversity of Flanders' educational landscape, we invited programs from both urban and rural settings. Recruitment focused on students in their final years, who volunteered to take part in focus group discussions. Of six programs contacted, five agreed to participate.

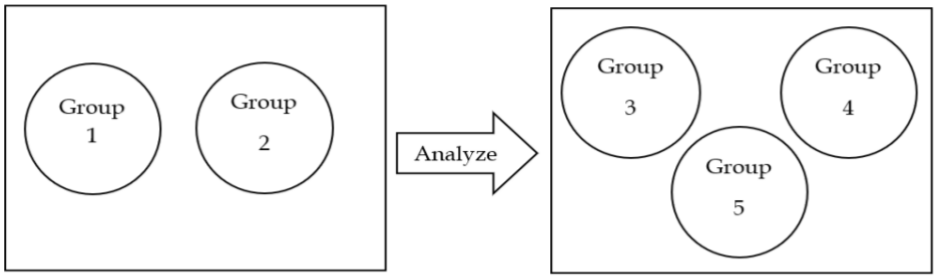

Figure 1
Emergence Between Groups

In total, 18 preservice teachers took part: 10 in primary education and 8 in secondary education (Appendix A). Group sizes ranged from two to five participants. In one instance, only a single participant was available; this session was conducted as an in-depth individual discussion using the same protocol. Although focus group interaction was not possible in that case, the structure and questions remained consistent, and the transcript was analyzed alongside the group data. Rather than treating it as a separate dataset, it was used to enrich and triangulate thematic interpretation.

Discussions were conducted in Dutch between May and June 2023 on participants' campuses. Sessions were audio- and video-recorded and totaled approximately 7 hours and 45 minutes. All participants provided informed consent and completed a short demographic questionnaire prior to participation.

The research team consisted of three members: the first author (PhD candidate in educational studies) and two MA students (in educational studies and anthropology). The two MA students, both native Dutch speakers, alternated as moderators, while the remaining team member supported note-taking and observation. The team collaborated throughout design, data collection, and analysis. Differences in linguistic background and disciplinary training were treated as analytic resources, inviting regular reflection on interpretation and positionality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2017). Analysis proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts were produced verbatim and read repeatedly for familiarization. Each researcher independently generated initial codes using NVivo (Version 14). Early coding stayed close to participants' language and included codes such as "theory–practice imbalance," "superficial diversity coverage," "reality shock," "segregation practices," and "lack of guidance."

Next, the team met to compare coding, discuss differences, and refine categories. Through iterative dialogue, codes were clustered into broader patterns that captured recurring tensions across programs. Themes were then deliberately organized around the research questions: (1) how diversity was integrated in theoretical coursework and (2) how diversity was encountered and interpreted during internships. This structure allowed us to move beyond listing themes toward examining how different elements of preparation interacted across contexts.

In the final stage, interpretation shifted from descriptive categorization to analytic explanation. We examined relationships among themes—for example, how fragmented coursework intersected with uncertainty during internships, or how structured reflection mediated "reality shock." Relevant scholarship was engaged as an interpretive lens to deepen analysis of patterns already evident in participants' accounts, particularly in relation to curriculum integration, field experiences, and institutional norms. This iterative and reflexive process ensured that analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives while also situating findings within broader debates in teacher education and multicultural education research.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To reduce researcher bias and strengthen the trustworthiness of findings, we used a combination of strategies: instrument vetting, rehearsals, midpoint analysis, and peer debriefing. The study design, focus group protocol, and analytical questions (Appendix B) were reviewed by five university professors in educational and cultural studies, eight teacher educators from various preservice programs, and nine graduate students (five PhD candidates and four MA students).

Two rehearsals tested the focus group protocol: the first with two MA anthropology students, and the second with three preservice teachers. These pilots helped refine flow, sequencing, and timing. The research team also conducted a midpoint analysis between focus groups. This process involved a careful review of the data collected thus far and the identification of emerging themes and patterns. Based on these insights, the team adjusted the focus of subsequent discussions while maintaining consistency in the core protocol.

For validation of analysis, the second author—a teacher educator of Turkish heritage with Belgian citizenship—reviewed the coding scheme and selected

quotations. The third author, a native Flemish teacher educator, also examined codes and excerpts and provided feedback. This multi-perspective collaboration strengthened interpretive rigor and encouraged reflexive discussion throughout the analytical process.

This study was conducted as part of an officially funded research project at University of Leuven (KU Leuven). Ethical considerations were reviewed during the project approval phase in accordance with institutional procedures. The study adhered to the professional ethical standards of KU Leuven and to the *Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium*. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. In addition, the deliberate emergent design—through instrument vetting, rehearsals, midpoint analysis, and collaboration within a multi-perspective research team—served not only methodological purposes but also supported ethical rigor by reducing bias and strengthening transparency in the research process.

Findings

This study explored how teacher education programs in Flanders integrate issues related to diversity, equity, and social justice into their curricula, and how preservice teachers perceive their influence on their knowledge and beliefs. Drawing from the rich narratives, several themes were identified. These themes highlight a variety of approaches in the design and implementation of course modules and internship experiences across different teacher education programs. This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis, beginning with insights from the cake metaphor, followed by a discussion of the key themes, distinguishing between theoretical and practical components of the preservice curricula.

The Cake Metaphor as a Shared Language for Curriculum Balance

In this study, the cake metaphor was used as an engaging introduction and invitation for deeper discussions about participants' three-year teacher preparation. It worked as an inviting entry point and enabled participants to open up and share their thoughts in a more imaginative way. Initially, participants were invited to think about and play around the ingredients of a cake and the process of baking a cake. This playful introduction set the stage for a more reflexive exercise: "If your teacher education program was a cake, what ingredients would it contain?" Participants were then asked to draw and visually present their "teacher education cake" with its different ingredients. This creative activity allowed participants to think about the essential components of their teacher education, as well as identifying areas for improvements.

A key theme that emerged from the cake metaphor concerned the balance between theoretical and practical components across the years. For example, Rosa identified two key ingredients: a base (theory) and filling (practice). She explained,

> The ‘base’ for me is all theoretical knowledge, from didactics, pedagogy, to all subject-matter courses. The filling is then the practical experience we gain. In my view the filling was too thin. I would like a good base and a lot of filling. I think we could have more practice.

Similarly, Dawid highlighted three main ingredients: “For me, there were three main ingredients in our teacher education: subject-matter knowledge, pedagogy, and internships.”

The cake metaphor, in short, became a shared language for stimulating deeper thinking and fostering rich dialogue. Through this metaphorical frame, the participants were able to think and start to talk about their experiences and perceptions regarding their teacher education programs. The metaphor facilitated a dynamic dialogical space where participants critically examined their curriculum design and suggested alternatives, enriching the following discussions. A clear consensus that emerged from the cake metaphor discussions was the importance of a balanced teacher education curriculum that integrates theory and practice holistically and comprehensively.

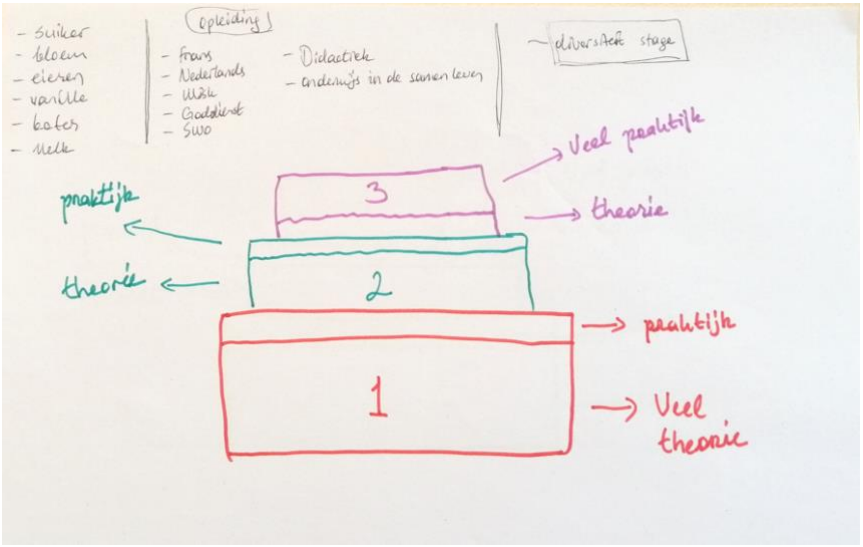

Figure 2
The Cake Metaphor

RQ1. Integration of Diversity and Equity in Theoretical Coursework

Across all programs, preservice teachers noted that diversity and equity are present in the theoretical curriculum. Yet, the way these topics are included varies greatly. Some programs deliberately and consistently integrate diversity-related courses across several years. Others treat them as optional add-ons, often resulting in fragmented or superficial coverage.

A Structured, Multi-year Approach

For some students, a structured, multi-year approach created space for gradual knowledge growth, self-reflection, and a change in perspective. Aaliyah, a secondary student, explained how her program built these themes across three years. Her words show how systematic exposure, moving from general introduction to critical application, can shift preservice teachers' perspectives:

> In the first year we had an introductory course about diversity, in the second year there was deeper discussion about inequities in education, inclusive education, multilingualism, which was really good. This year we conducted research about how diversity is framed in the popular media. I was very affected by that. What we did in that course was very valuable and had a huge impact on me.

Rosa, a primary education student, echoed this trajectory. She described how courses on stereotyping, discrimination, and multilingualism reshaped how she understands children's language and their learning:

> Children might be slightly less proficient in Dutch, but that doesn't mean they are incapable. A child is not weak in all areas, that is actually not possible. We need to look carefully at the differences in cultures and languages and bridge the gap between them.

Together, these narratives suggest that when topics of diversity and equity are woven into the very fabric of the core theoretical curriculum in a structured way, preservice teachers are more likely to develop both conceptual knowledge and reflective awareness.

Diversity as an Optional "Add-On": Fragmentation, Disappointment, and Reinforced Monolingual Biases

By contrast, other students described optional courses that felt disconnected and disappointing. Keira recalled her anticipation for a multilingual education course, saying: "I remember that I really wanted to follow that course because it is an important topic. But from the first lesson I already felt disappointed. Yes, I felt like there was not much I could learn from this course."

Lily and Newroz agreed that the course lacked coherence. Here we see how a poorly designed course not only failed to enrich knowledge but, in Keira's case, reinforced existing monolingual bias. Lily stated, "Yes, we thought, wow, we're going to learn a lot of things in this course." Newroz agreed, stating, "Yes, but that course was complete chaos… every lesson was disconnected from each other."

Keira's reflection shows how an experience like this can shape her practice in unhelpful ways, particularly when students feel they are left without guidance:

> All issues about multilingual education are left up in the air… Now, I would never have my students speak another language during my lessons. I do that now too, if someone speaks another language, I am like, "Hey, speak

> Dutch!" That is something we were really advised against. But I am not necessarily going to allow that.

Similarly, Dawid and Hannah described another diversity course as overly simplistic:

> Dawid: In that course these topics were discussed quite superficially. What is diversity, what types of diversity? How can you be confronted with that? I think that's where it stays, isn't it?
>
> Hannah: Yes, indeed. The discussions never went beyond the surface. We live in a superdiverse society already … but now when I think about it, I don't even have basic knowledge about these cultures, languages, and religions. That is a pity!

Taken together, these accounts underline how optional or fragmented approaches risk leaving preservice teachers with gaps in understanding, and in some cases, with reinforced stereotypes.

Pedagogy, Materials, and Who Teaches: What Makes Coursework Feel "Real"

Participants also linked the quality of diversity preparation to pedagogy and resources. Some students praised assignments that connected theory to authentic materials and public debates. Francesco, for example, described how his portfolio included plays, films, and critical media analyses:

> I watched the video "Dark Side of the Flex Culture" and wrote a reflection about it. I also critically analyzed representation of different cultures and religions in the popular media… Christmas is presented as joy with presents, but feast of sacrifice is presented with blood and violence… I realized that the world is really much bigger than the Western world. This was the core takeaway for me.

Others, however, criticized overly passive methods. Jade described courses where "lecturers just read a PowerPoint… the motivation is gone, because it's basically just sitting and listening and doing nothing."

Finally, several participants highlighted the importance of campus diversity, particularly the presence of lecturers with lived experience of migration and/or minoritization. Eduardo explained that, "I cannot say I really encountered passionate lecturers, except Mrs. … She also has a migration background… Those people speak from their own lived experiences." Kai raised a similar point about the limits of "only theory," saying, "The feeling I often had was, they mainly talk from theory. But have they really experienced it all themselves? I doubt that."

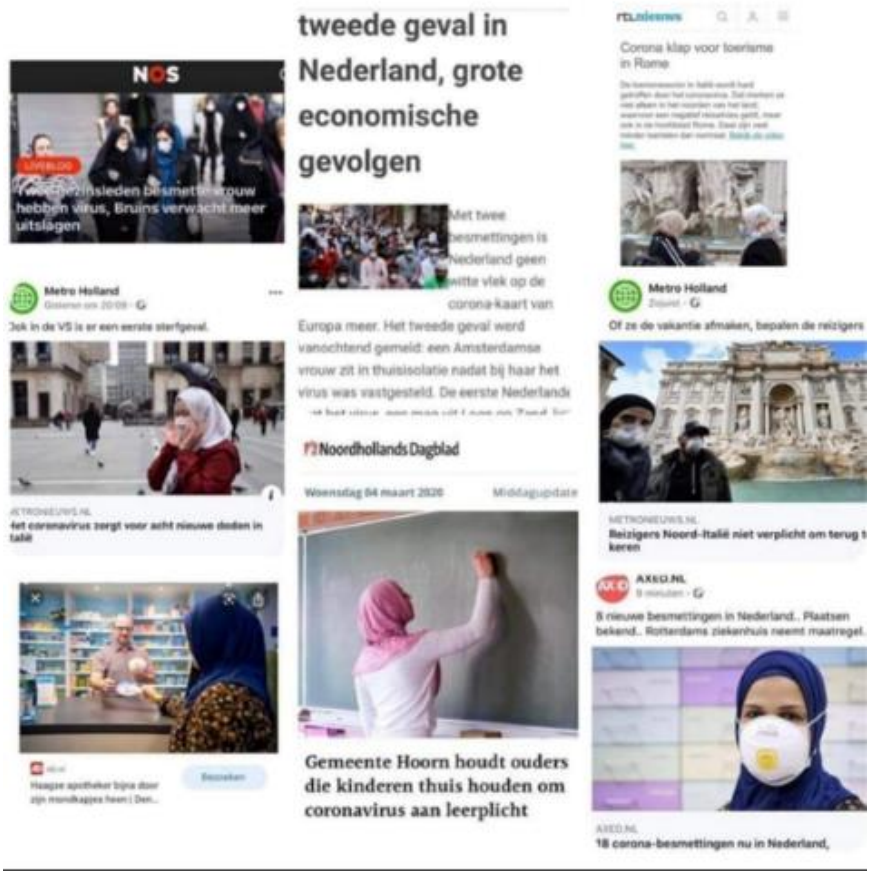

Figure 3
Stimulus Material from Participants' Portfolios

In sum, preservice teachers' accounts show that while all programs acknowledge diversity, the depth, structure, and pedagogy differ significantly. Structured, compulsory courses with authentic resources and materials foster reflection and challenge biases. Optional or fragmented courses, by contrast, often leave students underprepared, disengaged, or even more entrenched in monolingual perspectives.

Figure 4
Stimulus Material from Participants' Portfolios

RQ2. Diversity in Internship Experiences

Internships were often where preservice teachers confronted the realities of diversity most directly. The discussions revealed sharp contrasts in how programs structure these experiences, the support they provide, and the opportunities students have to critically reflect on what they encounter. Some programs broadened the internship beyond schools into community-based contexts, while others relied solely on traditional school placements. Across both, participants' accounts showed that placement design, guidance, and support were decisive in shaping how they learned to deal with diversity.

Community-based Internships as "Eye-openers"

For some students, diversity internships, working in community centers, and homework help programs offered a powerful complement to theory. Clara described her placement as a moment of "reality shock":

> Last year we had the diversity course and then an optional diversity internship linked to that course. I worked with a student in homework class in a community center here in the city. That was very educational. I may have had a bit of a reality shock, but I learned a lot more from the course itself. In practice it is very different.

Akira agreed, adding:

> You realize that you live in a completely different world and you know so little about it in advance. I was really shocked, and when I look back now, what I remember most is that diversity internship — not the theoretical courses.

Similarly, Fedoua described her work helping children with homework in a multicultural school context:

> Each of us was working with three or four children once a week… language games, mathematics… and, in the end, those children who had difficulty with both language and arithmetic had good results. That was really rewarding and I found that very educational.

These stories highlight the benefits of community-based internships. They provided exposure to different realities, challenged assumptions, and left a lasting impression that theory alone could not provide.

School-based Internships: Witnessing Segregation and Lowered Expectations

In contrast, many students reported that school-based internships confronted them with entrenched stereotypes and discriminatory practices. Lily recalled one case vividly. She explained, “There was this boy… a very intelligent boy. He was really in favor of A-track but still they put him in the B-track. Just because he had a migration background.” Keira described an even more explicit case of segregation:

> There was a class, divided into two groups. In one group, eight out of ten were Moroccan students, and in the other group all white boys and girls. I brought this up in the teachers’ room and they confirmed: “Yes, we do that, otherwise it’s difficult to manage the classroom.”

Rosa had a similar experience in her placement:

> At one of my internship school, the class was simply segregated. The weak students were on one side, and they just happened to be students of color. And my mentor said that’s easier for giving extra explanation. This is a very wrong image. But you cannot do anything about it because our supervisors expect us to adapt to the internship school. That causes a gigantic internal conflict.

Such testimonies show that for many preservice teachers inequity was not merely an abstract topic, but a routine, everyday reality during internships at schools. This observation often paired with a sense that challenging these inequities was professionally risky or simply not expected from a student teacher.

Systemic Challenges and Discrimination Against Student Teachers

In some cases, discriminatory practices targeted not only pupils but also preservice teachers themselves. Francesco described his placement in a predominantly white school:

> I told my supervisor at college that I didn't feel safe in this school. Still, I wanted to give them a fair chance. But a few weeks later I was kicked out… My mentor teacher was very clearly not ready for a person like me in education. There were microaggressions, sarcastic tones, calling me defensive or aggressive… I burst into tears. In the end, they said we wish you good luck with the rest of your training.

His experience underlines how the attitudes of mentor teachers and school staff can directly harm preservice teachers from diverse backgrounds. By contrast, his next placement in another school illustrates what inclusive school cultures can make possible:

> After I was kicked out, I ended up at a good school, really inclusive. And there I noticed that I can really contribute… Because I speak Arabic and a large part of the parents spoke Arabic, we could communicate more smoothly. Those parents were so grateful. And then I thought, that is why I am in education: to help reduce the gap.

This contrast underscores the role of school cultures in shaping preservice teachers' sense of belonging and professional growth.

Guidance and Reflection: Making Internship Experiences Discussable

Alongside placement type and school culture, participants stressed that the support offered by programs shaped what they could take from internships. Several noted that internship experiences do not automatically become educative; rather, they need to be worked through in dialogue and reflection. What made a difference was having regular moments, guided by teacher educators, where student teachers could share experiences, name tensions, examine assumptions, and discuss alternatives together.

Amara described a weekly reflection moment:

> We had a moment on Thursdays at campus, like a reflection moment. We all had to write down a situation and say, "I'm having a hard time with this, how can I best approach it?" Then we all discussed the case and shared ideas. Sometimes it is difficult to find an answer on your own, but by talking with others that answer comes to light.

Kai suggested that peer learning could be strengthened even further by making internship experiences more visible across the cohort:

> What I also think would be great is if we could visit each other's internship schools. For example, Amara is now teaching in that school — what is it like there, and how do they deal with diversity? I think we can learn a lot from each other.

Overall, these findings show that internships are powerful sites where preservice teachers encounter diversity and inequity directly. What they take from these encounters, however, depends strongly on the nature of the placement and on whether teacher education colleges create opportunities to discuss and interpret these experiences together. Where placements were supported by meaningful guidance and shared reflection, preservice teachers were better able to make

sense of tensions they encounter and consider how to respond to inequity in educational spaces.

Discussion

This study examined how preservice teachers in Flanders experienced the ways diversity, equity, and social justice were addressed in their coursework and internships. A key finding is that differences between programs were not simply about the amount of diversity content in the theoretical curriculum, but about how that content was framed, structured, and revisited over time. When concepts such as structural inequality, language hierarchies, or discrimination were discussed explicitly across multiple years, participants reported being better able to interpret concrete school practices. They described recognizing tracking and streaming decisions, monolingual expectations, and deficit talk about certain students and families. This aligns with scholarship arguing that equity-oriented teacher education requires sustained, structured, program-wide integration that helps preservice teachers connect pedagogical decisions to the social organization of schooling (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Zeichner, 2022).

Where diversity was treated as a peripheral theme, participants described different outcomes: uncertainty, disappointment, and unresolved tensions that often pushed them back toward restrictive defaults. Keira's move toward a Dutch-only stance after a course that left "all issues… up in the air" is telling. It suggests that superficial or fragmented preparation does not merely fail to help; it may leave student teachers with few ways to handle complexity, encouraging reliance on familiar, institutionally reinforced norms. Similar concerns appear in McCardle and Milford's (2024) study of teacher education in rural Appalachia, where preservice teachers were broadly receptive to diversity but criticized their programs for offering limited and surface-level preparation.

Similar to findings by Trager (2020) and Harfitt (2018), community-based placements—such as work in homework support centers or local community organizations—were consistently described as eye-opening. These placements brought preservice teachers into contact with social realities beyond their own experiences and required them to work closely with pupils and families in less formal settings. Clara spoke of a "reality shock," and Akira described being "shocked" by realizing how little she knew beforehand. Fedoua's account illustrates another dimension: through weekly support sessions, she developed greater confidence in explaining content in accessible ways, responding to language-related misunderstandings, and building trust with pupils who initially struggled. Participants also described becoming more attentive to how language background, migration history, and school expectations shape pupils' opportunities to learn. For some, these experiences encouraged a shift away from quick deficit explanations toward more careful consideration of context. These findings align with evidence that community-based service-learning can strengthen sociolinguistic awareness and reflective engagement (Abrica, 2024; Arabacı Atlamaz, 2022; Yuan, 2018).

School-based placements, however, confronted some students with inequities that they found difficult to challenge from the position of a student teacher. Segregated groupings, lowered expectations, and deficit discourses were

sometimes defended as “practical necessities.” Rosa described the “gigantic internal conflict” created by expectations to adapt to the school even when practices appeared inequitable. In a few cases, inequity was experienced not only as something happening to pupils but also as something preservice teachers themselves faced.

Where programs offered regular and structured reflection moments, participants found them invaluable for making sense of challenging experiences. Participants emphasized the need for reflection that is (a) regular rather than ad hoc, (b) collective rather than private, and (c) guided and structured rather than purely therapeutic. These insights support arguments that simply placing students in diverse classrooms is insufficient; opportunities for guided reflection and critical dialogue are needed to turn experience into learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Gay, 2018; Zeichner, 2015).

Several of these patterns are well documented in scholarship on whiteness and race-evasive discourses in education. This work argues that teaching and teacher education are not culturally neutral spaces; in many contexts, their demographics and normative center continue to be shaped by whiteness and middle-class assumptions (Carter Andrews et al., 2021; Jupp et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2001, 2008; Solomon et al., 2005; Wozolek & Atif, 2022). Most participants in this study were educated in predominantly White, monolingual institutional contexts, where practices such as tracking or linguistic assimilation were often treated as ordinary rather than as choices with equity consequences.

This body of scholarship further clarifies how discourses of individualism and meritocracy can operate as “neutral” common sense in teacher education. In our data, this was visible in familiar repertoires: appeals to sameness (e.g., “I don’t see color,” “I treat everyone the same”), discomfort with naming racism or inequality, and a tendency to locate problems in students’ cultures, languages, or families rather than in institutional barriers. Even when preservice teachers recognized discriminatory practices during internships, many described uncertainty about whether—and how—to challenge them from their position as student teachers.

This lens also helps interpret why preservice teachers with migration backgrounds described particular vulnerabilities during internships. In our data, they did not only observe inequities affecting pupils; at times, they themselves were positioned as “different” and subtly questioned in ways tied to language, culture, or belonging. This echoes Robinson and Kenyon’s (2024) findings that preservice teachers of color in predominantly White institutions often experience isolation and lack of support.

Together, these findings underline that preparing teachers for diversity also requires explicit attention to how race, language, and cultural norms are produced, normalized, and defended within educational institutions (Jupp et al., 2019; Solomon et al., 2005). Teacher education prepares students best when diversity is treated as a coherent commitment across coursework, field placements, and guided reflection moments. Where diversity is optional or superficial, and where internships reproduce inequity, preservice teachers are left with gaps in knowledge, unresolved tensions, and limited opportunities to work through what they encounter.

This study, while providing valuable insights, is not without limitations. The focus on teacher education programs in Flanders may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the qualitative design—relying on focus groups—reflects participants' situated perspectives and may not capture the full range of institutional practices. Finally, the study reflects a specific time and context; changes in educational policy and practice may influence how these patterns unfold over time.

Conclusion

Preservice teachers' narratives in this study point to an important distinction: Diversity preparation becomes meaningful when it is embedded across both theoretical courses and internships. When programs revisit issues of diversity over time, connect them to institutional structures and provide guided reflection, student teachers develop greater confidence in interpreting and responding to inequitable practices. By contrast, when diversity is addressed superficially or inconsistently, it risks remaining abstract and disconnected from the everyday realities of schools.

A key insight is the importance of practice-oriented experiences. Community-based internships, in particular, emerged as powerful spaces for confronting assumptions, expanding knowledge, and engaging with diverse learners in meaningful ways. Traditional school-based internships—when insufficiently supported—may reproduce systemic inequalities and create additional barriers for student teachers, especially for those with migration backgrounds.

As classrooms continue to diversify, teacher education programs face the task of moving beyond simplistic and symbolic inclusion toward a sustained and critically informed preparation. This calls for coherent curricula, meaningful practice in diverse contexts, and structured spaces for reflection and dialogue. In this way, teacher education can play a transformative role by preparing a new generation of educators who not only recognize diversity but also prepared to act as advocates of equity and social justice in their future classrooms.

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Appendix A: Participants

Pseudonym	Program type	Age	Gender	Ethnicity (self-defined)
Aaliyah	Primary	40-49	Female	White-European
Akira	Primary	21-29	Male	White-European
Amara	Secondary	30-39	Female	White-European
Amir	Secondary	40-49	Male	European-Arabic
Clara	Primary	21-29	Female	White-European
Dawid	Secondary	21-29	Male	White-European
Diana	Primary	18-20	Female	White-European
Eduardo	Secondary	21-29	Male	European-Asiatic
Elena	Primary	18-20	Female	White-European
Fedoua	Primary	18-20	Female	White-European
Francesco	Primary	21-29	Male	European-Arabic
Hannah	Secondary	18-20	Female	White-European
Jade	Primary	18-20	Female	White-European
Kai	Primary	21-29	Male	White-European
Keira	Secondary	40-49	Female	White-European
Lily	Secondary	40-49	Female	White-European
Newroz	Secondary	40-49	Female	White-European
Rosa	Primary	30-39	Female	Multi-ethnic

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

A. Theoretical courses:

1. Where and how did you encounter cultural and linguistic diversity in the theoretical courses of your teacher training?
2. How do you perceive the integration of diversity topics in your theoretical courses?
3. How were these courses designed and structured: lectures, discussions, etc.
4. Which topics were covered in these courses?
5. What teaching materials were used: textbooks, scientific articles, videos, etc.
6. Which materials, activities, or assignments did you find most valuable and why?
7. What did you do and why?
8. How has the way diversity was addressed within teacher education influenced your perspective or actions?
9. What aspects of the courses did you find difficult or confusing? (How did you deal with this?)
10. What challenges did you encounter during your theoretical courses regarding diversity?
11. What are the strengths and limitations of these theoretical courses?

B. Internships

1. Where and how did you encounter cultural and linguistic diversity during your internships?
2. What challenges did you face during your internships, especially regarding diversity and inclusion, and how did you address them?
3. Can you share a specific example of when you were confronted with the topic of diversity during your internship and how you dealt with it?
4. How was the school environment in your internship school? To what extent do you feel supported by your mentors, teachers, and principals of internship school?
5. What can you tell us about the support from your teacher education college in working with a diverse student population
6. 6. How did your internship experiences contribute to your understanding and handling of diversity in the classroom?

C. Closing (summary) questions:

1. What changes or additions would you suggest to enhance the current curriculum, especially concerning diversity and inclusion?
2. Of all the things we discussed, what was the most important to you?

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work the first author used Chat GPT in order to improve language and readability with caution. After using this tool, the first author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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