



PROMOTING SCHOOL BELONGING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHALLENGES AND TEACHING PRACTICES FOR STUDENTS WITH IMMIGRANT BACKGROUNDS IN GREEK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Athina Lykourinouⁱ

Independent Researcher,
Greece

Abstract:

Sense of school belonging refers to students' emotional connection to school and their perception of being accepted, respected, and supported. Students with immigrant backgrounds may experience barriers to participation, social inclusion, and belonging within the school environment. The Greek educational system has been described as ethnocentric and bureaucratic, with limitations in promoting intercultural dialogue, cooperation, and inclusion. This qualitative study explores issues related to inclusive education in Greece, focusing on challenges in intercultural education, factors influencing students' inclusion and school belonging, and teaching practices that support participation. Through the accounts of eight primary and lower secondary public-school educators, gathered in semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically, participants identified language barriers and students' emotional needs as key challenges. Socioeconomic background, intercultural awareness, and teacher–student relationships emerged as important factors influencing inclusion. Reported practices included differentiated teaching, self-expression activities, intercultural activities, cooperative learning, and project-based learning. However, curriculum overload limited teachers' flexibility to implement alternative practices, highlighting the tension between teachers' efforts to respond to diverse students' needs and the constraints of the Greek educational context.

Keywords: belonging, immigrant background, teaching practices, inclusion, Greek public schools

1. Introduction

Refugees and immigrants face multiple challenges that affect all aspects of their lives, including personal, economic, professional, social, legal, educational, and psychological dimensions. These challenges are multifaceted and interconnected, directly affecting

ⁱ Correspondence: email lyathina@gmail.com

their overall well-being. In 2024, the global number of international migrants was estimated at approximately 304 million (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025).

The increased global migration flows in recent years, driven by economic, social, and political factors, have received substantial research attention (Soto Nishimura & Czaika, 2024). Research on forced migration, immigration policies, and the social inclusion of refugees and immigrants in host countries, including related areas such as access to healthcare and education, also occupies a significant place (Kraly *et al.*, 2023).

In intercultural and inclusive education, access encompasses school enrolment as well as equal opportunities for positive learning outcomes and participation in the school community, through responses to language barriers, cultural differences, and inclusive curricula that reflect and respect students' identities. In this context, access to education supports academic achievement, social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and mutual respect among students regardless of background (Pérez-Jorge *et al.*, 2023). Within this broader process of participation and social inclusion, students' sense of belonging may be especially important for immigrant and refugee students (Ialuna *et al.*, 2024; Archambault *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, teachers are often unprepared or unsupported in meeting immigrant students' needs (Damaschke-Deitrick *et al.*, 2023).

While research on migrant and refugee students in Greece has expanded in recent years, several teacher-focused studies have examined education within reception classes and specialized support structures (Mogli *et al.*, 2019; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020; Tsiaousi & Chiou, 2024; Stathopoulou *et al.*, 2025). Research focusing specifically on teachers' experiences in general education classrooms appears comparatively limited. Samsari *et al.* (2024) emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences regarding the inclusion of culturally diverse students. Stathopoulou *et al.* (2025) also note that their study did not address the perspectives of general education teachers. On an international level, Carrasco-Mella *et al.* (2026) identify a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice. By analysing teachers' lived experiences and everyday practices, this research seeks to provide context-sensitive qualitative evidence on inclusion and school belonging in general education classrooms in Greece.

This study examines inclusive education by investigating teachers' reported practices related to students with immigrant backgrounds' sense of belonging, as well as the challenges of learning and social inclusion for these students in general education classrooms in Greek public schools. The objective is to gain knowledge of how teachers seek to promote students' sense of belonging through their everyday teaching practices and how they reflect on the challenges and perceived outcomes associated with these practices. The term students with immigrant backgrounds is used in accordance with Motti-Stefanidi's (2023) definition, referring to young people who have either migrated themselves or were born in the host country to immigrant parents.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Greek Educational Context

In Greece, educational approaches to cultural diversity developed alongside increasing immigration from the late 1980s and early 1990s, gradually moving from multicultural toward more intercultural orientations that emphasized cross-cultural dialogue (Chalari & Georgas, 2016). This shift was notable because Greece had long, incorrectly, considered itself a culturally homogeneous society, despite the historical presence of the Muslim minority of western Thrace and the Roma population (Sotiropoulou, 2020).

However, the Greek educational system has been described as inflexible and bureaucratic, following a monocultural and monolingual approach (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023). Following an assimilation model, the system treats diversity as an educational problem of minority students, who are expected to ignore their backgrounds and adopt the dominant culture, leaving school curricula unchanged (Sapountzis, 2013). In contrast, intercultural principles hold that the educational system and teachers are responsible for adapting teaching materials and practices to the needs of all students (Valianti *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, national educational policy is hampered by limited funds, restricted material resources, centrally organized policies, and unstable working conditions for teachers (Nomikou, 2023).

Recent research in Greece highlights constraints in curriculum and institutional organization, inconsistent preparation for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students, challenges in providing language support, and the ongoing need for greater flexibility. Despite these challenges, teachers report adapting their teaching and using various strategies to promote participation and inclusion (Mattheoudakis *et al.*, 2025; Samsari *et al.*, 2024; Stathopoulou *et al.*, 2025; Tsiaousi & Chiou, 2024).

2.2 Sense of School Belonging

In educational settings, Sense of School Belonging (SSB) denotes students' emotional connection to the school environment and their perception of being accepted, respected, and supported (Goagoses *et al.*, 2026). While related to concepts such as school climate and school engagement, school belonging is distinct; factors such as teacher and peer behavior, opportunities for participation, and the broader school climate are conditions that influence belonging rather than constituting the construct itself (Aragoneses de la Rubia *et al.*, 2026; Goagoses *et al.*, 2026).

Peer relationships play a crucial role in developing children's and adolescents' social and emotional skills, serving as one of the most important reference groups. Peer acceptance in school may refer to occasional social interactions or deeper emotional relationships with frequent contact and participation in shared activities both in and out of the classroom (Cavicchiolo *et al.*, 2023). In culturally and ethnically diverse educational contexts, peer support and friendships, positive teacher–student relationships, opportunities for participation, and multilingual practices such as translanguaging are

positively associated with students' sense of school belonging (Aragoneses de la Rubia *et al.*, 2026).

Factors that can be negatively associated with a sense of belonging include school climate, school culture, teaching style, and low socioeconomic background (Pendergast *et al.*, 2018). More recent evidence also points to socioeconomic inequalities in school belonging (Brinkmann *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, an inclusive school climate toward immigrants is positively associated with immigrant students' sense of belonging, while multicultural practices may contribute to a more inclusive climate (Choi *et al.*, 2025).

2.3 Teachers' Role in Supporting School Belonging

Student–teacher interactions are essential for providing emotional and social support. These interactions may differ based on students' country of origin (Ortega *et al.*, 2020), and teachers' perceptions of students from various ethnic backgrounds can be shaped by stereotypical expectations (Glock, 2016). A significant challenge in multicultural classrooms is the lack of intercultural understanding and awareness among teachers, which can perpetuate negative stereotypes about specific ethnic groups. Teachers' capacity to address diversity depends not only on their attitudes but also on their professional knowledge, culturally responsive competence, preparation, and the institutional conditions of their work environment (Aalto *et al.*, 2024; Carrasco-Mella *et al.*, 2026; Ialuna *et al.*, 2024).

The teacher–student relationship plays a critical role in shaping students' sense of belonging. Positive teacher support and close teacher–student relationships are associated with stronger school belonging, although this association may vary according to students' immigrant background (Archambault *et al.*, 2024; Ialuna *et al.*, 2024). In Greece, first-generation immigrant-origin adolescents were more likely than their non-immigrant peers to benefit from positive teacher–student relations in terms of school belonging (Abdulhamed & Beattie, 2024).

2.4 Teaching Practices and Challenges in Promoting School Belonging

Working in class with students from different linguistic, learning, and cultural backgrounds can be particularly challenging for teachers because multicultural environments require alternative teaching practices that curricula and educational policymakers often do not support. Recent research identifies limited teacher preparation, curricular constraints, inadequate linguistic support, and weak institutional coordination as recurring difficulties, while culturally responsive pedagogy, linguistic support, differentiated approaches, and peer-mediated practices are among the strategies used to support migrant and refugee students' participation (Carrasco-Mella *et al.*, 2026; Mattheoudakis *et al.*, 2025; Samsari *et al.*, 2024; Tsiaousi & Chiou, 2024).

Teachers report encountering linguistic and socio-emotional challenges when working with students from refugee backgrounds. However, experiences related to displacement or trauma should not be generalized to all students with immigrant backgrounds (Stathopoulou *et al.*, 2025; Tsiaousi & Chiou, 2024).

Monolingual approaches have traditionally prevailed in multicultural classrooms, often excluding students' mother tongues in favor of the target language. However, leveraging students' full linguistic resources is increasingly recognized as beneficial for target language acquisition, motivation, self-confidence, and cognitive flexibility (Krulatz & Iversen, 2020). Practices such as translanguaging, which involves drawing on the diverse languages of all students through activities like translating, comparing, and cross-language reading and writing, promote linguistic diversity and equality (Duarte, 2020). In Greek refugee-education contexts, translanguaging has been used to support communication and comprehension, though its effectiveness depends on educators' preparation and broader institutional conditions (Makrogianni *et al.*, 2026).

Teachers' practices, such as awareness of intercultural education policies and the use of alternative materials and technologies tailored to students' diverse needs, can enhance classroom participation and foster more responsive instruction. Strategies including differentiated tasks, scaffolding, simplified language, visual and symbolic resources, and the integration of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are reported in culturally diverse classrooms in Greece and internationally (Carrasco-Mella *et al.*, 2026; Mattheoudakis *et al.*, 2025; Samsari *et al.*, 2024).

Cooperative learning offers opportunities for peer interaction, participation, language use, and shared classroom activities. Collaborative and peer-mediated approaches are also linked to enhanced opportunities for belonging and inclusion in culturally diverse educational settings (Aragoneses de la Rubia *et al.*, 2026; Carrasco-Mella *et al.*, 2026; Ferguson-Patrick, 2020).

2.5 The Present Study

The main objective of this paper is to explore issues related to the inclusion of students with immigrant backgrounds in Greek public schools, specifically the challenges that emerge in general education classrooms and the practices chosen by teachers to address these challenges and support students' participation and sense of school belonging.

Based on the preceding literature, the study is guided by three main research questions:

RQ1: What challenges do teachers report when teaching students with immigrant backgrounds in general education classrooms in Greek public schools?

RQ2: What factors do teachers perceive as influencing students' inclusion and sense of school belonging?

RQ3: What teaching practices do teachers report using to support students' participation and sense of school belonging?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research focuses on teachers' experiences in Greece regarding the simultaneous presence of students with students with immigrant backgrounds. A qualitative approach

was chosen to investigate the views and practices of teachers in Greece regarding supporting student belonging. This approach provides a comprehensive description of the data, facilitating a deep and detailed understanding of the topic under investigation (Sandelowski, 2000; Neuman, 2014). According to Stenberg and Maaranen (2022), qualitative design is appropriate for educational research as it allows for the documentation of participants' experiences and understanding of educational phenomena through teachers' insights.

Qualitative design in education is used to describe the experiences, motivations, and practices of those involved in the learning process (Daněk & Uργοšíková, 2024). In the study of teaching practices, qualitative design offers an in-depth investigation of what teachers believe and why and how they choose to operate in relation to school context. Furthermore, the educational context is a space where complex issues emerge and is characterized by dynamic processes between those involved, data that can be accessed through personal reports, and the detailed and flexible exploration of subjective meanings. In the case of the present research, there is a need to gain insight into how teachers perceive the challenges in multicultural classrooms and how they deal with those challenges in order to support students' sense of belonging. Accordingly, the study focuses on teachers' perceptions and accounts of their classroom experiences and practices.

3.2 Data Collection and Interview Guide

In this study, the semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions was applied to answer the research questions with Greek educators with experience teaching students with immigrant backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a data collection tool because they offer the researcher flexibility to give participants space to freely share their experiences. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher can adapt the questions and add or remove some depending on the interview's progress, thus illuminating issues that were not initially foreseen (Creswell, 2016).

The interviews with teachers were organized based on five categories of questions to investigate inclusion practices and challenges in the Greek school. The first group of questions concerns information about the teachers, such as teaching experience, training, and their students' nationalities. The second category of questions explores the challenges faced by educators. Through three initial questions, teachers were asked to express their views and feelings about the difficulties they may face in a classroom where students have ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or other differences. The third category concerned the psychological, learning, and social needs that teachers believed their students had, while the fourth focused on factors influencing students' inclusion and sense of belonging. Finally, the fifth category focused on teaching practices, particularly the strategies teachers used to enhance students' participation and promote a sense of belonging. In total, 23 open-ended questions were used as a flexible guide for the semi-structured interviews.

The interviews were conducted by telephone in Greek and transcribed by the author. Eight interviews were conducted over approximately 15 days, from December 24, 2024, to January 10, 2025. The interviews were recorded and lasted 25 to 50 minutes.

3.3 Sampling and Recruitment

This paper presents the results of eight semi-structured interviews with Greek primary and lower secondary school teachers. For the research aims, purposive sampling was chosen in order to collect data from educators who teach in classes attended by students with an immigrant background. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method used in qualitative research, in which the researcher selects participants based on their characteristics. In the present study, participant selection was criterion-based, as direct experience teaching students with immigrant backgrounds in general education classrooms constituted the main eligibility criterion (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

In this study, the basic criterion was finding teachers of general public education with immigrant children in their classes. Being a teacher in general classrooms is important because it illuminates the relationships between all students and the inclusive practices teachers may use. The researcher chose schools attended by students with immigrant backgrounds. These are three primary and two secondary schools in the center of Athens and one secondary school in Chios. Athens and Chios were selected because the researcher had access to schools in these locations.

The first contact with these schools was made by telephone. The school principals were informed about the research, and the teachers who agreed to participate contacted the researcher to schedule telephone interviews. In two cases, the researcher directly contacted the educators she knew who had experience in multicultural classrooms and would like to participate in an interview. Six educators responded positively to the telephone communications with the schools.

3.4 Participants' Profiles and Context

Of the eight participants, two are male, and six are female. All have teaching experience in classes with children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, ranging from eight to thirty years. All teach in general public-school classes, three in lower secondary schools and five in primary schools in Athens and Chios. Table 1 provides details about the participants in the study, including demographic information, professional profile, teaching experience, and the ethnic background of their students.

Table 1: Participants' profiles

	Years of Teaching experience	Education field	Specialty	Origins of Immigrant students
P1	14	Primary	Arts	Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Syria, Afghanistan, African Countries (unspecified)
P2	19	Primary	English	Africa, Albania, Bulgaria, Syria, Pakistan, Moldova, Poland
P3	30	Primary	Teacher	Russia, Poland, Syria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, African Countries (unspecified)
P4	29	Primary	Teacher	Albania, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Indonesia, China
P5	21	Lower Secondary	Philologist	Albania, Georgia, Bulgaria
P6	13	Lower Secondary	Philologist	Albania, Georgia, Romania, Nigeria
P7	8	Lower Secondary	Philologist	Albania, Russia, Bulgaria, Nigeria, Madagascar
P8	11	Primary	Teacher	Russia, Albania, Italy, Bulgaria

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews with the educators. The analysis was conducted by the author, following the general phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After the interviews were transcribed, the author reviewed the transcripts in depth and coded relevant excerpts, grouping similar codes and recurring patterns into initial themes. It was then examined whether the content of the themes was coherent and whether there was a clear distinction between the different themes. After the themes were defined and named, their content was detailed.

3.6 Ethical Issues

An attempt was made to address any ethical issues related to the research process. Participants were fully informed about the nature and purposes of the research and that the interviews would be recorded. All teachers' participation was voluntary, and they were informed that they had the right to stop the interview at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were also declared. Finally, consent forms were distributed to all.

4. Results

This section presents the results of interviews with primary and secondary educators working in public schools in Greece. Through thematic analysis, the empirical findings are categorized into four major thematic units: (1) challenges in multicultural education, (2) students' socio-emotional needs (3) socio-cultural context and peer dynamics, and (4) teaching practices that promote a sense of belonging.

4.1 Challenges in the Education of Students with Immigrant Background

The teachers who participated in the research expressed a generally positive attitude towards immigrant students and their inclusion in Greek schools. All participants reported not observing overt issues of prejudice and racism toward immigrant students in their schools, contrasting this with other categories of students, such as students with disabilities and obesity, whom they perceived as more frequent targets of school bullying. Students with immigrant backgrounds were generally reported to be included in the school community, and their presence in the classroom was not characterized as an institutional barrier.

Despite the challenges reported by teachers, seven of eight participants said they do not find it difficult to work in multicultural classrooms, although it requires significantly more effort. However, one foreign language teacher reported distinct structural difficulties:

P2: "Yes, very much so. Immigrant children have many difficulties at home; they are not supported. In my class, they behave badly, and their parents are not interested; they consider English to be a secondary subject."

This highlights a specific challenge within the Greek school context regarding foreign language classes or specific subjects. When families face severe socioeconomic difficulties at home and cannot support their children, and simultaneously consider a subject to be secondary, it directly affects student behavior and participation, making the educator's work significantly more demanding. Beyond these specific subject-related challenges, the teachers characterize the most important obstacles as language limitations and students' emotional needs, combined with a rigid curriculum.

4.1.1 Language Barriers

Teachers identified limited proficiency in Greek as a major barrier in daily classroom life, associating it with lower participation or behavioral difficulties when students were unable to follow the lesson.

P1: "If students do not understand, they will not participate; they will make noise."

To handle this communication gap and support student participation, teachers spend more time doing extra work. They choose to adjust their feedback and how they correct mistakes. Instead of focusing strictly on grammar and formal language correction, which could cause more stress and make the students stop trying, teachers prioritize communication. They adjust their testing and error feedback to build confidence, allowing students to use the language without fear of constant correction.

P6: "When there are children who do not speak Greek well, the teacher has difficulty; many times I have to stop the lesson and explain something that for Greeks is known, this makes

it difficult for me... I definitely have to work harder... I have to prepare 2 level exercises that are easier so that even the weakest students who don't speak Greek well can participate. The same goes for exams. I can't have one exam and give it to all the children because some won't write anything."

Participants also described language difficulties as a source of emotional pressure for some students, including concerns about maintaining their linguistic identity.

P5 (quoting a migrant student's essay): *"You cannot communicate easily because the Greek language is difficult and makes you forget your mother tongue, which is very bad."*

4.1.2 The Pressure of the Curriculum Overload

Teachers identified the inflexible national curriculum as a second major challenge. They expressed deep frustration because the strict, content-heavy textbooks leave little room for flexible, inclusive practices. The pressure to keep up with curriculum demands leaves very little time to focus on the actual communicative and social needs of immigrant students.

P3: *"There is little time; we are overwhelmed by the curriculum. All these endless grammar exercises do not help at all."*

The focus on endless grammar and standard curriculum targets acts as an institutional barrier. Teachers feel divided between their pedagogical desire to help immigrant students feel a sense of belonging and the systemic obligation to finish the textbooks.

P4: *"This is very tiring. I have the curriculum chasing me."*

4.2 Socio-Emotional Needs

A recurring aspect of the teachers' accounts concerned students' socio-emotional needs and the importance of teacher–student relationships in identifying and addressing these needs. Educators consistently emphasized that promoting students' psychological safety, emotional stability, and relational closeness was important for supporting learning and a sense of belonging at school.

For some students, particularly those with refugee backgrounds, educators described the school environment as an important space of emotional stabilization. They highlighted that these children often carry profound psychological pressure and sadness due to their background, past experiences, or unstable situations at home. This emotional vulnerability may appear in the classroom as quiet withdrawal, tension, or behavioral difficulties, requiring careful handling by the educator.

P2: *“Children who have difficulties and are emotionally pressured show aggression and cause tension and troubles.”*

Teachers emphasize that before any grammar or academic lesson can take place, they need to spend time calming the children and creating an environment where they feel safe and happy.

P3: *“It is important to be able to calm the children down from what they have faced and make them feel happy and lucky. They carry an enormous sadness, especially refugee children.”*

A key finding within this theme concerned how educators identified and assessed the needs of students with immigrant backgrounds. In the absence of formal, standardized psychological screening tools or institutional assessment frameworks, teachers rely on close interpersonal relationships and daily classroom observations. A trusting and emotionally secure teacher–student relationship emerged as an important means of identifying students’ needs. Through this close bond, students were described as feeling more able to express their vulnerabilities.

P4: *“I am the main teacher of the class; I identify their needs from students’ behavior. From their participation or non-participation in the lesson. So, I understand what is happening, and I try to help as much as I can.”*

It was also reported that when emotional safety is present, students feel secure enough to share personal difficulties extending beyond the classroom.

P6: *“The financial difficulties are visible. As for the emotional ones, I talk a lot with the children; I try to create a relationship with them when I find time... they know that anyone who wants something can contact me so it is not difficult to identify their needs. The most basic means by which you can identify their needs is the relationship with the children, relationship and observation.”*

4.3 Socio-Cultural Context and Peer Dynamics

Beyond explicit teaching methodologies, participants also described socio-cultural, economic, and relational factors that they associated with immigrant and refugee students' sense of belonging.

4.3.1 Peer Relationships, Shared Interests, and Exclusion

A recurring observation in the interviews concerned the role of shared digital culture in providing common points of reference among students. Shared digital spaces and video games were described as common reference points that could facilitate peer interaction despite differences in Greek-language proficiency.

P1: *"Children are now exposed to a lot of computer images; everything has Minecraft as a common reference. Roblox. Some movies. Now there is the common culture."*

These shared interests were described as helping students with immigrant backgrounds participate in peer interactions with their Greek classmates.

P6: *"With children who are immigrants, Greek students will find their common ground, and you now know the common ground, and what interests children is Minecraft, Fortnite, and all those games they play."*

P8: *"I do not consider the other differences that children have among themselves, such as culture, important because the students are now all engaged in the same things, and they easily find their common interests and elements."*

Another recurring observation in the interviews concerned patterns of peer exclusion within the participants' school contexts. Participants reported that nationality or immigrant background was not perceived as a primary source of exclusion in their school contexts. Instead, bullying was more often described as targeting students with disabilities or obesity rather than students with immigrant backgrounds. Balkan and Georgian students were often described as being more easily included in the school environment due to cultural similarities with the host society. Furthermore, participants reported very few instances of conflict based on ethnic or cultural differences.

P5: *"The children who are most in danger of exclusion are the children with disabilities... and the kids who are overweight, those are the ones who have issues now, not the foreign language ones."*

P8: *"The children who experience difficult situations at school, the children who are usually targeted are the disabled children, mainly, or the overweight ones. Immigrants are not targeted, or at least I haven't seen it."*

4.3.2 Socioeconomic Challenges

In contrast, socioeconomic disparities were described as remaining highly visible in school life and as creating barriers to inclusion. Financial difficulties were described as becoming particularly visible during school excursions and informal classroom exchanges following holidays.

P6: *"The economic difficulties of immigrants are evident, and I think it is the most important thing. You see it in many cases: in their clothes, in the school excursions that immigrants may not participate in, and in how we say our news. What they have to share is much less than that of the Greek students... The children from Albania, Georgia, and*

Nigeria, what they said is that 'we did nothing,' 'I was at home watching TV,' 'I was playing with my mobile phone.'

4.3.3 The Educator as a Cultural Role Model

Participants described the teacher's relationship with the class as an important factor in shaping students' attitudes toward classmates with immigrant backgrounds. They emphasized that the educator's personal ethos, cultural curiosity, and stance against exclusion could influence how other students viewed their classmates.

P7: "I care about knowing that they are all equal, I treat them as equals, and that helps. And how other students think about their classmates. The teacher is often a role model for students. So, if they see that I, for example, am interested in music from Africa or Albania, they automatically become interested too. Or in any case, they don't underestimate it."

4.4 Teaching Practices to Support a Sense of Belonging

Participants described a range of pedagogical strategies used to support students' sense of belonging, including differentiated instruction and self-expression activities.

4.4.1 Differentiated Instruction and Curricular Adaptation

A key practice highlighted by participants was differentiated instruction to accommodate varying levels of linguistic readiness. Participants described static, rigid curricula as a barrier to engaging students with immigrant backgrounds. This included unofficially modifying textbook materials, scaffolding language learning, and using alternative resources with the aim of supporting all students' participation.

P7: "I can't have one exam and give it to all the students because there are some who won't write anything... When you let students feel like they're just spectators... in the end they find other ways to exist. They'll make a fuss, they will bother their classmates, and they will be defiant towards me because they feel like I am not doing anything to support their participation."

P8: "When you include things that interest and concern them, and they can talk about them, they participate more easily."

4.4.2 Self-Expression Activities

Beyond academic tailoring, participants also described creative projects used for self-expression and cultural sharing. One example was a participatory project titled 'Foxy's Journey,' which connected students' home experiences with the school environment.

P4: "We gave the students a stuffed fox, Foxy, and they did an activity they called 'Foxy's Journey'. Each child takes Foxy home for a week and records what Foxy saw and did with the student, including the foods, habits, extracurricular activities, and trips. The students

note what they did, take pictures, and present them to their classmates every Friday. Together, they write about Foxy's journey in a notebook. This helps the students get to know each other and learn about habits and practices from other families, as well as customs from other regions when the student and Foxy travel."

Participants also described using visual arts and narrative literature with students.

P1: *"I asked them to do their anti-portrait, that is, instead of drawing their portrait, to do what they think is the opposite of them. One student drew a relaxed guy with a straw hat playing the guitar."*

P6: *"...the best practice for belonging is to let them talk about themselves, their experiences, what they would like to do, and what they believe... Of course, we want them to write, but if they talk, in the future they will write too."*

P4: *"We wrote a text about Penelope Delta's Mangas, who was on a ship, and I asked them to tell me about their own experiences with ships and traveling. They have a lot of experiences."*

4.4.3 Cooperative Learning

In contrast to other teaching practices, cooperative learning was not spontaneously mentioned by participants. When asked about it directly, teachers acknowledged its potential value for promoting social inclusion. Teachers working in the first five grades of primary school reported using group activities less often because of concerns about cooperation and classroom management. In sixth grade and secondary school, group activities were reported more frequently.

P2: *"Although I recognize that group activities can be very helpful, I don't use them most of the time."*

P6: *"It's hard for the children to cooperate, but as long as they don't fight, I do it. It helps immigrant students."*

4.4.4 Intercultural Activities

Participants described intercultural activities as opportunities for students to gain knowledge, cooperate, and become more open to cultural differences. Depending on the class and the subject taught at each time, all educators in the study mentioned several examples of activities that include elements from different cultures, such as language, music, literature, and folk tradition. In the youngest primary school classes, students and teachers talk about different countries, say good morning in different languages, listen to songs, and play games from the students' different countries. With the various elements

from the students' countries of origin, the teachers and their students make books and hold informal intercultural celebrations with various types of music and food.

The philologists (P5, P6, P7), who teach language and literature in lower secondary school, use elements of the students' cultures in their lessons to highlight common elements across traditions and enrich all students' knowledge. Participants noted that literature lessons make it easier to introduce traditions from other countries, for example by asking students to bring fairy tales, poems, legends, and myths from their countries. Particularly with students from Balkan countries, literature lessons highlight common elements with Greek traditions, such as those found in *The Bridge of Arta* and *The Dead Brother's Song*.

P5: *"They realize that we are one and we have nothing to separate us, neither as nations nor as people."*

4.4.5 Translanguaging

Among the teaching practices discussed, translanguaging emerged as a popular approach among educators, although participants described significant challenges in its practical implementation. Although some participants reported encouraging students to maintain elements of their culture and encouraging immigrant parents to use their native language at home, the use of languages other than Greek in the classroom was generally limited, with a few exceptions. The general picture from the interviews is that teachers feel uncertain about what students may say to each other in languages they do not understand, including potentially offensive comments about classmates or the teacher.

However, in some cases, participants reported encouraging the use of other languages in the classroom and viewed students' home languages as potentially supporting inclusion and a sense of belonging. According to some teachers, older students do not feel comfortable speaking their home language in the classroom because it may make them feel different from their Greek classmates.

4.4.6 Project-Based Learning

Five of the eight teachers reported using project-based activities in school and as homework to enhance student participation, creativity, collaboration, and support students' use of Greek through organized projects based on student interests and characteristics. Examples of project topics included music, food, and football. To implement the projects, teachers assign topics to students, who present them in class.

P7: *"...we have also done similar projects on music, food, the children really like these and even those who seem to get bored when I have to ask them to look up information on the internet, they all do it, there is not a single one who will come and say 'I didn't do it.'"*

4.4.7 Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Responses to the Practices

Across the interviews, participants frequently linked alternative, intercultural, differentiated, collaborative, and self-expression activities to greater participation and more positive student responses. Teachers described students as showing interest and enjoyment, participating more willingly, and in some cases asking for activities to be repeated.

P2, referring to an activity involving peer correction, stated:

"I did it once, and they liked it so much that they kept asking me to do it."

Regarding role play and the use of realia, P2 stated:

"Participation is increased in these."

P7 similarly described students' responses to intercultural activities involving music:

"They liked it very much, their eyes lit up and since then they keep asking me..."

P8 associated the incorporation of students' interests into classroom activities with participation:

"When you include things that interest them... they participate more easily."

In general, participants noticed positive reactions and greater participation when using practices that incorporated students' interests, cultural backgrounds, opportunities for self-expression, or alternative forms of classroom activity.

5. Discussion

The present qualitative research aimed to examine issues related to intercultural education in Greece, focusing on the challenges primary and lower secondary educators face, the factors that influence inclusion, and the teaching practices that promote a sense of belonging. The participants reported that working in a multicultural classroom has several difficulties and requires teachers to work harder. However, participants described their work with students with immigrant backgrounds positively, as meaningful and engaging, while emphasizing intercultural exchange, cooperation, and equal treatment. The two challenges most frequently mentioned were language barriers and students' emotional difficulties. According to the participants, these challenges are further compounded by the Ministry-defined curriculum, which, because of its volume and rigid structure, was described as limiting teachers' flexibility.

Participants identified limited Greek-language proficiency as a challenge that may affect the academic progress and social inclusion of students with immigrant backgrounds. This finding is consistent with previous research in Greece, which has similarly identified language barriers or Greek-language proficiency as an important challenge in the education and inclusion of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds (Karanikola & Nikolopoulou, 2024; Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023; Mavromara *et al.*, 2023; Papapostolou *et al.*, 2020).

In this study, participants reported positive experiences in multicultural classrooms and stated that they had not observed problems, conflicts, or exclusion related to students' different cultural backgrounds. Teachers also noted that students often shared common interests, such as video games, music, and popular culture. Yilmaz *et al.* (2026) reported a related finding, showing that digital gaming environments provided opportunities for social participation and peer relationships among Syrian migrant youth. However, these teacher-reported findings differ from previous research documenting discrimination, exclusion, or bias among students with immigrant backgrounds. Frühauf *et al.* (2024), for example, found that immigrant-background students were more concerned about possible teacher bias than majority-background students.

Teachers in this study reported students' emotional difficulties as a challenge for educational practice. According to the participants, some students with immigrant backgrounds have complex emotional needs, and teachers considered it important to understand them through trusting relationships. All teachers considered it important for students to feel comfortable in the classroom, to be happy and to know that they can turn to teachers for issues that concern them. In fact, teachers stated that students' emotional well-being and sense of belonging are more important issues than learning performance. Participants linked students' sense of belonging to classroom participation, while feelings of isolation were associated with lower participation and, in some cases, disruptive classroom behavior.

Previous research has similarly suggested that the emotional needs of migrant students are a key challenge for educators, as schools for vulnerable social groups, such as migrants and refugees, are not only places of learning but mainly places where students develop a sense of belonging through the creation of a school culture of respect, acceptance and cooperation. Teachers in a multicultural environment can strengthen or undermine belonging. Previous research has similarly highlighted the importance of supportive teacher–student relationships and social and emotional support for the school belonging of students with immigrant and refugee backgrounds (Kaukko *et al.*, 2022; Archambault *et al.*, 2024; Abdulhamed & Beattie, 2024; Ialuna *et al.*, 2024).

In this study, Greek primary and lower secondary school teachers reported that the sense of belonging is a continuous process influenced by many factors, such as students' economic and social background, teacher-student relationships, school climate, and teachers' intercultural awareness. The socioeconomic profile of students was highlighted as an important factor potentially affecting students' emotional well-being

and social participation. Economic and social inequalities undermine school participation, and immigrant students are more likely to have lower self-expectations and motivation, higher school dropout rates, and a lower sense of belonging (Abdusamatov *et al.*, 2025). In addition, poverty among migrant children has been associated with poorer educational outcomes and reduced social participation (Forbes & Sime, 2016).

This research identifies the teacher-student relationship as an important factor associated with students' school engagement and sense of belonging, and participants linked positive classroom experiences to teachers' intercultural awareness, attitudes toward immigrant students, and the creation of a positive classroom climate. This finding is consistent with Archambault *et al.* (2024), who found that greater teacher-student closeness was associated with students' sense of school belonging, whereas teacher-student conflict was associated with lower school belonging. Similarly, Wang (2025) found that positive teacher-student relationships predicted better academic adjustment among returned migrant children, with school attitude and resilience playing mediating roles.

Regarding practices intended to support a sense of belonging, teachers often described differentiated teaching as responding to the needs and abilities of all students through activities that boost motivation and participation. The most frequently mentioned teaching practices included self-expression activities, intercultural activities, project-based learning, and the use of audiovisual materials. The emphasis on active student participation is consistent with the view that students can make constructive contributions to the learning process by personalizing the conditions in which they learn (Reeve, 2013). Project-based learning may also support motivational processes, including the development of an ideal L2 self, better regulation of language anxiety, and sustained self-efficacy (Park & Hiver, 2017). Participants also reported that students participated more and showed positive responses when differentiated, intercultural, self-expression, project-based, and other alternative activities were used.

Among the practices participants described as more difficult to implement and less frequently used were cooperative learning and translanguaging. Teachers recognized cooperative learning as important but reported that it was difficult to implement, especially in the lower grades of primary school. Teachers of sixth-grade primary and lower secondary school classes reported examples of cooperative learning implemented in the classroom despite difficulties in student collaboration. Structured cooperative-learning techniques have been found to significantly affect both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of foreign-language motivation, although cultural and contextual constraints may affect their implementation (Fakhri Alamdari & Ghani, 2022). At the same time, previous research has repeatedly reported a gap between the recognized value of cooperative learning and its consistent implementation in classroom practice (Buchs *et al.*, 2017; Veldman *et al.*, 2020; Tamimy *et al.*, 2023; Adl-Amini *et al.*, 2024; Szczesniak, 2025).

A similar discrepancy emerged regarding translanguaging. Although participants expressed positive attitudes towards students maintaining their home languages, most

reported limited use of languages other than Greek in the classroom. Translanguaging has received considerable research attention in recent years as a pedagogical approach that can support multilingual students' learning, participation, collaboration, and sense of belonging (e.g., Kim & Choi, 2021; Karafyllia & Maligkoudi, 2023; Mammou *et al.*, 2023; Decristan *et al.*, 2024; Hamman-Ortiz *et al.*, 2025). In the present study, however, teachers expressed concerns about maintaining effective classroom communication and management when students used languages that the teachers did not understand.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be acknowledged. These include the small sample size and the study's exclusive reliance on teachers' perspectives. The study did not include the perspectives of students, parents, or school leaders, nor did it include classroom observations.

Additionally, the research also focuses on separate aspects of the difficulties associated with inclusion, such as students' emotional needs, socioeconomic inequalities, and the language barrier, but does not examine how these dimensions interact to shape students' participation and sense of belonging.

Future research could include students' perspectives and classroom observations, as well as larger and more diverse samples, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how teaching practices are implemented and experienced in general education classrooms in Greece in order to promote students' sense of inclusion at school. Finally, a systematic comparison across educational levels and student age groups would provide a more nuanced understanding of how teaching practices may vary across different school contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Athina Lykourinou is a secondary school teacher in Greece. She holds two Master's degrees, in Special Education and in Language Education for Refugees and Migrants. Her academic interests include inclusive education and teaching practices in multicultural settings.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2184-5138>

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