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**The Concept and Practice of Traditional Martial Arts for All  
(Focus Group)**

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## **Breaking Barriers in Martial Arts: A Focus Group Investigation into Inclusive Practices**

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### **Executive Summary**

The TMA4ALL focus group analysis presents a thorough approach to understanding inclusive martial arts, integrating universal accessibility principles with specific adaptations for particular needs. Inductive and deductive analyses revealed two main conceptions of inclusivity: universal accessibility, emphasising broad adaptability, and disability-specific adaptations, concentrating on tailored responses for participants with distinct needs. The findings emphasise the necessity of cultivating environments that are physically and emotionally safe, adaptive, and respectful. Key themes include safety and trust-building, responsive flexibility, and relational engagement.

Coaches consistently highlighted the necessity of establishing an inclusive environment in which participants, particularly those from LGBTQIA backgrounds, experience respect and validation. Safety encompasses both physical and emotional dimensions, with educators emphasising the importance of vigilant practices to mitigate harm and foster trust. Responsive flexibility emerged as a fundamental skill, allowing educators to adjust in real-time to the diverse needs of participants, thereby ensuring that all individuals can engage comfortably at their own pace. Relational engagement and contextual awareness are essential for establishing connections and comprehending participants as complete individuals, acknowledging their distinct backgrounds and identities.

The findings underscore the significance of personal empowerment and collaborative adaptation. Educators cultivate a sense of ownership and belonging in the training environment by prompting participants to establish personal goals and provide feedback. Continuous reflexivity and a growth mindset facilitate a cycle of self-improvement among teachers, allowing for the ongoing refinement of practices and enhancement of inclusivity.

The focus groups indicated an underlying tension between general accessibility and specific adaptations. If unaddressed, this divide may lead to inconsistencies; however, integrating both approaches allows coaches to develop a more holistic and inclusive practice. By engaging in open dialogue and self-reflection, educators can establish a cohesive approach that acknowledges and meets the varied needs of all stakeholders. This synergy supports inclusive martial arts as a dynamic and evolving discipline, allowing all

individuals to experience the comprehensive benefits of martial arts within a safe, empowering, and adaptable setting.

**Keywords:** Inclusion; Diversity; Disability; Good Health and Well-being; Quality Education; Reduced Inequalities

## Introduction

Inclusive martial arts tackle the issue of establishing an environment that effectively meets the varied needs of all participants. This necessitates the modification of pedagogical approaches, physical environments, and foundational beliefs to accommodate individuals with diverse abilities, including those with disabilities. Inclusive settings facilitate support for individuals with disabilities and promote a wider sense of community, empathy, and mutual respect among participants (Rao, 2008). Advancing inclusive practices necessitates a transformation in the attitudes of teachers and students, alongside structural modifications in the teaching and perception of martial arts (Bailey & Sweeney, 2023).

Inclusive martial arts programmes seek to establish an environment in which diverse participants experience a sense of belonging. These initiatives are intentionally structured to ensure that all participants can access the significant mental and emotional advantages of engaging in martial arts within a unified community (van der Kooi, 2020). To realise the potential of martial arts for inclusion, instructors must have the requisite skills and knowledge to assist students with diverse needs. It is crucial to thoughtfully evaluate methods for individualising instruction while maintaining the integrity of established techniques.

Knowledge of various physical and developmental disabilities is essential for instructors, as is awareness of pertinent safety guidelines and legislation, to ensure that all students can practise freely and safely (Pečnikar Oblak et al., 2020). Effective communication, adaptability, and the capacity to deliver constructive feedback are essential to ensure that modifications align with each student's needs. In addition to skills, cultivating a mindset characterised by empathy, patience, and humility is crucial for recognising the extent of our own learning needs before others can comprehend our perspectives. By prioritising these aspects, instructors can create an environment that respects and supports the abilities and experiences of all individuals, thereby facilitating the shared enjoyment of martial arts.

The increasing demand for inclusive sports signifies a significant movement aimed at facilitating participation regardless of individual abilities. Recent studies indicate benefits across populations, including enhanced physical health, increased mental acuity, and strengthened community bonds (Kavoura et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). The incorporation of diversity in martial arts fosters an environment characterised by unity, support, and self-reflection. This approach enhances the knowledge of marginalised students and contributes positively to the educational experience of all participants.

Incorporating a wider range of individuals challenges prevailing assumptions regarding competence and redefines the fundamental nature of martial arts. Traditional styles frequently prioritise physical prowess and skill; in contrast, inclusive martial arts focus on adaptability, resilience, and collaboration rather than competition. For non-disabled students, inclusiveness can promote empathy, collaboration, and an appreciation for the capabilities of individuals different from themselves.

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this research, which involved semi-structured focus groups, is elaborated upon in this section. In order to obtain profound insights from a diverse array of individuals, including marginalised and non-Marginalised individuals, TMA instructors, and experts in inclusive physical activity, the qualitative research approach entailed semi-structured focus groups. While maintaining a clear focus on central topics regarding inclusion, the focus groups provided a pliable yet organised platform for investigating the viewpoints and histories of participants.

This study employs a focus group methodology, which is informed by the knowledge of educators, practitioners, and professionals who have experience in inclusive martial arts. The aim was to examine the potential obstacles that coeducational and inclusive environments may pose, as well as to identify opportunities for the development of martial arts programmes that are more accessible to a wider range of participants. Focus groups offer a platform for the exchange of interactive ideas and perspectives on the representation of the diversity of experiences within martial arts, enabling individuals of all backgrounds, including a wide range of genders, ethnicities, and abilities, to fully engage in these practices and exchange ideas.

The participants in these discussions were chosen for their proficiency in adaptive athletics, inclusive education, and martial arts training. The emphasis was on individuals who are actively engaged in the accessibility of martial arts for individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities. These findings will enhance the current research on inclusion in physical education and offer martial arts instructors practical suggestions for improving accessibility.

### *Sampling and Recruitment Strategy*

Six semi-structured discussion circles were arranged, representing stakeholders within the TMA4ALL project. Attendees encompassed Marginalised communities such as LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled persons, migrants and refugees, women and girls, and the elderly. Additionally, non-Marginalised parties partook. Focus groups also hosted TMA mentors and physical activity experts focused on inclusive techniques within TMA. Candidates needed current or potential involvement as TMA members, coaches, or people linked to exercise delivery benefitting underrepresented groups. Outreach happened through partner establishments that connected with relevant persons in TMA or related physical activities.

### *Participants*

Participants were segmented into Marginalised and non-Marginalised individuals, TMA coaches, and inclusive physical activity experts. Each of these groups brought unique perspectives and experiences to the table. The Marginalised participants include people from LGBTQ+ communities, individuals with disabilities, migrants and refugees, women and girls, and the elderly. Non-Marginalised participants, though fewer in number, are included to provide insight into how inclusivity can be fostered in a broader social context. The university conducting the focus groups will engage with TMA coaches. TMA coaches are at the frontline of implementing inclusive practices, making their input critical to understanding what skills and knowledge are necessary to foster an inclusive martial arts environment. Table 1 is a breakdown of the participant groups:

**Table 1.** Focus group participants

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Participants</b>
<b>INSIDE</b>	People from LGBTQ+ communities (10 participants), non-Marginalised people (5 participants), inclusive physical activity experts (5 participants), migrants (5 participants)
<b>UCSI</b>	TMA coaches (20 participants), inclusive physical activity experts (5 participants), migrants (5 participants)
<b>KSK</b>	People with disabilities (10 participants), non-Marginalised people (5 participants)
<b>LFVIBW</b>	Persons aged 60+ (10 participants), non-Marginalised people (5 participants)
<b>TKSS</b>	Women and girls (10 participants), non-Marginalised people (5 participants)

### *Time Frame*

The focus group discussions will be conducted from June to August 2024. This three-month window allows sufficient time for recruitment, scheduling, and conducting the focus groups across various partner organisations and universities. Additionally, this period accommodates the necessary time for transcription and translation of the focus group recordings, ensuring that all data is properly prepared for analysis. To streamline the process, focus groups will be conducted online whenever possible. This approach facilitates easier scheduling across different regions and allows for automatic recording and transcribing of conversations using ‘Read.AI’ software. In cases where the focus groups were conducted in person, they will be recorded using audio devices, with all conversations subsequently transcribed. Since some focus groups may be conducted in languages other than English, translations will be provided for all transcripts, ensuring a consistent and comprehensive dataset for analysis. All partners are expected to complete the focus groups and submit the transcripts to UCSI University by the beginning of September 2024.

### *Ethical Considerations*

All the procedures in this study followed the ethical standards of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects. This study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee at UCSI University (Code no: UCSI/ IEC-2024-FOSSLA-0009), and all methods used were per these guidelines. We performed this study after obtaining informed consent from all participants. All participants were fully informed about the study, and they could withdraw at any point without penalty. The collected data were saved in storage, with limited access only possible by the research team. The study demonstrated the research paradigm's beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice by protecting participants' rights and welfare during all stages of the research process.

### ***Data Collection***

The focus groups took place between June 2024 and January 2025, providing a few-month window for scheduling, conducting, and transcribing the discussions. Most focus groups were conducted virtually to facilitate participation across different regions and ensure ease of recording. Online platforms also allowed for the automatic recording of discussions, which were then transcribed using software applications like *Read.AI*. Audio recordings were made and subsequently transcribed when focus groups were held in person. Since some focus groups were performed in partner languages, transcripts were translated into English to ensure uniformity in data evaluation. By early September 2024, transcriptions had been submitted to UCSI University for analysis, up until January 2025.

The role of the moderator in the focus groups was pivotal for facilitating discussions while guaranteeing that the participants felt comfortable sharing their perspectives. Moderators used a set of predefined open-ended questions to guide the conversation. They also encouraged participants to explore pertinent themes in greater depth, permitting the emergence of new insights. Moderators remained neutral throughout the discussions, confirming that participants' responses were not influenced by their presence or expectations.

### ***Data Management***

All audio recordings from the focus groups were securely stored in encrypted files to protect the participants' privacy. The files were then carefully analysed to yield verbatim transcripts which captured the groups' discussions. Non-English transcripts underwent a meticulous translation process involving professional translators to render them in English. The resulting translations were then thoroughly vetted to confirm the meanings came through intact. Only the organisations involved in the project could view the raw data in its original form. Strict protocols were established to ensure participants' confidentiality was safeguarded throughout the life of the research initiative.

### ***Limitations***

While this research sheds light on barriers and options for inclusiveness in classic martial arts practices, limitations remain. The small focus group sample constrains how widely findings may apply. Also, participant biases could have shaped responses, as those already motivated to discuss the topic may have been likelier to participate. Interpretation challenges in translation may have blurred nuances for some data, though cross-checks tried minimizing such losses (Ritchie et al., 2013).

The methodology section offers a transparent, thorough process summary for this qualitative study by addressing participant selection and translation rigour. It secures research integrity and validity at the same time acknowledging caveats. The account allows replicability while still leaving openings for an augmenting understanding of diversity, participation challenges, and potential solutions across martial arts traditions.

## *Data Analysis*

The method we employed for analysis was qualitative data analysis, a technique that is frequently used to investigate patterns, themes, and meanings in non-numerical data. Detailed data collected from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys are analysed using qualitative analysis to provide a framework for understanding social phenomena (Patton, 2015). This method is well-suited for our investigation of inclusive martial arts, as it enables researchers to document the depth and complexity of participants' perspectives and experiences. To the best of our knowledge, this hybrid methodology is being implemented for the first time. In our investigation, we implemented a dual-system approach that integrated the OECD DeSeCo Framework and Thematic Analysis, facilitating a comprehensive and organised analysis of our results.

### *Thematic Analysis (Inductive Analysis)*

Thematic analysis was employed in our initial analysis, a qualitative method that identifies, analyses, and interprets themes across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis is frequently employed, in which researchers begin with specific data and progress to broader generalisations. This approach enables themes to arise directly from the participants' input rather than from a pre-imposed structure. The focus group transcripts were systematically coded in this inductive process to identify shared themes that revealed critical insights into inclusive martial arts. This method ensured that the generated themes accurately represented the participants' viewpoints (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), thereby promoting a rational comprehension of the data.

### *OECD DeSeCo Framework (Deductive Analysis)*

After identifying themes through inductive analysis, we employed the OECD's Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) framework as a secondary analytic instrument. The DeSeCo framework delineates the essential competencies required for economic, social, and personal success (OECD, 2005). The framework offered a structured perspective through which we could evaluate our initial findings compared to a globally recognised competency model, enabling us to analyse our themes from a competency-based basis. During this deductive phase, we evaluated the themes identified in the initial round of analysis against DeSeCo's predefined competencies. Deductive analysis, which applies established theories or frameworks to the data, confirmed that our themes were consistent with key competencies already acknowledged in the field, thereby enhancing the validity and profundity of our findings (Hyde, 2000).

### *Integrating Inductive and Deductive Analysis*

By integrating thematic analysis with the DeSeCo framework, we accomplished both breadth and depth in our analysis. The inductive, thematic analysis established a foundation directly rooted in the participants' experiences. In contrast, the deductive approach utilised the DeSeCo framework and provided a structured competency perspective that challenged and expanded our findings. Our findings were participant-centred and followed internationally recognised competency standards due to the combination of inductive and deductive methods that provided general insights into inclusive martial arts and nuanced comprehension of its complexities (Patton, 2015).

### *Why Focus Groups?*

One of the primary benefits of focus groups is their ability to facilitate in-depth exploration of complex issues, such as inclusion in martial arts. Inclusion involves various dimensions—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—and participants may have diverse experiences and interpretations of what inclusion means in the context of martial arts training (Morgan, 1997). By engaging martial arts teachers in group discussions, researchers can encourage them to elaborate on their personal views, experiences, and the challenges they have faced in implementing inclusive practices. Focus groups provide an open and supportive environment that allows participants to articulate their thoughts more freely than they might in a structured survey or individual interview (Kitzinger, 1995). This qualitative depth is particularly useful for exploring the nuanced ways in which inclusion is understood and practiced across different martial arts disciplines.

### *Interaction and Synergy Among Participants*

A distinctive advantage of focus groups is the interaction and synergy that occur among participants. When martial arts teachers engage in discussion with their peers, they are likely to build on one another's ideas, leading to the co-construction of knowledge and shared understanding (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). This interaction can reveal insights that might not emerge in individual interviews, as participants react to each other's comments, ask follow-up questions, and provide real-time feedback. For example, one teacher might share a successful strategy for adapting martial arts techniques for students with disabilities, prompting others to reflect on their own practices and share similar experiences. This collaborative dynamic enhances the richness of the data and fosters a deeper understanding of how inclusion can be effectively implemented in martial arts settings (Ritchie et al., 2013).

### *Capturing Diverse Perspectives*

Martial arts is practiced globally in various forms, from traditional disciplines like Karate and Taekwondo to more contemporary practices such as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Each discipline may have its own philosophies, training methods, and approaches to inclusion. Focus groups are particularly well-suited to capturing this diversity of perspectives because they allow for the inclusion of participants from different backgrounds, styles, and geographic regions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). By bringing together teachers with varying experiences, focus groups enable researchers to explore how inclusion is perceived and enacted across a range of martial arts contexts. This diversity can shed light on both the universal challenges and the specific, discipline-based solutions for promoting inclusion.

### *Identifying Practical Recommendations*

Focus groups can also be valuable in generating practical recommendations for improving inclusive practices in martial arts. As teachers discuss their experiences, they often share strategies that have worked in their own classes, which can be insightful for developing broader recommendations for martial arts schools (Vaughn et al., 1996). For example, during a focus group, one teacher might describe a method for modifying techniques for students with physical disabilities, while another might discuss the importance of creating an emotionally supportive environment for students with cognitive challenges. These

discussions can help identify best practices that are grounded in real-world experience and can be applied across different martial arts settings.

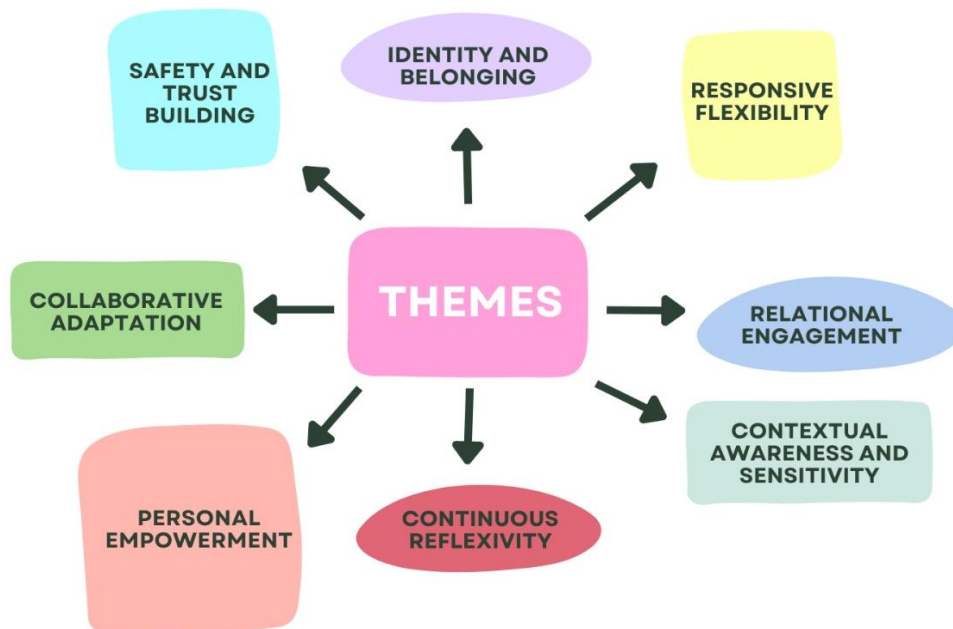
### *Enhanced Participant Engagement*

Finally, focus groups can enhance participant engagement by allowing martial arts teachers to feel heard and valued. In contrast to surveys, which can be impersonal, focus groups provide a more interactive and social experience for participants, which may lead to more thoughtful and detailed responses (Kitzinger, 1995). The group setting also encourages participants to think critically about their own practices as they listen to their peers' contributions. This engagement can lead to the generation of more meaningful data, as participants reflect on their own experiences in relation to the broader discussion.

## **Results**

### *Stage 1: Inductive Analysis*

In this first stage of the analysis, themes are identified through a structured process beginning with data familiarisation, where researchers immerse themselves in the material, noting initial observations. They then generate codes by labelling significant words or phrases. Related codes are grouped into potential themes, such as '*Identity and Belonging*', by identifying patterns and commonalities. Researchers review these themes to ensure clarity and distinction, refining or merging as needed. Each theme is then clearly defined and named, capturing the core concepts. Finally, themes are contextualised and illustrated with supporting data, providing a coherent framework that reflects participants' experiences and insights. The themes from our analysis are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Themes based on focus group analysis

## ***Focus Group Findings***

### ***Safety and Trust Building***

Building a sense of safety is about creating a training environment where participants feel both physically and emotionally secure. This was a recurring theme in the expert groups. Several of the experts in women's and girls' participation commented on this principle. One said, "Training should be a safe place for those kids and for making mistakes... We have to let them make mistakes and not look at them. So they feel safe and happy". A second expert tied safety with respecting boundaries: "For students to feel safe, they need to know their boundaries will be respected, and that they won't be pushed beyond what they are comfortable with". This was a theme discussed among the physical activity experts. One expert spoke about the importance of inclusive coaches creating "a positive and safe space where students feel free to express themselves without fear of judgement". Such spaces, according to another, is necessary to ensure "students enjoy, they will keep coming back".

Safety was closely associated with trust. One of the experts on women and girls stated this explicitly: "To feel safe, students must trust their coaches and know that they won't be forced to do something they are not ready for". Similarly, the migrants group stated, "Making martial arts inclusive means ensuring students are comfortable with the environment. They must feel protected, especially younger students and those with disabilities".

For many, especially LGBTQIA<sup>1</sup> members, safety in martial arts is more than technique; it's about trust and validation. One participant expressed, "There's both physical safety, but also that emotional safety of knowing that your existence is validated and your identity will be respected". This assurance is particularly essential in traditionally male-dominated settings, which can feel unwelcoming to queer participants. Coaches help establish this trust by stepping in when necessary to maintain safety standards and proactively addressing issues: "We have had to intervene in our club when members didn't feel safe... knowing that people will take action is crucial". Building trust also involves protecting participants from microaggressions<sup>2</sup> or potential emotional discomfort. As one LGBTQIA participant shared, "I struggle with being misgendered<sup>3</sup>, and when that happens, it makes focusing so much harder. Just having instructors who remember my pronouns means a lot".

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (one's sexual or gender identity), intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender

<sup>2</sup> Subtle, often unintentional actions or comments that can make individuals feel marginalised or uncomfortable based on aspects of their identity (like gender, race, or ability).

<sup>3</sup> When someone is referred to by incorrect pronouns or gendered terms (like being called "he" instead of "she" or "they"), which can be distressing for transgender or non-binary individuals.

### *Responsive Flexibility*

Responsive flexibility involves an adaptive teaching style that allows teachers<sup>4</sup> to meet participants' needs in real-time. For coaches, this often means reading subtle cues and being prepared to modify the session: “You have to change the plan completely if someone has trouble with a movement”, noted one teacher. Those managing disabilities or specific sensory sensitivities especially value this flexibility. Several experts highlighted the importance of flexibility in planning. For example, one talked about this explicitly: “Martial arts can be flexible. If one way doesn't work, find another way! Everyone got different bodies, different strengths”. Others stressed the need to be adaptable: “Some students need special ways to train, so we must think outside the box. Maybe use a chair for balance, maybe use punching pads instead of full contact”, and “The traditional martial arts are not an easy task so especially for beginners, they should be set with a fundamental commitment and gradually trace difficulties to help them to build confidence”.

Participants from LGBTQIA backgrounds, who may have additional barriers related to social perception, benefit from this responsive approach: “It's refreshing to go into a space where I can focus on the activity without worrying about how I look”. Such an approach helps create a practice environment where participants can feel fully engaged in the martial art, rather than pressured by conventional standards.

### *Relational Engagement*

Relational engagement focuses on building meaningful relationships within the training environment, where empathy and mutual understanding are central. This approach encourages teachers to “see each participant as a person first, not a category”. One coach noted, “I treat each person based on what I see, not on assumptions about their background or ability”. This focus on individual connections helps participants feel recognised and understood. So, the coach is central to the creation and maintenance of inclusive martial arts, inclusion requires continuous flexibility. One physical activity expert asserted: “Martial arts can be flexible. If one way doesn't work, find another way!” Likewise, another stressed that since learners are unique, the coach must differentiate: “Some students need special ways to train, so we must think outside the box. Maybe use a chair for balance, maybe use punching pads instead of full contact. The most important thing is never let a student feel like they cannot do it”. This is all about “thinking outside the box. Maybe use a chair for balance, maybe use punching pads instead of full contact. The most important thing is never letting students feel like they cannot do it”.

LGBTQIA participants shared that relational engagement also involves understanding intersectionality: “You can't just be inclusive to one ... you have to be inclusive to all”. For those navigating complex identities, relational engagement creates an atmosphere where they feel socially connected and respected as whole individuals. Coaches who embrace relational engagement foster a space where differences are celebrated, not merely accommodated. In a similar vein, the migrants claimed inclusive coaches needed a “a fundamental commitment” to engagement and participation.

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<sup>4</sup> For simplicity and consistency, we use the term 'teacher' to as a general label represent coaches, instructors, Sensei, and so on.

### *Contextual Awareness and Sensitivity*

Contextual awareness is the ability of teachers to recognise and respond to the diverse backgrounds and identities participants bring into the martial arts space. It goes beyond basic disability awareness to include understanding how factors like gender, culture, and race can shape an individual's experience. One participant shared, "In some spaces, just being trans can be challenging. If I'm misgendered, it's hard to concentrate". This awareness allows coaches to create a welcoming atmosphere where all participants can engage meaningfully without feeling marginalised. So, language becomes key. This was especially the case for the migrants. One said, "We need to be careful about the language we use ... I will not use the words that would enhance that kind of stereotype". This was a perspective shared by several of the experts consulted.

Effective teachers in inclusive martial arts adopt an approach of openness and readiness to adapt to each person's unique context. "We don't need to know every detail, but we do need to recognise and respect each person's context", said one coach. This sensitivity to background helps teachers avoid missteps and microaggressions, making the martial arts space inclusive for all.

### *Personal Empowerment*

Personal empowerment is a core outcome in inclusive martial arts, promoting autonomy and agency over participants' training journeys. Coaches encourage participants to set personal goals and engage at their own pace rather than imposing a strict standard. "It's important to let people set their own goals", one teacher noted, "whether that's mastering a technique or simply feeling comfortable". One of the experts in women and girls spoke about the power of building relationships: "The best part about the whole trip wasn't the actual travelling—it was hanging out with normal people... this is the right inclusion when you treat everybody the same way, no differences". Similarly, an inclusive physical activity expert reported the power of inclusion of all: "Martial arts is not only for young and strong people. It's for EVERYBODY. I've seen older people, people with disabilities, even students who never exercised before—they all can learn, as long as the coach welcomes them and supports them". For LGBTQIA participants, empowerment also involves freedom from social judgments: "It's nice to go into a space and concentrate on the activity without having to worry about what I look like or if I'm meeting some arbitrary standard". By fostering personal empowerment, teachers create an environment where participants can take ownership of their progress, experiencing martial arts on their own terms.

### *Collaborative Adaptation*

Collaborative adaptation is an approach where teachers and participants work together to shape the training experience. Unlike a traditional top-down style, this involves a partnership between coach and student, where participants' feedback directly influences training adjustments. One coach shared, "If someone tells me an exercise is too intense, I adjust it right away; it's their session as much as mine". "Different learners have different needs and requirements," said one of the migrant informants. "So as teachers, they should build or design individual courses to meet different demands of the learners". This view was also argued by a physical activity expert: "Coaches need to understand that different students have different capabilities... if the coach is too strict and inflexible, it may scare

students away”, and this is most likely to be effective based on cooperation and communication.

This collaborative process is highly valued by LGBTQIA participants, who appreciate having a voice in shaping their practice environment. “Being able to give feedback and have it taken seriously means I feel like I belong”, one participant expressed. Collaborative adaptation ensures that everyone’s needs are considered, creating a mutually respectful training space.

### *Identity and Belonging*

An inclusive martial arts space should affirm each participant’s identity and foster a genuine sense of belonging. For LGBTQIA participants, having their identities recognised and respected can make a significant difference in their willingness to engage. “Just knowing that my identity is respected makes it much easier to focus”, shared one trans participant, emphasising the importance of a culture that actively acknowledges diverse identities.

Coaches contribute to this sense of belonging by making standards for inclusive practices, such as sharing pronouns and respecting chosen names. “Our club includes pronouns as a norm”, said one coach, “which helps everyone feel they’re seen and respected”. This approach to affirming identity creates a training environment where participants feel celebrated for who they are, not just accepted. Central to this is sense of feel part of the group – really part of the group. Two of the experts on women and girls stressed this. The first said: “They have to feel they are a part of the whole group so the others have to feel some kind of responsibility towards them. They have to help them in some ways so they can feel that they belong”. The second emphasised the need to undermine feelings of difference: “I think the most important thing is that that person is not treated differently. If you feel like you are at home, you're not different, then I think that is a really good start”. This requires the coach to “Respect the uniqueness of each student”, as a migrant expressed, while maintaining a sense of community.

### *Continuous Reflexivity*

Continuous reflexivity is a process where teachers routinely reflect on their practices, seeking to improve inclusivity. Coaches highlighted that creating an inclusive space is not a fixed achievement but an on-going journey. “Self-reflection is key ... it’s a learning process for us, too”, noted one teacher. This iterative process allows coaches to adapt and refine their methods based on successes and participant feedback.

For LGBTQIA participants, this reflexivity is crucial as it demonstrates a coach’s commitment to evolving with the community’s needs. “Knowing that coaches are willing to learn and grow is reassuring”, one participant explained, “because it means they’re committed to keeping this space inclusive”. Reflexive practices ensure that coaches can effectively navigate new challenges, making the training environment a continually adaptive and welcoming place for all.

## *Conclusion*

The findings indicate that inclusive martial arts are deeply rooted in creating safe, responsive, and respectful environments that support all participants, particularly those from LGBTQIA communities. Key conclusions include the following:

### **Safety and Trust as Core Foundations**

Building a physically and emotionally secure environment is essential. Teachers who maintain safety standards and validate each participant's identity foster trust and inclusivity, enabling participants to engage confidently. This approach is crucial in traditional, male-dominated settings, which may otherwise feel unwelcoming to women or LGBTQIA individuals.

### **Adaptability in Instruction**

Inclusive martial arts benefit greatly from responsive flexibility, where teachers adapt training to meet diverse participant needs. By modifying techniques or practices in real-time, teachers support those with disabilities or specific sensitivities, allowing participants to focus on the activity rather than external judgments or conventional standards.

### **Meaningful Relationships and Empathy**

Establishing strong relational engagement - where teachers connect with participants as unique individuals - promotes empathy and a sense of community. This is especially beneficial for those with complex or intersectional identities, who may feel more connected and understood within an environment where differences are celebrated.

### **Awareness and Sensitivity to Context**

Effective inclusive martial arts practices require a teacher's awareness of diverse backgrounds, recognising that experiences of gender, culture, or race may shape how participants engage. A sensitive approach helps prevent marginalisation and ensures each participant feels respected and understood.

### **Empowerment and Autonomy**

Teachers foster personal empowerment by encouraging participants to set goals and progress at their own pace. This autonomy allows participants to focus on skill-building without the pressure of conforming to external expectations, enabling them to shape their journey in an authentic and fulfilling way.

### **Collaboration between Coach and Participant**

Collaborative adaptation, where feedback shapes the training experience, empowers participants to influence their practice environment. This partnership

enhances a sense of belonging and respect, as participants know their perspectives are valued.

### **Affirming Identity and Belonging**

Affirming participants' identities, such as through standard practices like sharing pronouns, cultivates a sense of belonging. When participants feel their identity is respected, they are more likely to engage fully, knowing they are valued for who they are.

### **Commitment to Continuous Improvement**

Continuous reflexivity, where coaches consistently evaluate and adapt their practices, ensures that inclusivity is an on-going process. This commitment to growth demonstrates that teachers are dedicated to creating a welcoming environment for all and continually adapting to new insights and feedback.

These findings suggest that inclusive martial arts thrive when teachers prioritise safety, adaptability, relational empathy, and continuous self-improvement. This approach not only makes martial arts accessible but also fosters a supportive community where participants feel secure, respected, and empowered.

### ***Stage 2: Deductive Analysis***

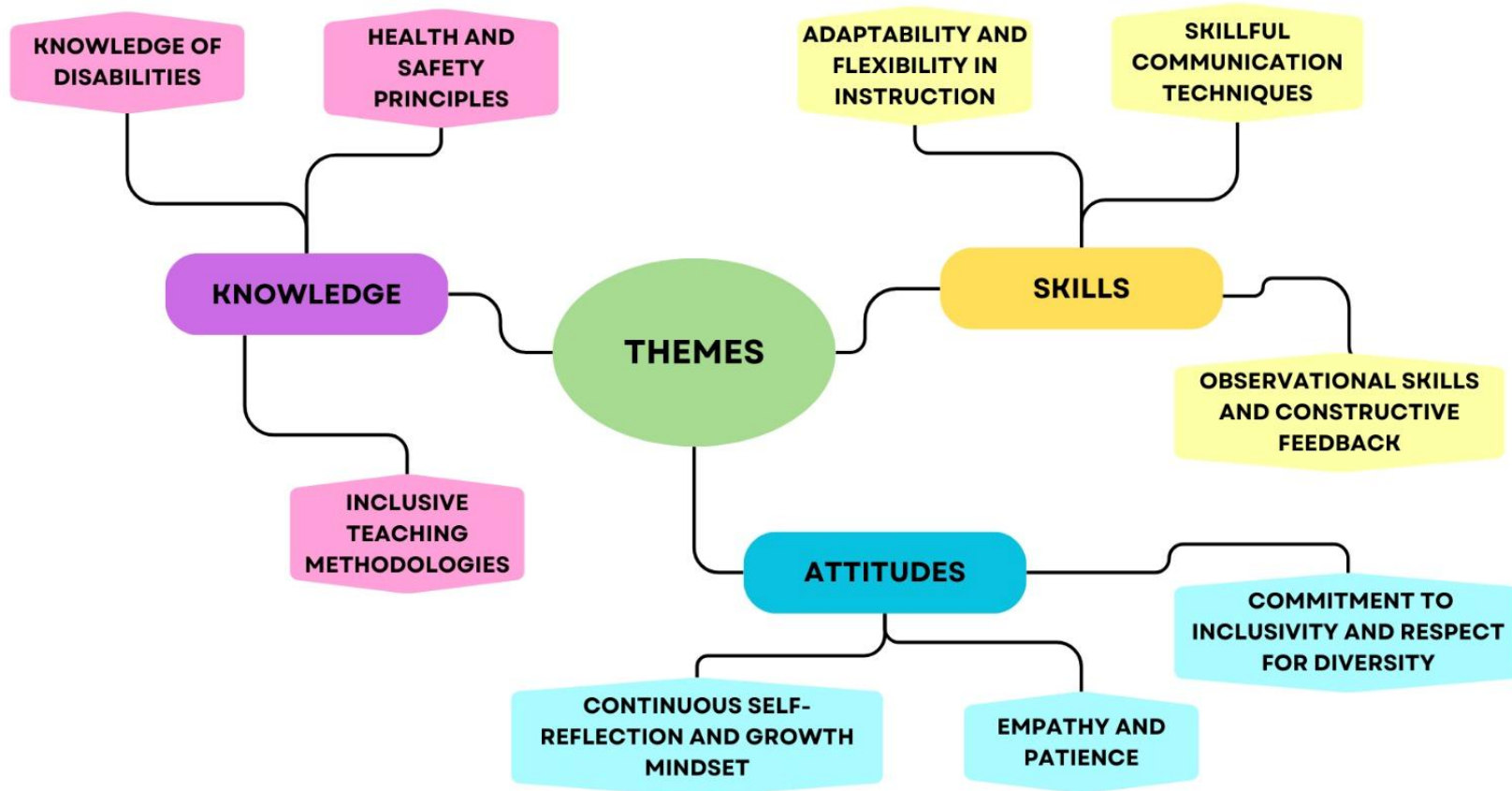
Deductively analysing the data from focus groups approached the data from a different angle. While the inductive (thematic) analysis sought to identify common themes, shared understandings, and generalised recommendations from our participants, this phase tested these data by focusing on a set of universal competences. The competences we used came from the widely employed the DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) framework from the OECD - knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values, as discussed above.

The OECD's DeSeCo framework is a foundational approach to defining and understanding critical competences needed for individuals to lead successful and fulfilling lives in complex, modern societies. The framework outlines three broad categories of competences, which go beyond traditional academic skills to encompass a more comprehensive range of abilities necessary for personal, social, and economic well-being.

A strength of the DeSeCo framework is its cross-cultural adaptability and relevance across diverse contexts. This was a deliberate aspect of its design, as the OECD aimed to create a framework that transcends specific cultural or educational systems and instead focuses on universal competences. By emphasising broad, transferable competences like Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes/Values, the DeSeCo framework is versatile enough to apply in varied cultural, social, and professional settings. For example, the competences in the framework are relevant whether someone is in an academic setting, a workplace, or a community environment. The framework's adaptability allows it to support individuals

from different cultural backgrounds and societies, recognising that while the expressions of competences might differ (such as how respect is shown), the core competences remain applicable and meaningful globally. This adaptability in sports and martial arts allows coaches to foster skills and attitudes that align with local values and universal principles, such as teamwork and respect. Thus, the DeSeCo framework's cross-cultural flexibility makes it a valuable tool for developing competences that are meaningful, respectful, and effective across diverse environments.

Our initial analysis revealed a broad range of competences associated with inclusive martial arts (see Figure 2 and Table 2).



**Figure 2.** Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes/Values associated with Inclusive Martial Arts

**Table 2.** Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes/Values associated with Inclusive Martial Arts, with descriptions and exemplary quotations

Category	Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Knowledge	Knowledge of Disabilities	Trainers understand the specific needs of participants, like autism or ADHD, for tailored approaches.	<i>“With autistic people... you can’t and shouldn’t touch them.”</i>
	Health and Safety Principles	Safe practices and intensity adjustments are emphasised, especially for older or disabled participants.	<i>“Karate has to be challenging but not overtaxing... it’s about gentle movements that keep participants safe.”</i>
	Inclusive Teaching Methodologies	Flexible strategies for adapting exercises and adjusting pace to ensure inclusivity.	<i>“The sensei must ensure everyone’s learning... adapting constantly to match each participant.”</i>
Skills	Adaptability and Flexibility in Instruction	Trainers adjust methods dynamically, finding what works for each participant.	<i>“Sometimes you have to change the plan completely if someone has trouble with a movement.”</i>
	Skilful Communication Techniques	Trainers use calm, clear language to avoid overwhelming participants, especially new ones.	<i>“The first lesson is about experience, not shouting... so they feel safe.”</i>
	Observational Skills and Constructive Feedback	Trainers observe participants to gauge needs and provide supportive feedback.	<i>“You have to inspire them... people should want to come back smiling and leave smiling.”</i>
Attitudes	Empathy and Patience	Empathy and patience are essential for understanding participants' diverse learning paces and needs.	<i>“It’s important to have empathy... everyone’s journey is different. Some will need more time.”</i>
	Commitment to Inclusivity and Respect for Diversity	Trainers foster a welcoming environment, respecting each participant’s unique journey.	<i>“The beauty of Karate is that anyone can do it... people come with different abilities, and we adapt to them.”</i>
	Continuous Self-Reflection and Growth Mindset	Trainers reflect on their methods and adapt styles as needed to improve inclusivity.	<i>“Self-reflection is key... it’s a learning process for us, too, every time.”</i>

## Discussion

### *Knowledge of Disabilities*

In inclusive martial arts, a foundational understanding of disabilities empowers coaches to tailor their approach to meet each participant's unique requirements. One coach noted that understanding "the specific needs of participants, like autism or ADHD" is essential for creating a safe and positive training environment. Coaches emphasised treating individuals by their abilities rather than focusing solely on disabilities, recognising that each participant's capacity for learning varies. As shared in a focus group, "You should assess and work out everything as you go along", prioritising flexible assessment over rigid classifications.

### *Health and Safety Principles*

Safety is the cornerstone of inclusive martial arts, encompassing not only physical protection but also emotional security. For participants from LGBTQIA communities, creating a "safe space" extends beyond physical safety; it requires an environment where "your existence is validated and your identity is respected". This need is even more pronounced in traditionally male-dominated spaces, where LGBTQIA participants may already feel vulnerable. Coaches emphasised safeguarding, which includes legislative knowledge, background checks, and vigilant monitoring to ensure all participants feel secure.

### *Inclusive Teaching Methodologies*

Inclusive teaching in martial arts demands strategies that adapt to participants' diverse needs and abilities. Flexibility is vital, with coaches recognising that "the sensei must ensure everyone's learning" and continuously adjusting their approach. A coach working with individuals who have disabilities explained, "We need to train them in a way that suits them", especially for those who may not follow traditional learning models. This commitment to flexibility fosters a training environment where all participants feel engaged and valued.

### *Adaptability and Flexibility in Instruction*

Adaptability is a defining characteristic of inclusive martial arts, requiring coaches to adjust training methods in real-time. In one instance, a coach noted, "You have to change the plan completely if someone has trouble with a movement". LGBTQIA participants, especially those managing disabilities like dyspraxia or ADHD, have highlighted the importance of this adaptability: "It's nice to just focus on the practice without having to worry about what I look like". Such flexibility supports an environment where all participants, regardless of ability or identity, feel they can progress at their own pace.

### *Skilful Communication Techniques*

Clear, respectful communication is crucial, particularly with participants who may be apprehensive or feel overwhelmed. Coaches underscored the importance of using calm, accessible language, especially for newcomers. LGBTQIA participants often emphasised the value of a space where "I don't have to worry about what I look like" and can instead focus solely on the martial arts. Effective communication also includes nonverbal strategies, such as gestures and signals, which are especially useful for engaging participants with hearing impairments.

### *Observational Skills and Constructive Feedback*

A core skill in inclusive martial arts is the ability to constructively observe and respond to each participant's progress. Coaches emphasised the importance of inspiring confidence in their students, ensuring that "people should want to come back smiling and leave smiling".

Observing how participants engage with techniques allows coaches to provide tailored feedback, helping each build confidence and skill. For instance, some participants may struggle with memorising sequences, requiring patient, step-by-step support.

### *Empathy and Patience*

Empathy and patience are at the heart of inclusive martial arts, as participants vary widely in how they engage with training. Coaches highlighted the importance of patience, especially when working with individuals managing disabilities, noting that “patience is key in handling disabled students”. This empathy extends to understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQIA participants, who may face additional barriers in traditional settings. As one participant shared, “I’ve been in spaces where I was misgendered, and it made focusing on the practice very hard”. Coaches who prioritise empathy create an atmosphere where participants feel understood and valued.

### *Commitment to Inclusivity and Respect for Diversity*

Inclusive martial arts go beyond accommodating disabilities to embrace gender, cultural, and racial diversity. LGBTQIA participants highlighted the importance of intersectionality, noting that “you can’t just be inclusive to one... you have to be inclusive to all”. This commitment means creating a welcoming environment for all, regardless of identity. Coaches and participants alike expressed that inclusivity must extend across all intersections - physical or intellectual disabilities, race, or gender identity - to create a genuinely diverse and supportive training space.

### *Continuous Self-Reflection and Growth Mindset*

Coaches emphasised the importance of self-reflection to enhance their inclusive practices. One coach described this process as a “learning journey”, noting that “self-reflection is key... it’s a learning process for us too, every time”. For LGBTQIA participants, this growth mindset is particularly valued as it reflects an on-going commitment to understanding and adapting to diverse identities and experiences. Coaches who engage in continuous reflection become better equipped to navigate and address challenges, ensuring a consistently inclusive and respectful training environment.

The findings from these focus groups highlight the core elements necessary for creating an inclusive and supportive martial arts environment. By prioritising health and safety principles and recognising the individual needs of participants, coaches can establish spaces where all participants feel physically and emotionally secure. This means physical protection and feeling respected and validated, particularly in traditional spaces.

The effectiveness of inclusive teaching methodologies shines through in coaches' adaptable, flexible approaches, allowing participants of all abilities to engage at their own pace. Integral to this approach are skilful communication techniques and the ability to offer observational, constructive feedback, ensuring students feel seen, supported, and motivated in their practice.

The commitment to empathy and patience is central to an inclusive ethos, as it enables coaches to understand and respect their students' diverse backgrounds and needs. Inclusive martial arts spaces embrace differences in ability and gender, as well as racial and cultural diversity, with a solid commitment to inclusivity and respect for diversity. Recognising these varied identities is essential to building a genuinely welcoming environment for everyone. Finally, continuous self-reflection and growth allow coaches to refine their practices over time, embodying an on-going commitment to inclusivity.

In conclusion, these findings suggest that an inclusive martial arts approach is grounded in adaptability, empathy, and a dedication to personal and collective growth. Such environments foster participants' skills and enhance their sense of identity, belonging, and well-being, making martial arts a valuable space for positive personal and social transformation.

### **Final Thought: What are Inclusive Martial Arts?**

Our analysis of the data from the focus groups - using both inductive and deductive approaches - has uncovered a wealth of principles and guidance, marked by a high level of agreement among participants. The strong consensus reflects shared priorities and values, particularly around creating safe, adaptable, and inclusive environments within martial arts. Participants consistently emphasised empathy, flexible teaching, and respect for diverse identities, reinforcing the core principles underpinning inclusive practices. This broad alignment among varied perspectives strengthens the validity of the insights and provides a solid foundation for guiding inclusive practices in martial arts and related fields.

Engaging in this process revealed an implicit divide in views about the nature of inclusive martial arts, exposing a subtle yet impactful split in understanding beneath participants' perspectives. This distinction is significant, as research shows that underlying, often unspoken beliefs can shape practice more profoundly than openly shared views. These implicit beliefs subtly influence teachers' approaches, how they interact with participants and the methods they choose to emphasise or downplay. Such beliefs can foster or hinder truly inclusive practices by guiding real-world decisions and behaviours. Therefore, understanding and aligning these hidden dimensions with inclusivity principles is essential for creating a genuinely welcoming and adaptive environment. Bringing these underlying attitudes to light supports more intentional, cohesive, and reflective practice within inclusive martial arts.

The division goes to the heart of the idea of 'inclusion':

- Universal accessibility
- Disability-specific adaptations

### **Universal Inclusivity: Accessibility for All**

This approach prioritises the removal of traditional barriers, fostering a universally accessible martial arts environment. Participants emphasised that inclusivity requires adaptive, flexible teaching methods and environments that feel open and welcoming to everyone.

**Inclusive Teaching Methodologies:** Interviewees discussed the importance of adjusting methods to support each individual's learning experience. One participant shared, "We need to learn what they want to learn. If we start our training session without knowing what kind of group and the needs of the group, we miss the point of inclusivity". This understanding helps ensure that every session can meet participants' diverse goals and abilities, underscoring adaptability as key to inclusion.

**Skilful Communication Techniques:** Trainers emphasised the role of clear, patient communication in establishing a supportive environment. One trainer noted, "The first lesson is about experience, not shouting... so they feel safe". Participants added that communication should extend to families, especially among learners, to help "the parents see the benefits of martial arts" so they feel comfortable with their children's participation.

Commitment to Inclusivity and Respect for Diversity: Trainers and participants alike highlighted the need for a culture of respect within the dojo. A coach reflected, “It’s important to show participants that martial arts are for everyone - people of all abilities come together, and we adapt to them”. This commitment to inclusivity resonates across different backgrounds and experiences, from newcomers to veteran practitioners, ensuring a universally respectful space.

### **Disability-specific Adaptations**

The second conception of inclusive martial arts recognises the need for tailored methods to meet the unique requirements of participants with disabilities. This approach involves acknowledging and responding to each individual’s needs and careful, responsive teaching.

Knowledge of Disabilities: Trainers stressed the importance of specific knowledge to create a safe and respectful learning environment. As one participant with experience teaching autistic students explained, “With autistic people... you can’t and shouldn’t touch them”. Another coach added, “For people with disabilities, we need to train them in a way that suits them. If they can’t hear, we use gestures and signals to communicate”. These insights highlight the significance of specialised knowledge in delivering a positive experience for participants with disabilities.

Health and Safety Principles: Safety considerations are essential for working with participants with physical or sensory limitations. Interviewees reinforced the importance of a cautious, measured approach, particularly when dealing with older or disabled individuals: “Karate has to be challenging but not overtaxing... it’s about gentle movements that keep participants safe” . Another teacher noted, “Safeguarding is the number one principle before anything else. If people aren’t safe, how can you begin sessions?”. These principles help ensure that training remains safe and effective, regardless of ability level.

Empathy and Patience: Trainers stressed that empathy and patience are essential for supporting the progress of participants with disabilities. A participant shared, “It’s important to have empathy... everyone’s journey is different, some will need more time”. Another remarked, “You treat people as people... not as disabled people or ‘others’”. This attitude fosters a welcoming, supportive atmosphere where participants can progress at their own pace without feeling pressured to conform to set standards.

### **Bringing the Two Approaches Together: A Holistic Inclusive Practice**

If left unaddressed, the implicit divide in perspectives on inclusive martial arts could create tension among coaches and participants. This divide may lead to inconsistencies in teaching approaches, where some teachers prioritise broad accessibility while others focus more specifically on individual accommodations. Such differences could unintentionally create uneven experiences for participants, potentially leading some to feel overlooked or unsupported. Without open dialogue, these contrasting approaches could hinder the development of a cohesive, inclusive environment, as teachers may struggle to balance general inclusion principles with the specific needs of diverse participants.

Recognising and discussing these perspectives, however, offers a potentially powerful opportunity for synergy. Both approaches share a foundational commitment to fostering a safe, adaptive, and respectful training environment, and by integrating these views, teachers can create a more holistic practice. Through Continuous Self-Reflection and a Growth Mindset,

teachers can develop an approach that balances broad accessibility with personalised accommodations. As one coach noted, “Self-reflection is key... it’s a learning process for us too, every time”. Another echoed this: “Coaches are also learning how to treat people as people first, and not simply by their abilities or limitations”. This reflective process enables coaches to evolve their practices, combining general inclusion with tailored support and ultimately creating a unified, adaptable approach to inclusive martial arts that respects and addresses the diverse needs of all participants.

This balanced approach underscores that inclusive martial arts are dynamic and adaptive, evolving to meet the needs of all participants. By understanding inclusivity as both a broad and a tailored approach, trainers can create a space where everyone feels valued, supported, and empowered to experience the full benefits of martial arts.

## **Conclusion**

Focus groups offer significant benefits for studying martial arts teachers’ views of inclusion, including the ability to explore complex issues in depth, capture diverse perspectives, and generate practical recommendations. The interactive nature of focus groups fosters rich discussions that can uncover insights into the challenges and opportunities of promoting inclusion in martial arts settings. By facilitating collaboration and reflection among participants, focus groups help to create a shared understanding of how inclusive practices can be integrated into martial arts education. This makes them an invaluable tool for researchers aiming to understand and promote inclusion in diverse and dynamic contexts.

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## Appendix

Each focus group will be guided by a semi-structured set of questions tailored to the specific participant group. While there are core themes that each group will cover—such as barriers to participation in TMA, knowledge and skills required for inclusivity, and long-term benefits of inclusive martial arts—the semi-structured format allows the moderator to adjust the flow of the conversation and explore emerging topics in greater depth.

For **marginalised participants**, the questions focus on understanding their unique challenges in accessing TMA and identifying what would make the experience more inclusive. Example questions include:

- "What do you feel is the primary barrier to your participation in TMA?"
- "What knowledge and skills would a TMA coach need to ensure you have a positive experience of the sport?"
- "What would help you to feel included in TMA sessions alongside athletes with different abilities/from different backgrounds?"

For **non-marginalised participants**, the focus shifts toward understanding their perceptions of inclusivity and how it can be enhanced. Example questions include:

- "Do you feel there are any barriers for people to participate in TMA?"
- "What knowledge and skills would the coach need to ensure you have a positive experience of the sport?"
- "How could a coach create more inclusive sessions?"

For **inclusive physical activity experts**, the questions seek to uncover what specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes coaches need to make TMA more accessible and beneficial for marginalised groups. Example questions include:

- "What knowledge would coaches need to deliver inclusive TMA?"
- "What skills would coaches need to deliver inclusive TMA?"
- "What attitudes would coaches need to deliver inclusive TMA?"

For **TMA coaches**, the questions are centered around identifying gaps in their current coaching practices and understanding what is required to run an inclusive TMA club. Example questions include:

- "What knowledge and skills would you need to set up and run a grassroots TMA club?"
- "What knowledge and skills do you feel would improve your ability to coach athletes with disabilities/from disadvantaged backgrounds?"
- "What knowledge and skills do you think you would need to ensure these participants experience the benefits of TMA in the long term?"