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## ENHANCING TEACHER PREPARATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION INTEGRATION IN ALBANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract:** This study examines the integration of inclusive education principles in university teacher training, with a focus on the preparation of future teachers according to the inclusive teacher profile. In Albania, the Ministry of Education and Sports has just concluded the process of unification of universities' curricula for the training of teachers of different teaching profiles, proposing a course of two formative credits on inclusive education and orienting university professors on the main contents of the course. This research aims to analyse the content of university courses on inclusive education proposed in the different master's level study programs. Also, it aims to identify gaps, strengths, and areas of improvement existing in these programs based on the recommendations and results presented in similar studies in the international literature. The methodology includes a review of the literature to identify which recommendations come from other studies on the structuring of the course program on inclusive education. Also, the study includes a review of the university curriculum for the preparation of new teachers to perform a comparative analysis of the data collected. The findings reveal that while some programs incorporate elements of inclusive education, there is significant variability in the depth and consistency of this integration. However, significant gaps exist in areas such as opportunities for hands-on training and the application of inclusive pedagogical strategies in real classroom settings. The study highlights the need for a more systematic and comprehensive approach to incorporating inclusive education principles into all aspects of teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, Teacher Training, Disabilities, Best Practices, Pre-service Teachers, Curriculum Analysis

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a key term when discussing the quality education of all children. Furthermore, inclusive education has emerged as a global priority and is understood within the framework of human rights, children's rights, and the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 1948; 1989; 2008), emphasizing the right to quality education for everyone. Despite advancements in inclusive education, persistent barriers remain within the educational system and its associated processes, particularly in the real-world contexts of children's education. These barriers are often rooted in individual attitudes, which can hinder the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. (Dua & Dua, 2017; Kurowski, Černý, & Trapl, 2022; Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002; Sharma, Armstrong, Merumeru, Simic, & Yared, 2018). Monsen, Ewing, and Kwoka (2014) found that teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs significantly influenced classroom management and students' satisfaction with learning. Regarding the construction of inclusive attitudes and/or changing negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs, continuous recommendations have been directed towards institutions involved in training new teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; EASNIE 2014; UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, universities through their programs for training new teachers play an important role in supporting the development of inclusive practices in schools as well as fostering positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs. Attention has consistently been directed towards the factors that impede inclusive access within the educational system, ranging from physical barriers to attitudinal ones. Meanwhile, institutional barriers refer to those reflective of the bureaucratic structures present in schools, school boards, healthcare facilities, recreational programs, and charitable organizations (Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002). Furthermore, Pivik emphasizes that there are intentional attitudinal barriers, such as isolation and both physical and emotional bullying. On the other hand, unintentional attitudinal barriers are associated with a lack of knowledge and education, as well as inadequate understanding or effort on the part of the educational system or school staff (idem). Another study conducted by Sharma et al. (Sharma, Simi, & Forlin, 2015) highlights the fundamental importance of preparing new teachers to develop inclusive teaching practices, referencing the competencies they acquire during their university training. In their study, the authors provide recommendations for the National University of the Solomon Islands to revise its curriculum and course structure for inclusive education

offered to teacher education students, focusing not only on knowledge but also on affective and practical training (the 3H focus – Head, Heart, and Hands) related to inclusive teaching. In this regard, this study aims to direct research focus towards analyzing the extent to which teacher training programs at public universities in Albania integrate key components of inclusive education, with an emphasis on equipping pre-service teachers with sustainable competencies to meet the needs of students with disabilities through an inclusive approach. To this end, the research questions guiding the study were: How do current university courses in student teacher programs incorporate the principles and practices of inclusive education?; To what extent do these courses prepare student teachers to work with students with disabilities in regular classrooms?; How well do these courses align with the recommendations from existing studies and best practices on inclusive education?. Understanding the gaps and strengths in university preparation for inclusive teaching is essential for improving teacher training programs and ensuring all students' rights to an equitable education. The following paragraph provides a literature review aimed at evaluating the extent to which inclusive education is integrated into the university curricula of teacher training programs and examining the recommendations offered by various studies on the topic.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to answer the research questions, a literature review was conducted on how universities that offer teacher training programs integrate courses on inclusive education or special pedagogy into their curricula. What formative weight do these courses have in the training of new teachers and how much do they reflect the recommendations brought in the reports of international agencies such as EASNIE (EASNIE, 2020), European Commission (European Commission, 2020) The data presented in the Country Info section of EASNIE highlights the issue of "Teacher Education for Inclusive Education." It reveals that in several countries, university programs for teacher training either include or do not include courses on inclusive education for curricular teachers. Table 1 provides examples of how inclusive education training has been integrated into the programs for curricular teachers in various countries. Notably, it appears that Italy has made a greater effort to incorporate training focused on inclusion, even for curricular teachers.

*Table 1. Data from the the section "Teacher Education for Inclusive Education" presented in Country Info of EASNIE*

Teacher education for inclusive education	Presented /Hours or ECTS	Course definition
<b>Austria:</b> ‘Special education’ is included in the fourth and fifth years of teacher education (one to two hours per week). Since 2016, ‘Inclusive education’ has also been included (two hours per week). ‘Educational partnerships’ is also part of the basic teacher education curriculum. However, students of primary teacher education may choose ‘Inclusive Pedagogy’ as a major field of study from the fifth semester, while students of secondary teacher education may do so from the first semester.	Presented/ two hours per week	1.Inclusive Education 2.Inclusive Pedagogy
<b>Croatia:</b> The undergraduate study programme of pedagogy in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb includes two courses that deal with children with special needs: the Fundamentals of Social Pedagogy and the Methodology of Working with Students with Special Needs. The Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb offers courses on Inclusive Pedagogy and Social Pedagogy.	Presented/ no data	1.Fundamentals of Social Pedagogy 2.Method. of Working with Students SNE 3.Inclusive Pedagogy
<b>Greece:</b> Mainstream teachers also acquire qualifications on individualised support for learners with disabilities and inclusive education through Master’s degrees, training seminars and distance learning programmes provided by universities and other certified institutions.	Presented/ no data	1.Individualised support of LwD 2.Inclusive education
<b>Italy:</b> Initial training was oriented towards more inclusive practices, comprising 20% of the curriculum for curricular teachers and up to 100% for support teachers’ specialisation. All courses for initial teacher training include acquiring: teaching competences which favour the integration of pupils with disabilities. Pre-schools and primary schools: Training on pupils with SEN (Special Pedagogy for Inclusion – 10 ECTS, UNIBO; Psychology of disabilities	Presented/ 20% of the curriculum for curricular	1. <b>Special Pedagogy for Inclusion – 10 ECTS</b> 2. <b>Psychology of</b>

<b>and integration – 8 ECTS) Studies correspond to 31 credits. As pupils with special educational needs are the responsibility of both support teachers and the whole school staff, teachers and school principals at all school levels undergo specific in-service training on pupils with special educational needs</b>	teacher 31 ECTS	<b>disabilities and integration – 8 ECTS)</b>
<b>Lithuania: Every teacher who works in pre-school or primary school or as a subject, vocational or supplementary informal education teacher must complete at least 60 hours of training in special needs education and psychology.</b>	Presented/ <b>60 hours</b> of training in SNE	1.Special needs education
<b>Portugal: Initial teacher education includes a generic and introductory approach to issues related to inclusion, as well as understanding and supporting learners with diverse characteristics and additional needs and working with families. Kindergarten/pre-primary, primary and secondary education teachers can specialise in some areas (e.g. special education, counselling, pedagogical supervision, school administration, curriculum development, etc.).</b>	Presented/ no data	1. Generic and introductory approach to inclusion, 2.Special Education

Source: Data retrieved from European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2020), <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/lithuania/teacher-education-for-inclusive-education>

According to the data published on the EASNIE website of different European countries, training for inclusive education or support for students with special needs and disabilities, in many countries, is addressed to specialized or support teachers. In practice, it seems that in the curricula for the training of curricular teachers there is no training regarding the principles of inclusive education, moving from theoretical aspects to practical ones to be applied in regular classes with an inclusive approach. This leads to the conclusion that regular class teachers receive little or no professional training regarding their work with children with special needs. However, in this regard there is a need for a more in-depth study on university curricula, and why not, also at the level of content of the syllabus of specific courses.

### 3. PREPARATION OF TEACHERS FOR INCLUSIVITY IN EDUCATION: DATA FROM RESEARCH AND STUDIES

The preparation of teachers for inclusivity in education, especially concerning their knowledge, practical skills, and attitudes towards including children with disabilities in regular classrooms, has attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers. They aim to understand the factors that influence this area and to identify effective practices for training teachers. The goal is to align training with the characteristics of an Profile of Inclusive Teachers (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012) From this perspective, it is important to underline that in many studies attention has been paid to the change in attitudes of both pre-service teachers and in-service teachers.

In the study carried out by Kurniawati et al. (2014) reviews international literature on the characteristics and efficacy of primary teacher training programs on inclusion. The study identifies that most programs focus on improving attitudes, knowledge, and skills, but *their short-term nature limits long-lasting impact*. Field experiences and interactive methods enhance learning, but *follow-ups and outcome measurements are needed to ensure sustainable progress*. The article underscores the role of well-structured training in equipping teachers to meet diverse classroom needs, aligning with the broader human rights agenda of inclusive education.

Another study presented by McCrimmon (2015) discusses the challenges and shortcomings in the preparation of teachers for inclusive education (IE) in Canadian schools. While IE is widely adopted across Canada, the author notes that few Canadian universities require teacher candidates to complete coursework specifically focused on inclusive education. Consequently, many future teachers feel inadequately prepared to work with students who have exceptional learning needs. In his study, McCrimmon identifies several barriers to effective IE implementation, including *teachers' willingness and preparedness to embrace inclusive practices*. Research indicates that factors such as gender, experience, and personal expectations influence teachers' acceptance of inclusion. Also, a review of teacher preparation programs reveals a significant lack of required courses on IE and childhood disabilities. Most programs focus primarily on preparing teachers for typical learners, leaving them underprepared for inclusive environments. The author suggests that specialized postgraduate certificate programs could provide targeted *training for teachers regarding childhood disorders and effective classroom interventions*. Such programs are currently offered by only one Canadian university and are designed to enhance teachers' capabilities in inclusive settings.

A study by Sharma (2012) examined the impact of a 10-week inclusive education course on pre-service teachers in Victoria, Australia. Using surveys and concept maps, the mixed-methods research revealed significant

improvements in participants' attitudes, confidence, and understanding of inclusive teaching. Initially, many viewed disability through a medical lens and doubted their ability to manage inclusive classrooms. By the course's end, they embraced the social model of disability, focusing on strengths rather than deficits, and reported enhanced confidence. Structured into three modules—understanding inclusion, its importance, and practical strategies—the course featured interactive components like school visits and guest lectures. The findings highlight the effectiveness of targeted training in fostering inclusive practices and stress the importance of institutional support for sustainable implementation.

Lancaster and Bain (2010) examined the effectiveness of two course design models in improving pre-service teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) for inclusive education. Comparing an "embedded design" approach with an "applied experience" model, the study found that the embedded design, emphasizing stages of knowledge-building, active engagement, and continuous feedback, produced significantly better outcomes. This approach integrated collaborative problem-solving, explicit teaching, and cooperative learning, ensuring direct application to lesson planning and instructional strategies. In contrast, the applied experience model, centered on real-world practicum, was less effective in fostering PCK mastery. The findings highlight the importance of robust theoretical coursework to prepare teachers for learner diversity, with practical experiences serving as a complement rather than a replacement. Tristani and Gunter (2020) conducted a systematic review of 27 studies examining teacher training for inclusive education in North America and Australia. The review highlights the significant impact of training on improving teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills for supporting students with disabilities (SWD). Various methods—coursework, workshops, and blended approaches—showed positive outcomes, with workshops particularly effective for skill development. However, inconsistencies in the duration and frequency of training make it challenging to identify optimal conditions. The authors stress the importance of addressing both pedagogical knowledge and attitudes toward inclusion and recommend systemic changes, such as policy alignment and ongoing professional development, to sustain effective inclusive practices.

Based on the analysis of the data from various research studies presented above, it is clear that, while these studies may not be exhaustive and many others exist on the topic, we can identify several important aspects to consider for preparing teachers for inclusive education. Many studies emphasize the importance of integrating different teaching methodologies by combining theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. Additionally, there is a focus on the duration of teacher training programs, as well as the importance of follow-up and evaluation of results. This evaluation should measure not only the knowledge and practical skills gained but also any changes in the beliefs and attitudes of the teachers who participate in the training.

Research indicates the importance of considering socio-cultural factors, prompting us to assess teachers' attitudes at the start of their training. This assessment allows us to design training courses that effectively contribute to developing genuine competencies in inclusive teaching.

#### **4. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION COURSES IN ALBANIAN UNIVERSITIES**

In Albania, for nearly two years, university faculties that prepare teachers have been under the guidance of the ministry for curriculum unification. During this process, in collaboration with seven public universities, a document was created outlining university program plans for teacher training. An agreement was reached on 80% of the curricula for these programs. In the psycho-pedagogical training courses for teachers of various profiles at the master's level, the working group proposed the integration of a course titled "Inclusive Education." This course comprises 3 ECTS, which includes 37 hours of lectures in the auditorium and 38 hours of independent study for students. The working group responsible for unifying curricula did not outline the essential elements that the course program should include to effectively prepare students for inclusive education. Additionally, they did not provide guidance on the key areas that teachers should emphasize in order to develop the competencies of new educators, particularly in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to inclusiveness. In the analysis of teacher training programs, it is noted that there are no laboratory hours or practical work opportunities for student teachers. This absence limits their ability to interact closely with students with disabilities and hinders their understanding of how to integrate theoretical concepts with the practical aspects of inclusive teaching in regular classrooms. One unexamined aspect is the attitudes of newly graduated teachers regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Conducting a study on this topic by the teaching departments would provide valuable insights to help guide the revision of various courses, including the course on inclusive education. The goal would be to foster positive attitudes toward inclusion, which is a key component of the profile of an inclusive teacher. Joint forums that bring together experts and university professors from various fields can foster meaningful discussions about inclusive education and the training of new teachers. Such collaboration would promote a unified approach to addressing inclusion and integrating supervised practical classes in inclusive classrooms, where effective and successful practices have already been identified. In conclusion, introducing a course on inclusive education in

university curricula for training new teachers is insufficient to foster positive attitudes towards inclusion. This is because attitudes are one of the primary barriers to achieving effective inclusive education.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while Albanian universities have made strides in integrating inclusive education principles into teacher training programs, significant gaps remain. The variability in course content and the lack of practical training opportunities hinder the development of comprehensive inclusive teaching competencies. To address these issues, a more systematic and cohesive approach is necessary, ensuring that all teacher education programs incorporate both theoretical knowledge and hands-on experiences. By fostering positive attitudes and equipping future teachers with the necessary skills to support students with disabilities, Albania can move closer to achieving truly inclusive education. Continued collaboration among universities, policymakers, and educators is essential to refine and enhance these programs, ultimately ensuring that all students receive the quality education they deserve.

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