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SPECIAL AND INCLUSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION. THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION - REMOVING BARRIERS

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Abstract:

Inclusive education is a contemporary educational philosophy that emphasizes the active participation of all students in the classroom. This paper explores the theoretical foundations and critical factors for implementing inclusion effectively. It contributes to both semantic understanding and practical ways for promoting educational inclusion and removing barriers within pedagogical contexts. This study aims to highlight the importance of the work in inclusive teaching of teachers for the inclusion of students with disabilities and special educational needs. The article can inform professional development efforts to improve teachers' inclusive practices.

Keywords: special and inclusive teacher education, inclusion, special needs, inclusive teaching, labeling, inclusive schools, barriers, learning environment, learning styles, diversity, inclusive teacher

Highlights

- It underscores the role of learning environment and the benefits for learning of all students.
- It emphasizes the necessity of awareness of limitations and potential obstacles to achieve truly inclusive schools.
- It highlights the importance of teacher competencies and the removal of barriers such as labeling.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education is vital to achieving quality education and effective teaching for all. It is a fact that contemporary rhetoric on disability and the inclusion of all children includes theoretical and practical issues and seeks to understand knowledge and apply skills regarding: Familiarity with fundamental principles and challenges of inclusive education, Implementation of educational adaptations through the removal of barriers, Reflection on perceptions that influence educational reality, Design of modern pedagogical methodologies, strategies and practices with the support of technology and the development of creativity, Examination of conceptual frameworks and analysis of applied tools suitable for building inclusion in all educational contexts, Development of engaging learning experiences and the cultivation of a lifelong inclusive culture towards all stakeholders of an educational community (Mitschell & Sutherland, 2022; Graham, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Black-Hawkins, 2014; Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Basically, this framework for educational inclusion has three main parts: *Participation and access, Participation and collaboration, Participation and diversity* (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2025; https://www.cast.org/). So, the modern teacher needs knowledge and skills to strengthen their inclusive role and enhance their personal theory on issues of school inclusion and social justice in all contexts of formal, non-formal and informal education (Amzat et al., 2017). Here, Florian (2008) suggests that it is through an examination of "the things that teachers can do" that we will begin to bring meaning to the concept of inclusion. Further to thus, public discourse on issues of inclusion and co-teaching practices—as means of promoting equity and effectively addressing the needs of vulnerable social groups and individuals with disabilities—has significantly expanded in contemporary literature (Slee, 2014).

In particular, inclusion is recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for quality education, while teachers' co-teaching practices are considered crucial for the academic success of vulnerable groups of students within mainstream classrooms (Cruz et al., 2023). In this context and as defined by contemporary literature (Figueiredo, 2025), this study attempts to also advance with a suggestion of parameters for the establishment of educational inclusion, which could be used at different times and contexts. Through our work, we seek to contribute to teacher education, and we aim to contribute to the training of teachers and their awareness of the acceptance of diversity.

2. Aim and significance

This paper is based on bibliographic research on inclusive education. It is a Mini-Review Article. We attempt to examine educational inclusion as an everyday pedagogical philosophy and practice. The article is a short critical approach outlining basic factors for the implementation of inclusive education. It contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical ways for promoting educational inclusion and removing

barriers within pedagogical contexts. Overall, the aim of this study is to explore the core of inclusive teaching practice as a part of the special and inclusive teacher education.

Here, it should be noted that the purpose of the paper is not to provide an exhaustive presentation of all theoretical frameworks on the topic of educational inclusion, but to critically discuss those theoretical and applied frameworks that contribute most to inclusive practice and the removal of barriers to educational inclusion. This study aims to highlight the importance of the work in inclusive teaching of teachers for the inclusion of students with disabilities and special educational needs. Consequently, it can inform professional development efforts to improve teachers' inclusive practices.

3. Beyond special needs - the challenge of educational inclusion

In contemporary educational discourse, attention is directed toward the inalienable right of every child to receive quality education within their local community, as enshrined in national and international legislation (CSIE). Stubbs (2008) argues that the notion of "special needs" remains vague and ultimately unhelpful, as it does not effectively contribute to understanding or addressing educational differences. Instead, emphasis on concepts such as responsiveness to diverse learning needs and styles, the provision of adequate resources, accessibility and the assurance of quality, inclusive education for all constitutes a set of critical parameters for overcoming barriers to learning for everyone.

On the other hand, approaching a student's educational needs through a negative, interactional lens in relation to the learning environment may lead to processes of labeling and exclusion. Conversely, a psychodynamic understanding of educational needs—considered within the sociocultural context of the child and their family—shifts the focus toward strengthening the student's psychosocial skills. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration between teachers and specialists characterizes the most advanced educational systems, representing a central concern of contemporary psychopedagogical approaches to inclusion and contributing to substantial transformations in school structures (Kourkoutas, 2008).

From this perspective, students' learning ability and performance can be either enhanced or undermined, depending on whether the categorization of educational needs is utilized constructively or results in stigmatization. The learning environment itself may thus act as either a facilitator or a barrier to learning. Consequently, the analysis of the interaction between student and environment must encompass all dimensions of the educational system (Reid, 2019, pp. 43–44).

Labeling is associated with the early stages of an individual's socialization through the dual processes of inclusion and exclusion and the ensuing construction of social identity both within and beyond the school context (Waterhouse, 2004). It is therefore essential to highlight the negative consequences of potential stigmatization (*labeling*) in education (*loannidi*, 2001; *loannidi* & Malafantis, 2022), particularly in cases where

educational needs may be linked to behavioral disorders or possible involvement with social control mechanisms.

This is important because it challenges the notion that mainstream classroom teachers do not recognise or know how to implement effective teaching practices for pupils with special needs (Florian, 2008). As Florian states: "A central challenge for teachers who wish to develop inclusive practice is to consider the way they think about the problem of inclusion. The challenge is not to defend the need to accommodate learner differences, as has been the case so far, but to challenge our collective complacency about what is not 'otherwise available'. Individual teachers may not be able to change the organisational structure of schooling, but their work can be informed by the knowledge that it is possible to support the learning of all students".

4. About inclusion and inclusive education - Removing barriers

The literature provides substantial evidence on effective ways to promote inclusion (Reid, 2019), emphasizing cooperative learning and inclusive teaching practices in combination with teachers' professional competencies and skills (Ioannidi, 2023). The integration of these elements can generate multiple synergies for the benefit of students, offering teachers professional opportunities for collaboration and collective problemsolving to address various learning barriers within their classrooms (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2022).

According to Aggelidis and Mavroeidis (2010), the definition of inclusion is associated with any form of marginalization that may be experienced at school by any child, regardless of whether or not the child is identified as having special educational needs. The same authors further argue that genuine inclusive education should begin at an early stage, target all levels of the educational system, and take into account the opinions and interests of all children in developing an individualized educational program.

In this formulation, inclusive education is grounded in the right of every individual to education, ensuring the presence, participation, and progress of all students, and above all, the principle of *equal opportunities* (Medina-García et al., 2020). Inclusion is a dynamic process. Its core principles include respect for diversity, recognition of rights, responsiveness to individual needs, effective pedagogical and psycho-educational planning, collective responsibility, personal and professional development. What does this mean in practice? It means (Mullin et al., 2021):

- **Inclusion** Creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, represented, supported, and valued to fully participate.
- **Diversity** Examining the makeup of an institution to ensure that people from different backgrounds and with multiple perspectives are represented.
- **Equity -** The fair and just treatment of all members of a community.
- **Accessibility** The commitment for everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience to be included in all programs and activities.

This philosophy finds its practical expression in the concept of the *School for All*, where diversity becomes a source of learning and continuous improvement for the school community. Within this framework, traditional categorization practices are abolished, and educational approaches that sustain dependency relationships between vulnerable groups and socially dominant ones are dismantled (Soulis, n.d.).

In this direction, both school and social inclusion—and particularly inclusive education—constitute a sustainable developmental strategy for individuals, social groups and communities. It is an education of non-exclusion, one that embraces diversity and acknowledges the unique needs of every learner. Especially noteworthy is the community dimension of inclusive education, which emerges from its organizational perspective and evolves into what is now known as *education without exclusion*. This approach embodies the ethics of inclusion, the voices of all stakeholders and the central role of the community in articulating inclusive cultures, policies and practices (García-García & Cotrina-García, 2023).

Sattorova (2023) notes that inclusive education represents a new humanistic practice that manifests today as a systemic educational innovation. It requires profound changes in how teaching is organized, how the learning environment is designed and resourced, and how all participants in the educational process—children, teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, social educators, and parents—engage in the shared responsibility of education.

Finally, it should be noted that a deep understanding of inclusive practices within the educational process, combined with teachers' positive attitudes, constitutes a critical factor for the effective implementation of inclusion (Krischler et al., 2019). Equally important is the awareness of the limitations and barriers that prevent schools from operating as fully inclusive institutions (Evans & Lunt, 2002; Hedegaard Hansen, 2012). Thus, understanding the importance of learning styles should be an integral part of a school's daily practice, policy, and philosophy. Therefore, classrooms need to be designed with consideration for the diverse ways in which students learn. For example, it may be necessary to rearrange the layout of desks or to provide students with the opportunity to choose the design or style of desks they prefer. At the same time, it is essential to take into account other factors related to the classroom environment, such as furniture, spatial design, lighting, sound, colour, space and the overall classroom atmosphere (Reid, 2019). Also, the positive communication practices, clear task roles and responsibilities and positive interpersonal relationships promote cooperation (Ufermann et al., 2024).

In this way, it becomes clear that the quality of teaching and learning processes in co-teaching and inclusive education is of paramount importance, as the development of school capacities and the reduction of school failure are key factors for the success of inclusive education systems (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). Here, it is no coincidence that the way in which disability is understood is important because the language people use to describe individuals with disabilities influences their expectations and interactions with them, e.g. for physical education

teachers, philosophical orientation in regard to disability discourse can influence how they treat and interact with students with disabilities in their classes (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

In total, inclusive education ultimately represents a new philosophy of learning and active participation for all students within the classroom. It emphasizes, among other aspects, diverse learning approaches and the minimization of barriers (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

5. About inclusive teachers – the example of Greece and Cyprus

The literature focuses on a major challenge facing education systems around the world, that of finding ways of including all children in schools (Ainscow, 2020). It is noteworthy that empirical findings suggest that teachers ought to be given the opportunity to increase their competency in what should be an ongoing process of listening to and acting upon student voices in inclusive education, potentially going so far as to become agents for change in the school system (Uthus & Aas, 2024). Other empirical findings highlight the importance of fostering a supportive inclusive education climate, enhancing teachers' efficacy and positive attitudes, and providing necessary resources to facilitate the implementation of inclusive instruction (Fu et al., 2025).

Specifically, according to research findings in Cyprus and Greece (Ioannidi, 2024), the teacher must have skills as cooperation, contact, flexibility, sociability, realization, understanding, ingenuity, creation, innovation, imagination, respect for diversity, patience, support, high expectations for all children, social justice, lifelong learning on inclusion. Furthermore, lifelong learning and professional development are fundamental for teachers, as inclusion requires constant renewal of pedagogical strategies and up-todate knowledge. Respect for diversity, social justice and empathy should be the guiding principles of inclusive education, ensuring equity and equal learning opportunities for everyone. As mentioned, understanding, patience and emotional support contribute significantly to students' participation and academic as well as social progress. The use of technology and digital tools was also mentioned as a means to remove barriers and enhance accessibility for students with diverse educational needs. Inclusive teachers must foster cooperation and mutual respect among students, creating a classroom climate that values every individual. High expectations for all students, combined with differentiated teaching methods, can lead to meaningful and effective inclusion. Ultimately, inclusion is achieved through continuous reflection, collaboration and the teacher's personal commitment to social justice and equity in education.

In additional, inclusive pedagogies and innovative pedagogical practices are of interest for the pedagogical and inclusive basis of the modern school of the 21st century (Ioannidi, 2025). At this point, it is not a coincidence that experiential opportunities for inclusion within the educational context shape and enrich students' inner worlds, linking learning to life while recognizing diversity and its inherent value in society. Above all,

the principles of inclusive education are reinforced, reflecting the fundamental notion that "no one should be marginalized" (UNESCO, 2017; Beckett & Callus, 2023).

6. Conclusion

Summarizing, it has been decades since inclusive education was introduced as the most favourable approach to educating students with special educational needs and disabilities. Still, according to research and practice, teachers' attitudes are seen as the most timeless and important key factor for its successful implementation (Lindner et al., 2023). Therefore, inclusive education relies on institutional support as well as teachers' attitudinal readiness, since they are central to fostering equitable environments for students with SEND (Demirdiş & Çiftçi, 2025).

In reality, faced with these challenges, there is evidence of an increased interest in the idea of making education more inclusive and equitable. However, the field remains confused as to the actions needed in order to move policy and practice forward (Ainscow, 2020). For this reason, explore below some central actions and teaching options for the educational inclusion and equal access to learning of all children with and without disabilities:

6.1 Implications of the work for inclusive teaching

Supporting and teaching in action: how to use the work in your inclusive teaching (see: Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020):

- Encourage students to think about the inclusion in practice. how are these concepts, principles, and strategies?
- Relate the new information about inclusion to pre-existing knowledge and experiences.
- Include inclusive activities that focus on application.
- Use examples to explain inclusive concepts and practices.
- Offer images, animations and texts about inclusion.
- Emphasize inclusive progress and focus on "learning" instead of "knowing".
- Formulate key points for inclusive communication and participatory action through multiple modes, visual, auditory, artistic, kinesthetic, etc.
- Create appropriate adaptations and modifications to your learning conditions and teaching.
- Consider everyone's voices and ensure equal learning opportunities with innovative pedagogical methodologies, e.g. differentiation, assistive technology, UDL, etc.
- Utilize digital tools and create works with inclusive meanings with critical reflection and creativity, e.g. shapes, drawings, paintings, written texts, artistic events, etc.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

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