SPECIAL AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: SURFACING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' VIEWS THROUGH INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES - FOCUS ON INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

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Abstract:

Student-Centered Learning in Higher Education promotes interaction between students (Redmond et al., 2023) and online discussions through interactive educational activities can provide rich information on pedagogical issues and highlight valuable views on inclusive pedagogy. This paper explores the university students' views through interactive activities with a focus on inclusive education. This study used a qualitative approach. The data collection technique used was forum group discussion. The findings highlight the importance of inclusive pedagogies and innovative practices within modern learning contexts and environments. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of interactive environments in Higher distance learning and Teacher Education with regard to inclusive pedagogies and innovative practices. The results are of interest for the pedagogical and inclusive basis of the modern school of the 21st century, highlighting the views of post-graduate students - teachers from Cyprus and Greece (Ioannidi, 2023, 2024). Although the conclusions are not generalizable, this research report is expected to provide valuable insights and ideas for policymakers, teachers, educators and education practitioners in their efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment in combined/blended learning contexts. The present study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical investigation and applied knowledge, contributing to the field of Inclusive Education and Teacher Education (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2020; Zembylas, 2024).

Keywords: inclusive education, interactive activities, inclusive pedagogies, innovative practices, differentiation, UDL, teacher education/training, collaboration, assessment, acceptance of diversity, socio-emotional skills, accessibility & technologies

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1. Introduction

Student engagement is consistently identified as a key predictor of learner outcomes within the online learning environment (Brown et al., 2022). According to van der Rijst & Fernández-Díaz (2025), "*inclusive student-centred pedagogies are those educational approaches that aim to create a welcoming, equitable, and engaging environment in which every student has the chance to participate meaningfully and reach their full potential. It is a transformative educational approach, emphasising active student engagement, individual autonomy, and tailored learning experiences in order to contribute to an equitable learning environment, where every student feels valued, respected, and supported*".

In this context, students' views are of interest through interactive activities in Tertiary distance education, where online discussion is promoted and the learning experience is improved for all. Interactive activities are educational in nature, help students apply knowledge and cultivate skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, problem solving, etc.

This paper explores the university students' views through interactive activity with a focus on inclusive education and inclusive pedagogies. In this brief research report, we aim to investigate and describe the views of university students regarding pedagogical priorities-practices in inclusive education on the occasion of an online discussion. It's about Student-Centered Learning in Higher Education that promotes interaction between students (Redmond et al., 2023).

We believe that the findings are of interest for the pedagogical and inclusive foundation of the modern school of the 21st century, highlighting the views of university students - teachers. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of interactive environments of Tertiary distance Education in Teacher Education regarding inclusive education and inclusive pedagogies.

2. A Brief Review of Literature

Generally, inclusive education of students with and without disabilities in general education contexts has been a global movement for at least 30 years (Amor et al., 2018). With the impetus of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with disabilities, inclusive education is an idea whose time has arrived around the world. Its scope goes far beyond learners with disabilities and has now been extended to cover all learners with special educational needs, whatever their origins. It also extends beyond the mere placement of such learners in regular classes to include consideration of multiple facets of education (Mitchell, 2015).

In particular, inclusive education refers to a wide range of strategies, activities and processes that seek to make a reality of the universal right to quality, relevant and appropriate education (Stubbs, 2008). However, according to Haug (2016), "*no country has yet succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion, as defined by different international organizations. Placement seems to be the most*

frequent criterion of inclusive education, to avoid segregation. The quality of teaching and learning processes in inclusive education has lower priority".

As Loreman mentions (2017), a number of different pedagogical approaches have been presented as being helpful for teachers working with students in inclusive learning environments. Based on approaches that appear to have been effective, a set of principles for the development and implementation of inclusive education pedagogy can be discerned. Examples of inclusive approaches that align with some basic principles of inclusive pedagogy include, but are not limited to, Differentiated Instruction, Universal Design for Learning, etc. So, improved teacher preparation is a necessity (Smith & Tyler, 2011).

3. Research Aim and Research Question

In recent years, the need for inclusive, student-centered pedagogical approaches in higher education has ceased to be just an ambition and has emerged as an essential practical necessity (https://tott.uoc.gr/links/%cf%83%cf%87%ce%b5%ce%b4%ce%b9%ce%b1%cf%83%ce%bc%cf%8c%cf%82-%cf%83%cf%85%ce%bc%cf%80%ce%b5%cf%81%ce%b9%ce%bb%ce%b7%cf%80%cf%84%ce%b9%ce%ba%cf%8e%ce%bd-%cf%80%cf%81%ce%bf%ce%b3%cf%81%ce%b1%ce%bc%ce%bc/)

In this study, the discussion forum plays a central role on the platform of the thematic unit "Special and Inclusive Education: Contemporary Pedagogical Practices", where the interactive discussion of the students took place during the academic year 2024-2025 (Spring).

The central question was: "*In your opinion, what should be the pedagogical priorities-practices to create an educational and school environment that will consolidate Inclusive Education*?".

By addressing this question, this study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical exploration and practical application, offering innovative insights into Inclusive Education and Teacher Education.

4. Research Methodology

This paper reports on a study conducted among Greek and Cypriot university students, aiming to explore their perspective on the pedagogical priorities and practices for the foundation of inclusion.

This research was conducted within the Student-Centered e-Learning Environment, Module EPA526 «Special and Inclusive Education: Contemporary Pedagogical Practices», Master's Degree "Educational Sciences", Open University of Cyprus.

This study used a qualitative approach. The data collection technique used was forum group discussion. Overall, twenty-two [22] university students-teachers participated. The data were collected (online) based on free-writing texts (answers) from university students - teachers from various educational and professional specialties in the international Greek-speaking area (Cyprus and Greece). The anonymity of the writings-answers was strictly observed. The writing texts were subjected to thematic analysis. We created a system of autonomous conceptual units, the so-called themes, and classified the versions of the responses as categories based on their semantic content (Tsiolis, 2018). It is worth mentioning that the thematic analysis of interactive activities aims to identify the most important dimensions around which the comments are organized (Willig, 2015). Conclusions cannot be generalized.

5. Data Analysis – Discussion

The findings highlight the importance of **inclusive pedagogies and innovative practices** within modern learning contexts and educational environments (https://tott.uoc.gr/symperiliptiki-mathisi/). The students mentioned the following thematic categories, as coded in the relevant topics: Differentiated Teaching, Professional collaboration and networking of teachers, Method of evaluation-feedback, Awareness of the acceptance of diversity, Collaborative learning and socio-emotional development of students, Universal design and accessibility of educational materials in relation to the use of technology. The emphasis on Differentiated Teaching is important, as it is proposed as the first choice (qualitatively as a topic and quantitatively as a frequency of responses) by the post-graduate students/teachers. Below, the most important findings are analyzed as they emerged in thematic categories.

Specifically, the results show that the most important thematic axis is **Differentiated Teaching**. This means that students perceive differentiated teaching as a central element of inclusive education, confirming the international bibliography that emphasizes the importance of adapting to the needs of each student. Differentiation in education can be seen as a means of responding to student diversity in order to meet the vision of *a school for all*. Differentiation has been widely addressed within a Western context, and it appears to be a versatile phenomenon as it occurs under various guises and with a variety of terms and modes of operationalizations. Four perspectives for approaching differentiation further illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon: *differentiation as individualization, differentiation as adaptation to specific groups, differentiation as adaptations within diverse classrooms*, and *differentiation in a system perspective* (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022).

Professional Collaboration is also frequently recorded, which shows that coordinated action by teachers & specialties is considered a key foundation for the success of inclusion. For example, findings indicate that special educational consultation is perceived as support and collaboration. The class teachers appreciate the support they receive from special educators. The collaboration is characterised by professional

exchange and mutual problem-solving. Distributed expertise seems to be a crucial element of the collaboration. The conclusion is that collaborative special educational consultation enables class teachers to support pupils with special educational needs and strengthens professional collaboration between class teachers and special educators (Pettersson & Ström, 2019).

Then, according to students, **Teacher Education/Training** is essential for their professional development. Teaching effectiveness in a school depends on several variables, including appropriate resources, instruction, and instructional leadership, but is often guided by people who work in the classroom (Shaoan et al., 2025). So, it is generally acknowledged that promoting teacher quality is a key element in improving primary and secondary education (Douglas & Sass, 2011). Contemporary, improved teacher preparation is a necessity (Smith & Tyler, 2011).

The remaining axes, such as **Assessment-Feedback,** which is an ongoing process with active involvement of the learner in learning tasks (https://tott.uoc.gr/diamorfotiki-axiologisi/) and use of Technology-Digital tools, have a smaller but substantial presence, highlighting the need for a variety of tools and modern media in the educational process. Learning, Design and Technology (LTD) is a significant field that concerns the phenomena surrounding the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of learning experiences. The move towards more human-centered and participatory methods of design in LDT has contributed to an improved learner experience (Giannakos et al., 2025).

Also, **Acceptance of Diversity** follows. In this way, it is emphasized that inclusion is not only a matter of teaching practices, but also of cultivating a climate of acceptance, empathy and social skills. In addition, another thematic axis mentioned by the students is **Collaborative Learning** in relation to **Socio-Emotional skills**. According to López-Mondéjar & Tomás Pastor (2017), it is remarkable that *"once the research was completed in a cooperative learning classroom, the results reflected greater empathy and assertiveness among group members, as well as greater cohesion and confidence in reaching agreements and accepting views which differ from their own. Therefore, we can establish a positive relationship between the use of a cooperative methodology and an improvement in the socio-emotional skills of university students"*.

Further reference was made to the **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL) in relation to **Accessible Educational Material**. The Universal Design for Learning framework is based on extensive research and years of implementation. It aims to develop successful and inclusive learning experiences for learners of all levels, abilities, and backgrounds (https://www.cast.org/). According to Espada-Chavarria (2023), it is necessary to continue progressing in the practical implementation of teaching models based on Universal Design, which also supports course management.

Today's learners are diverse, each with unique strengths, challenges, and learning preferences. Addressing learner variability is essential in providing educational experiences that work for everyone. **Accessibility** means that individuals with disabilities—from early childhood through the workforce—have equal access to

materials and technologies for reaching educational outcomes and advancing in employment (https://www.cast.org/what-we-do/accessibility-inclusive-technology/).

Finally, firstly, there is a consensus that what teachers do in the classroom directly impacts student's learning (Finkelstein et al., 2019) and, secondly, educational response of students is understood as all those actions that, within the principles of the inclusive school, take into account every student and act in accordance with their specific needs (Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023). In reality, inclusive education has a major role as it has an interactive relationship in all pedagogical contexts, and inclusive teacher practices were concentrated into five keys-skills: Collaboration and Teamwork, Determining Progress, Instructional Support, Organisational Practices, Social/Emotional/Behavioural Support. These are keys for inclusive education and create a guide for conducting in-class observation of inclusive teachers (Finkelstein et al., 2019).

6. Significance and Conclusion

Education is a fundamental right for every person in accordance with the right to inclusion (a.24). It is a fact that there is evidence of an increased interest in the idea of making education more inclusive and equitable (Ainscow, 2020). Here, it is appropriate to state that "*social acceptance is vital to students' development. Being rejected by classmates can result in negative socio-emotional and academic outcomes. Finding relevant factors to be able to effectively support student social acceptance is especially challenging in inclusive classrooms because of the high heterogeneity of the student group. There is evidence that social acceptance is determined by the social behavior of students. In addition, current research suggests that affect-motivation dispositions, such as teacher attitudes, are related to teaching practices, which in turn are associated with student outcomes*" (Garrote et al., 2020).

The conclusions confirm the necessity to create an inclusive educational framework that will give great importance to differentiation and adaptations of teaching as well as to the cultivation of a positive climate with respect for diversity and emphasis on the cooperation of all those involved. Inclusion is multidimensional and requires a combination of methodologies and didactic, social and organizational strategies in all learning environments and settings (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Consequently, teachers' skills for the success of inclusion are multidimensional (Ioannidi, 2024), and educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to design and deliver instruction that meets the needs of all students (Quane, 2025). Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of interactive environments in Higher distance learning and Teacher Education with regard to inclusive pedagogies and innovative pedagogical practices. The results are of interest for the pedagogical and inclusive basis of the modern school of the 21st century, highlighting the views of post-graduate students - teachers from Cyprus and Greece (Ioannidi, 2023, 2024).

7. Contribution

Educational institutional guidelines around the world agree that building more inclusive schools is a priority (Margas, 2023). The aim of the paper was to present views using online discussions in Higher distance education about inclusive education.

This online discussion was implemented postgraduate through online pedagogical activities performed by students. It is common knowledge that research and teaching are complementary processes in Higher education. So, it is appropriate to mention that at the time of writing the article, it was clear that the production of new knowledge during the research process is enhanced by its dissemination through teaching and vice versa (https://tott.uoc.gr/syndesi-erevnas-didaskalias/).

Online discussions through interactive activities can provide rich information on pedagogical issues and highlight valuable views on inclusive education and inclusive pedagogies. This study is expected to provide valuable insights and ideas for teachers, policymakers, educators and education practitioners in their efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment in all contexts. It aims to bridge the gap between theoretical investigation and applied knowledge, contributing to the field of Inclusive Education and Teacher Education (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2020; Zembylas, 2024).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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