



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ALBANIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract:

Inclusive education constitutes a core principle of education systems, emphasizing equal access, participation and learning outcomes for all learners, especially those with disabilities. In Albania, the development of inclusive education has been influenced by national education reforms and international commitments, including alignment with European standards and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This literature review critically examines academic and policy-related studies on inclusive education in Albania, focusing on key challenges and emerging opportunities, excluding analyses related to the inclusion of ethnic minorities. The literature identifies several structural and pedagogical barriers to effective implementation. Key challenges include insufficient pre- and in-service training of teachers in inclusive practices, limited availability of specialized support professionals such as psychologists and speech therapists, and inadequate school infrastructure to meet diverse learning needs. The research further highlights the discrepancies between inclusive education policies and their implementation in schools, often affected by large class sizes, limited financial resources and weak institutional monitoring. Attitudinal barriers, including limited awareness and resistance to inclusion among some teachers and parents. At the same time, the literature shows significant opportunities for strengthening inclusive education in Albania. Legislative developments, curricular reforms emphasizing learner-centered approaches and the introduction of individualized education plans have contributed to gradual progress. Increased focus on professional development, inclusive assessment practices and assistive technologies has further enhanced the capacity of schools to address the diverse needs of students. Collaborative initiatives between schools, local authorities and support services are also identified as promising practices. In conclusion, although Albania has established a supportive policy framework for inclusive education, continued efforts are needed to translate policies into effective practice. Targeted investments in teacher education,

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support services, and institutional capacity remain essential to ensure sustainable and high-quality inclusive education for all learners.

Keywords: inclusive education; educational policy; special educational needs; Albania

1. Introduction

Inclusive education refers to the education of diverse and unique learners who learn together in the same classroom, reflecting the diversity of society and promoting equal access to education. According to UNICEF (2015), inclusive education represents a response to the needs of learners and the realities of their lives, aiming to create learning environments where all students feel accepted, supported, and valued. This approach is based on the principle that schools should adapt to learners, rather than expecting learners to adapt to the system.

Inclusive education is considered a key mechanism through which teaching methods, curricula, pedagogy, and professional support for educational staff are adapted to promote learning for all students, including those whom traditional educational systems have failed to adequately support or include. This approach emphasizes the removal of barriers to learning and participation and encourages the active involvement of all learners, regardless of ability, social background, or health conditions.

The National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities in Albania emphasizes that disability does not reside within the individual as a personal deficit, but rather emerges from the interaction between individual impairments and social barriers that limit participation. According to this framework, *persons with disabilities* are defined as individuals whose physical functions, mental capacity, or psychological condition deviate from what is typical for their age for a period exceeding six months, resulting in limitations in their participation in social life. This definition aligns with the framework proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and does not focus on real or presumed deficiencies, but rather places participation at the center of attention.

A deviation from typical conditions may involve loss or limitation in physical, mental, or psychological structures that are considered age-appropriate. Disability is recognized when such impairment leads to restrictions that significantly affect participation in one or more areas of life. The six-month duration criterion serves to exclude temporary conditions that do not constitute a disability, while not excluding the need for early and timely interventions aimed at preventing long-term limitations.

This perspective is particularly important in the context of children, for whom a disability or the potential risk of disability has been identified. In this regard, inclusive education plays a crucial role in ensuring access to quality education and supporting the academic, social, and emotional development of children with disabilities, while also promoting a more equitable and inclusive society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Legal Framework for Inclusive Education in Albania

The Albanian legal framework has undergone significant improvements and further development with regard to the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly in the field of inclusive education. These developments are reflected in Albania's ratification of key international conventions and the adoption of national laws, strategies, and action plans aimed at promoting equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination.

A major milestone in this process was the ratification of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** in 2009, which establishes binding standards for the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in all areas of life, including education. At the national level, these commitments are reflected in **Law No. 69/2012 on Pre-University Education**, the **National Education Strategy 2021–2026** (Ministry of Education and Sports), the **Integrated Plan of the Ministry of Education (2010)**, the **National Action Plan for Children 2012–2015**, and other policy documents addressing disability and social inclusion.

Despite these positive legislative developments, reviews of the existing legal system indicate that gaps remain in achieving full alignment with international standards, such as the **UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993)**, the CRPD, and global commitments related to **Education for All** and the **Millennium Development Goals**. These gaps highlight the need for further harmonization between national legislation and international frameworks.

2.1.1 The Constitution of the Republic of Albania

The Constitution of Albania establishes fundamental principles of equality and non-discrimination. Article 18(2) states that *"no one may be unjustly discriminated against for reasons such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, political, religious or philosophical beliefs, economic, educational, social status, or parentage."* However, disability is not explicitly mentioned as a protected ground, which means that persons with disabilities are not directly safeguarded against discrimination at the constitutional level.

Furthermore, Article 27(2) employs the term *"mentally incapable"*, a concept that does not conform to the standards of the **International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)** developed by the World Health Organization. The ICF is grounded in a biopsychosocial model of disability, emphasizing the interaction between individual impairments and environmental barriers. Aligning constitutional language with this model would represent a significant step toward strengthening the legal protection and social inclusion of persons with disabilities, including their participation in education.

2.1.2 Law No. 69/2012 on Pre-University Education

The adoption of **Law No. 69/2012** represents a major achievement in the formal recognition of inclusive education in Albania. The law explicitly addresses the education of children with disabilities as a fundamental right and establishes key principles for their inclusion.

Article 63 outlines the principles of education for children with disabilities, emphasizing the full development of their intellectual and physical potential, improvement of quality of life, and preparation for full integration into society and the labor market. The law prioritizes the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools, while specialized institutions are considered primarily a temporary solution. It also guarantees the right to communication in sign language for deaf students and the use of Braille for students with visual impairments.

Article 64 regulates school attendance for children with disabilities, defining the responsibilities of local education authorities, multidisciplinary assessment commissions, and parents. Parents are granted a central role in deciding whether their child will attend a mainstream or specialized educational institution. The law also provides for home-based education when attendance at school is not feasible.

Article 65 focuses on the organization of education for children with disabilities, providing for adapted or individualized curricula, the provision of assistant teachers and rehabilitation services, and mandatory training and certification for educational staff working with these students. Local government units are required to ensure accessible and appropriate learning environments in accordance with standards set by the Ministry of Education.

In conclusion, Albanian legislation formally guarantees the right to public education for all children. However, the effective realization of inclusive education depends not only on the existence of laws and policies but also on their implementation in practice. Inclusive education must be understood as a continuous process, a guiding principle, and, most importantly, a pedagogical practice that requires ongoing adaptations, modifications, and improvements within inclusive schools and classrooms.

2.2 Classification of Students with Different Abilities

2.2.1 Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) The American Psychiatric Association (APA) created a diagnostic category called Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to identify children with hyperactivity and attention difficulties. Children with ADHD are not only more physically active and inattentive than their peers, but they also experience greater difficulties in responding appropriately and systematically achieving goals, even when goals are self-set. Hyperactivity is defined as excessive and uncontrolled movement, difficulty responding appropriately to environmental stimuli, and difficulty filtering various types of stimuli (Benito, Alonso, Guerra, & Moro, 2007).

Children should be taught to monitor their behavior, be persistent, and place themselves in a “controlling position” over impulsive behaviors (Pfiffner, Barkley, & DuPaul, 2006). Domsch, Ruhmland, and Lißmann (2022) emphasized two essential

aspects for understanding the education of children with ADHD: educational psychology and the learning process. Successful classroom management for students with ADHD includes clear academic instructions and classroom accommodations (Humphrey et al., 2022). Teachers should establish structured objectives, connect learning goals to prior knowledge, and set high expectations for training and behavior (McDougal et al., 2022). Tasks should be divided into smaller, manageable parts to reduce cognitive overload (Mezzanotte, 2020).

2.2.2 Students with Learning Difficulties

Students with learning difficulties demonstrate challenges in language acquisition, including reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematics (Woolfolk, 2011). These difficulties often result in lower academic achievement in specific subjects or domains (Haxhiymeri, 2006) and failure to progress academically (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Speece, 2002).

Common types include:

- **Dyslexia:** Difficulty in reading due to deficits in perceptual and sensory processing, compounded by insufficient practice and experience in reading and writing (Goswami, 2015).
- **Dysgraphia:** Difficulty in writing affecting motor skills and information processing, requiring high energy and concentration for writing tasks (Brant, 2014).
- **Dyscalculia:** Difficulty in understanding and manipulating numbers; considered a natural competence that varies among species and individuals (Agrillo, 2012).
- **Dyspraxia:** Impairment in planning, organizing, and executing movements without a known neurological problem (Nikoghosyan-Bossen & Hoffmann, 2018).

2.2.3 Students with Language and Communication Difficulties

Language and communication difficulties encompass a wide range of speech, language, and hearing problems, including articulation, voice, fluency disorders (e.g., stuttering), aphasia, and delayed language development. These difficulties affect comprehension, reading, writing, analysis, and information processing (Ferrari & Epelbaum, 1993).

- **Simple language delay:** Difficulty in syntactic and morphological organization without intellectual, auditory, or personality disorders (Hirst & Britton, 1998).
- **Aphasia/Disphasia:** Loss of previously acquired language skills, often due to brain injury, affecting expressive language and school achievement (Ferrari & Epelbaum, 1993).
- **Mutism:** Loss of previously developed speech, often associated with self-imposed inhibition of speaking (Ferrari & Epelbaum, 1993).

2.2.4 Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability (ID) is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, affecting conceptual, social, and practical skills, with onset before age 18 (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental

Disabilities, 2002). Previously called mental retardation, ID can result from genetic factors, including chromosomal abnormalities (Gulliford, 1992).

Common genetic syndromes causing intellectual disability include:

- Down Syndrome: Extra chromosome 21, leading to cognitive delays (Beirne-Smith, Patton, & Kim, 2006).
- Klinefelter Syndrome: Sex chromosome disorder in males, causing physical anomalies and cognitive delays.
- Williams Syndrome: Deletion on chromosome 7 causing intellectual impairment, cardiac issues, and hypersensitivity to sounds.
- Fragile X Syndrome: Most common inherited cause of intellectual disability, linked to the X chromosome, more prevalent in males (Taylor et al., 2005).
- Prader-Willi Syndrome: Genetic deletion on chromosome 15, leading to obesity, sleep disorders, and mild to moderate intellectual disability (Dykens & State, 2000).
- Phenylketonuria (PKU): Genetic metabolic disorder affecting phenylalanine metabolism without visible physical traits.

2.2.5 Students with Autism

Autism is a developmental disability affecting verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction, and repetitive, restricted behaviors and interests, usually appearing before age three (APA, 2000). Subtypes include:

- 1) Asperger Syndrome: Level 1 autism, with rigid thinking, difficulties expressing emotions, and challenges in peer interactions.
- 2) Rett Syndrome: A rare neurodevelopmental disorder affecting communication and coordination in early childhood.
- 3) Kanner Syndrome: Classic infantile autism with emotional detachment, repetitive behaviors, and learning difficulties.
- 4) Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS): Milder autism, primarily affecting language and social skills.
- 5) Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (Heller Syndrome): Loss of motor, social, and language skills after early normal development (Psikologu Online, 2025).

2.2.6 Students with Physical Disabilities

Physical disabilities refer to impairments that limit the physical functioning of one or more limbs or fine and gross motor skills. Gross motor skills involve large muscle groups, such as those of the arms and legs.

2.3 Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a written document prepared for students that specifies the educational goals to be achieved within a certain period. The IEP is a document that defines, plans, organizes, and monitors the teaching and learning process by adapting the general curriculum to the individual needs of the student. This plan outlines the steps that teachers follow to support students with special educational needs.

Adaptations and support are provided based on the student's needs. The plan highlights the aspects of the curriculum that require modification and focuses on the students' most critical needs. Not every student with special educational needs requires an IEP.

The IEP is a tool for students, parents, and all those responsible for the formal and informal education of these children. It is a working document that identifies the necessary adaptations in learning outcomes compared to the expected results for a typical educational level based on the achievement standards of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (IZHA MASR, 2016). The IEP is prepared for all children for whom a decision has been made by the relevant commissions, following the evaluation of the child by KMADR and KIANAK, as provided in the normative documents (DN). After a certain period, a decision is made regarding whether an IEP is required for the student. Subsequently, the plan is developed at school with the support of the assistant teacher, class teacher, parents, and school psychologist.

Reasons for the Name IEP

- P = Plan: Specifies the objectives to be achieved by the student with special educational needs or learning difficulties. It defines the timeframe, steps to follow, and criteria for assessing the effectiveness of interventions.
- E = Educational: The plan aims to address all aspects of development, including moral and social values.
- I = Individual: Strategies are designed based on the individual characteristics of each student with special educational needs or learning difficulties.

Montessori (1964) believed that children should be encouraged to work at their own pace and method without being pressured by competition, grades, or exams. They should follow their interests and preferences in reading and writing. This type of freedom motivates children with disabilities to thrive and progress.

Areas of Development Addressed in the IEP:

- 1) Sensory-motor development,
- 2) Language and communication development,
- 3) Social and emotional development,
- 4) Cognitive development,
- 5) Development of personal autonomy (Barolli, 2025).

2.4 Teacher Profile in Inclusive Education

The work on developing the profile of the inclusive education teacher is based on several principles and preconditions:

- 1) Inclusivity as a principle – Inclusivity is a principled approach, grounded in the right to education and based on a set of fundamental values.
- 2) Practical and conceptual challenges – There are practical and conceptual difficulties regarding a focus on teaching competencies in inclusive education. To ensure the profile fits different stakeholders, a broader approach to the idea of using competencies is required.
- 3) Policy considerations – Political priorities and the effects of national educational policies cannot be ignored. Additionally, there is an international and European

Union policy framework on inclusive education and teacher training that must be taken into account.

Some of the core values related to teaching and learning, which serve as the main foundation for the work of all teachers in inclusive education, are:

- 1) Valuing student diversity – Differences among students are seen as a resource and a value for education, not as an obstacle.
- 2) Supporting all students – Teachers maintain high expectations for the academic and personal achievements of every student.
- 3) Collaboration with others – Collaboration and teamwork are essential elements of every teacher's work.
- 4) Continuous professional development – Teaching is a lifelong learning activity, and teachers take responsibility for their students' learning throughout their careers.
- 5) Necessity of adapting teaching – Teaching must be adapted according to the needs and abilities of students with special educational needs.
- 6) Analyzing the history of inclusive education – Understanding the historical context helps teachers comprehend current circumstances.
- 7) Planning strategies to challenge exclusion – Teachers must prepare strategies to confront non-inclusive attitudes and avoid situations of exclusion.

These core values are linked to the competencies of inclusive education teachers. Competencies consist of three elements: attitudes, knowledge, and professional skills. A specific attitude requires a certain level of knowledge and understanding, new methods of assessment or comprehension, and finally, professional skills to apply this knowledge in practice. For each competency, the relevant attitudes, knowledge, and professional skills that form its foundation are outlined (Markja, Ndrio, Dragoti, & Agolli, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical research design based exclusively on scientific literature review. The aim is to systematically analyze, synthesize, and interpret existing peer-reviewed articles, books, and official reports concerning inclusive education in Albania. No primary data collection (e.g., surveys, interviews, or observations) was conducted. This approach allows for a rigorous assessment of the state of inclusive education, identifying challenges and opportunities grounded in scientific evidence.

3.2 Data Sources

The study draws on peer-reviewed and authoritative scientific sources, including:

- 1) Journal articles on inclusive education, teacher competencies, and inclusive pedagogy.
- 2) Books and monographs by recognized scholars in the field of education and special education.
- 3) Official reports and international guidelines, including:

- UNESCO publications,
- EU documents and recommendations on inclusive education,
- National reports and legislation from the Albanian Ministry of Education (IZHA MASR, 2016).

All sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and recency, prioritizing peer-reviewed publications to ensure scientific rigor.

3.3 Data Analysis

The study employs the following scientific methods for literature analysis:

- 1) Content Analysis:
 - Systematic extraction of key concepts, themes, and findings related to inclusive education challenges and opportunities in Albania.
 - Focus on themes such as teacher competencies, policy frameworks, infrastructure, societal attitudes, and access to education.
- 2) Comparative Analysis:
 - Comparison between national and international studies to identify gaps, similarities, and divergences in inclusive education practices.
- 2) Thematic Synthesis:
 - Organization of extracted data into coherent themes and sub-themes.
 - Development of a conceptual framework highlighting the main challenges and opportunities for inclusive education in Albania.

3.4 Research Procedure

- 1) Identification of relevant scientific literature and official reports.
- 2) Critical reading, coding, and categorization of content based on pre-defined themes.
- 3) Synthesis of information to construct a comprehensive theoretical framework.
- 4) Interpretation of findings in light of international best practices and national policies.

4. Results and Discussion

Inclusive education in Albania has experienced considerable development, supported by national policy reforms and adherence to international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). Studies indicate that inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental right, aiming to integrate children with diverse learning needs into mainstream classrooms (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). National guidelines in Albania emphasize individualized educational planning, teacher training, and the adaptation of curricula to meet students' needs, reflecting alignment with global best practices (OECD, 2022).

Despite these positive developments, scientific literature highlights persistent challenges. Teacher preparedness remains a significant issue, with many educators

reporting insufficient training in inclusive pedagogy, limited knowledge of differentiation strategies, and low confidence in implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) effectively (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Sharma et al., 2018). Physical infrastructure and educational resources are frequently inadequate, especially in rural schools, limiting accessibility and the use of assistive technologies (García & Weiss, 2019). Societal attitudes further influence the success of inclusive education; stigma, low expectations, and limited awareness among educators, parents, and local communities can restrict the participation and achievement of students with special needs (Mittler, 2012; Norwich, 2014). Policy implementation is often inconsistent due to funding limitations and insufficient coordination between governmental institutions, mirroring challenges observed in other countries transitioning to inclusive systems (OECD, 2022).

At the same time, literature emphasizes multiple opportunities for enhancing inclusive education. Continuous professional development programs have been shown to improve teacher competencies, confidence, and practical skills in inclusive teaching, directly addressing gaps in preparedness (Forlin et al., 2013). Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) allow teachers to adapt learning activities and assessment methods to students' abilities, which improves engagement and learning outcomes (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). International support and partnerships, including EU initiatives and UNESCO programs, provide both technical guidance and resources, fostering the adoption of evidence-based inclusive practices (UNESCO, 2020). Awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives are also highlighted as effective strategies to cultivate positive attitudes toward inclusion and diversity in education (Ainscow, 2020).

The integration of these findings suggests that challenges and opportunities are interdependent. Teacher training, resource allocation, societal attitudes, and policy frameworks must be addressed holistically to ensure effective and sustainable inclusive education. Literature consistently highlights that fragmented approaches are insufficient; inclusive education thrives when policies, professional development, infrastructure, and community support are coordinated and contextually adapted (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Mittler, 2012).

In conclusion, the literature indicates that Albania has made notable progress in promoting inclusive education but continues to face challenges in teacher preparedness, resource provision, and societal attitudes. Opportunities exist through professional training, individualized planning, international support, and awareness initiatives. Addressing these factors in a comprehensive and systemic manner can enhance the quality and effectiveness of inclusive education, providing a foundation for future research, policy development, and practical implementation.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Strengthen Teacher Training and Professional Development

- Implement continuous training programs in inclusive pedagogy, differentiation strategies, and the use of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).
- Integrate inclusive education modules into pre-service teacher education.

- Establish mentoring and peer-support networks for teachers to share strategies and experiences.

5.2 Improve Infrastructure and Learning Resources

- Ensure schools are physically accessible, including ramps, adapted toilets, and assistive technologies.
- Provide inclusive learning materials and digital resources tailored to diverse student needs.
- Allocate targeted funding to rural and under-resourced schools to reduce disparities.

5.3 Promote Positive Societal Attitudes and Awareness

- Conduct awareness campaigns to foster acceptance of students with disabilities.
- Encourage parental involvement in school activities and decision-making.
- Share success stories and evidence-based practices to demonstrate the benefits of inclusive education.

5.4 Strengthen Policy Implementation and Coordination

- Develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess policy effectiveness.
- Improve coordination among government institutions, NGOs, and schools to ensure consistent practices.
- Align national strategies with international standards and evidence-based recommendations.

5.5 Encourage Research and Evidence-Based Practice

- Promote further research on inclusive education effectiveness in Albania.
- Facilitate collaboration between universities, schools, and policymakers to generate relevant evidence.
- Disseminate research findings to inform educators, administrators, and policymakers.

6. Conclusion

Inclusive education in Albania has made significant progress over recent years, particularly through policy reforms, the adoption of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and alignment with international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). The literature demonstrates that inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental right, emphasizing the integration of students with diverse learning needs into mainstream classrooms.

Despite these advances, several challenges persist, including insufficient teacher training in inclusive pedagogy, limited access to appropriate learning resources and assistive technologies, inadequate school infrastructure, and societal attitudes that may

hinder the participation of students with disabilities (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Mittler, 2012). Policy implementation is also uneven, particularly in rural areas, highlighting the need for more consistent monitoring, coordination, and funding.

At the same time, multiple opportunities exist to strengthen inclusive education in Albania. Continuous professional development for teachers, the effective use of IEPs, international support and collaboration, and community engagement initiatives can significantly enhance the quality and accessibility of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020; Sharma et al., 2018). Literature suggests that addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities requires a **holistic and systemic approach**, integrating teacher training, policy enforcement, infrastructure improvements, and societal awareness.

In conclusion, while Albania has made notable strides toward inclusive education, achieving its full potential necessitates sustained efforts across multiple domains. Effective implementation of inclusive practices can lead to equitable educational outcomes for all students, promote social inclusion, and align national education policies with international standards. Future research, policy development, and practical interventions should continue to focus on bridging gaps, enhancing teacher competencies, improving resources, and fostering positive societal attitudes to ensure the long-term success of inclusive education in Albania.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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