PRESCHOOL PEDAGOGY AND TEACHING PRACTICES IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: A RESEARCH STUDY ACCORDING TO THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM IN GREECE

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Abstract:

The Curriculum forms the common framework for organizing learning in kindergarten based on certain principles. Preschool education, in the light of the development of basic abilities, is aligned with the principles of holistic development and learning adopted by the Curriculum. It is important that preschool teachers understand the core knowledge areas, concepts, and skills that are sought to be developed so that they can approach them holistically and dynamically. The purpose of this study is to investigate the views and educational practices of kindergarten teachers regarding the teaching plans and learning situations they organize in their inclusive classrooms in order to respond to the needs and capabilities of kindergarten children. It is a qualitative research, with the methodological tool of semi-structured interviews, in a sample of forty (40) kindergarten teachers from the regional unit of Epirus. Kindergarten teachers answered questions regarding: investigations, errors as a pedagogical tool, the learning situations they organize taking into account characteristics of the game, inclusive education in kindergarten, differentiated teaching and learning and the opportunities they create for intercultural communication. From the analysis and interpretation of the interviews, it is clear that the kindergarten teachers wish to harmoniously combine theory with practice and that inclusive education in kindergarten is a practical approach to diversity as an element that unifies and enriches the learning experience. However, the findings of the research also highlighted the need for teachers for training and further information on teaching methodology and practical application as well as the need to reframe and redefine the goals of the Analytical Study Programs in the direction of forming a high-quality modern school.

Keywords: kindergarten teachers, preschool pedagogy, methodological and didactic approaches, curriculum

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1. Introduction

Kindergarten lays the foundations for the development of the skills considered essential for the child's successful and dynamic participation in modern social life as an active citizen, in the context of his developmental maturity. The emphasis on a good knowledge of the developmental characteristics of preschool children, in the context of their all-round development, aims to create rich learning environments that respect the pace and way each child learns (IEP, 2022; Saracho, 2023).

Kindergarten teachers are asked to harmoniously combine theory with practice, so that the teaching designs and learning situations they organize are of high quality and meet the needs and capabilities of kindergarten children (Donasco, & Vertulfo, 2024). It is pointed out that the didactic framework in kindergarten is not identical with the narrow use of the term teaching, as applied to other levels of education. It refers to the systematic process of planning, implementing and evaluating activities that are developmentally appropriate, based on inquiry and play, promote collaboration and take into account the socio-cultural background and differentiated needs of children in the context of inclusive education (Huo, 2022).

It is particularly important to make use of exploratory learning that refers to the study or solving of issues, questions or problems that emerge from the context of the physical and social environment and fall into the interests of children, recommending a cognitive challenge for them (Chu *et al.*, 2017). In addition, the interdisciplinary approach that underpins inquiry learning is the framework of choice that defragments knowledge and treats it as a whole. The dissolution of the boundaries between individual scientific fields allows the integration of knowledge that has common characteristics in all sciences, promoting interdisciplinary interconnection.

In addition, inquiry learning can take different forms, depending on the degree of support provided by the kindergarten teacher in guiding children in planning and carrying out an inquiry. Children need to gradually transition from more teacher-structured to more open-ended explorations. Particularly important, in the context of the investigations carried out by children, is the utilization of error as a pedagogical tool, developing a positive attitude and internal motivation for learning (Donaldson, 2019).

From the literature review, we discern the multi-layered processes that allow teachers to design and adapt the lesson so that all students can follow it. Multilevel instruction involves a four-step planning process: the concept to be taught, the methods used to help students understand at their own pace, how new information is presented to students, and how students understand and demonstrate what have they learned (Rolf *et al.*, 2021). In the context of multi-level teaching, cooperative learning refers to a process in which students interact in groups, demonstrating responsibility towards their own learning and that of the group members. This interaction determines the relationship that develops between the children, with the kindergarten teacher, with the space and with the tools and materials they use. It can take the form of informal and/or formal cooperative learning, depending on the goals, organization and functioning of

the groups. Basic elements for the organization and effectiveness of cooperative learning in kindergarten are: a) the formation of groups, b) the determination of the nature of cooperative actions, c) the support of the division of labor and the assumption of roles by children, d) the development of interactions and relationships, e) presentation, evaluation and feedback (IEP, 2022; Ferguson - Patrick, 2020; Listrup, 2023).

Collaborative learning with the use of differentiated teaching which is a system of strategies that aim to adapt the Curriculum to the needs and abilities of the children in the class are effective teaching practice for modern inclusion classes. The adaptations of teaching according to differentiated teaching and learning, concern four levels, the learning objectives (content), the level of difficulty, the means and materials (process), the organization of the "space" and the management of relationships (learning environment) and the recording of the learning process (the result) with the aim of maximizing the quality of the subjective learning experience (Valianti *et al.*, 2020; Sakellariou *et al.*, 2020).

In modern, inclusive classrooms, culturally sensitive teaching is a necessity and should refer to the need to manage social identities to combat all forms of discrimination and exclusion. But it requires the integration of knowledge about the cultural characteristics and achievements of the different socio-cultural groups in the kindergarten program, so that it responds both to the priorities of the multicultural society and to the cultural capital of the children in the class. It is important for preschool teachers to create opportunities for intercultural communication through the interconnection of ideas, practices, and cultural products, enabling all children to take pride in their cultural and family capital and developing multicultural and multilingual awareness while becoming cultural communicators. of the school (Eden *et al.*, 2024; Hoytt *et al.*, 2022; Shey, & Fangwi, 2020).

2. Methodology

2.1 The Research Sample
It is a qualitative research, with the methodological tool of semi-structured interviews, in a sample: thirty (40) kindergarten teachers from the Regional Unit of Epirus. The researcher interacted with the subjects involved in the research in real conditions and with the "conversation with a purpose" as a basic tool, seeking to approach the issues discussed more deeply, he tried to generate data, interpret them, explain them and present with tables, diagrams and descriptive form (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Hennink *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Method of Analysis
The interview is one of the widely recognized forms of qualitative research, and it is a rich source of data regarding people's opinions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. In thematic analysis, data are classified according to study questions, themes, and data content. Thematic analysis

supports the division of the most important parts of the data. The data were then divided thematically, analyzed and interpreted in light of the literature (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

3. Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Table 1: Years of Teaching Service

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	6 to 10 years	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
	11 to 20 years	22	53.3	53.3	61.7
	21 to 30 years	15	38.3	38.3	100.0
	Total	40	100.0	100.0	

In terms of years of teaching experience, 53.3% are between 11 and 20 years, 38.3% have 21 to 30 years of experience, and 8.3% have 6 to 10 years of experience.

Table 2: Teacher Studies

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Teaching school	7	18.3
	A. S. GO. T. E.	2	6,7
	Postgraduate Diploma	13	31.7
	Other university degree, TEI	8	20.0
	I have no other studies	10	23.3
	Total	40	100.0

31.7% of the teachers who participated in the survey have a Master's Degree and 20.0% a second degree.

## 4. Presentation of Research Results

4.1 Do children need to gradually transition from more teacher-structured to more open-ended explorations?

When asked whether children need to gradually transition from more teacher-structured to more open-ended explorations, we received the following responses: 41.2% neither disagreed nor agreed, 37.3% agreed, and 9.1 % completely agreed. About 13% disagree and strongly disagree. We see that a percentage of the survey participants are wavering, not sure.
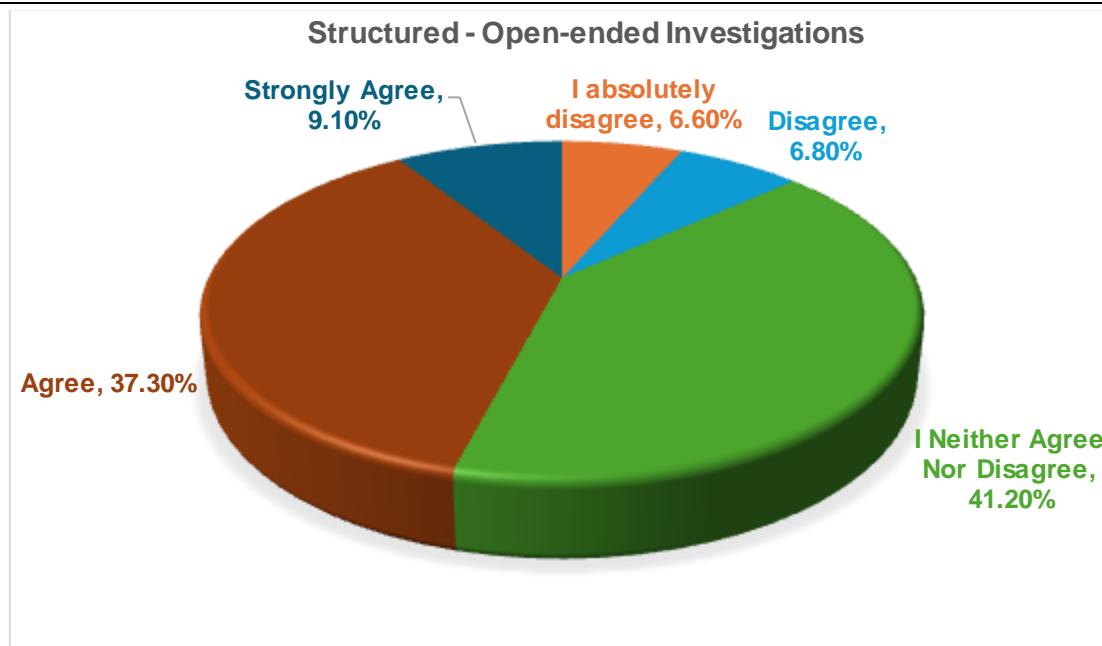
Graph 1: Quantitative Overall Results for Category: Investigations

4.2 In the context of children's investigations, do you use error as a pedagogical tool?
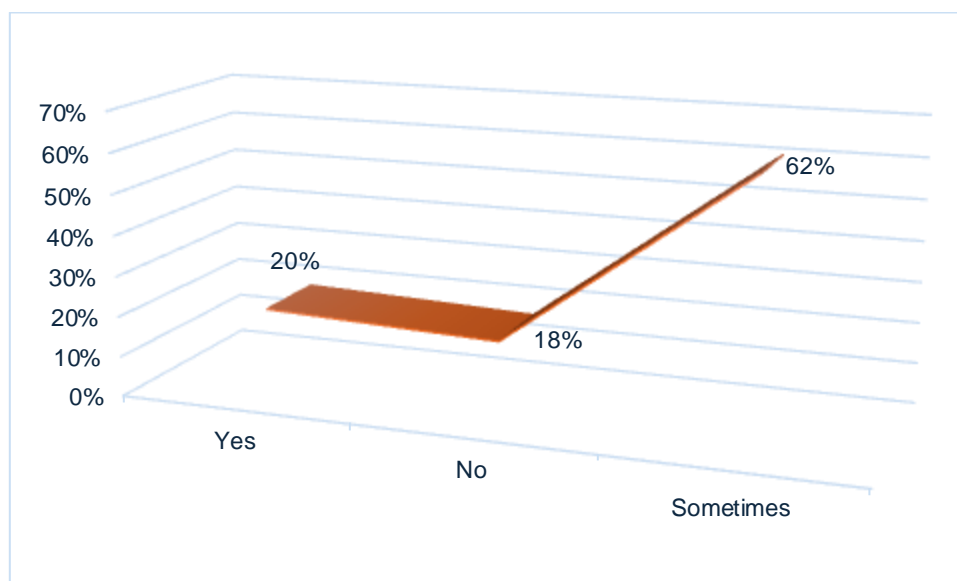
Graph 2: Error as a Pedagogical Tool

The largest percentage of kindergarten teachers answered that they sometimes use the mistake as a pedagogical tool (62%). 20% answered positively, and a similar percentage negatively (18%).

4.3 Do you organize appropriate learning situations taking into account characteristics of the game, which give the learning process a playful mood?
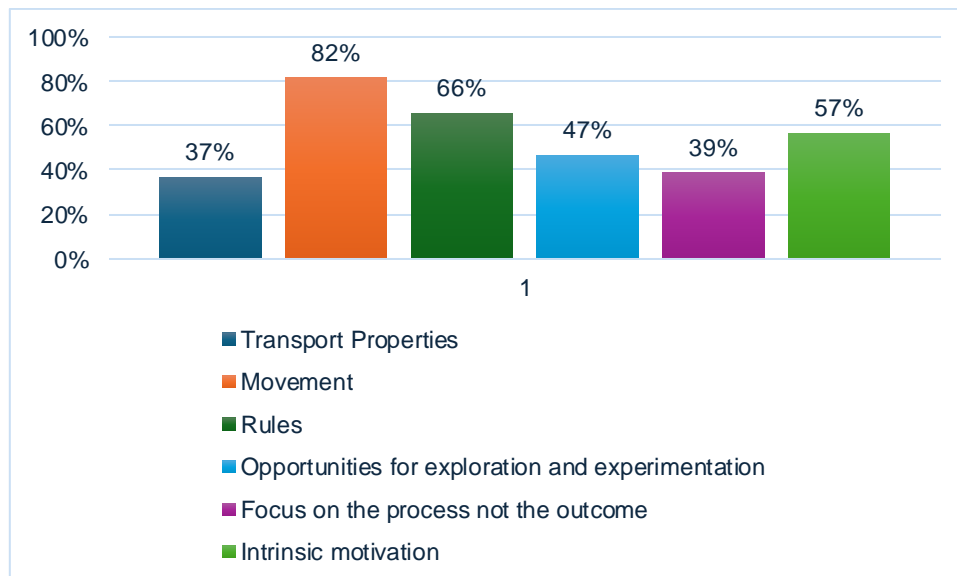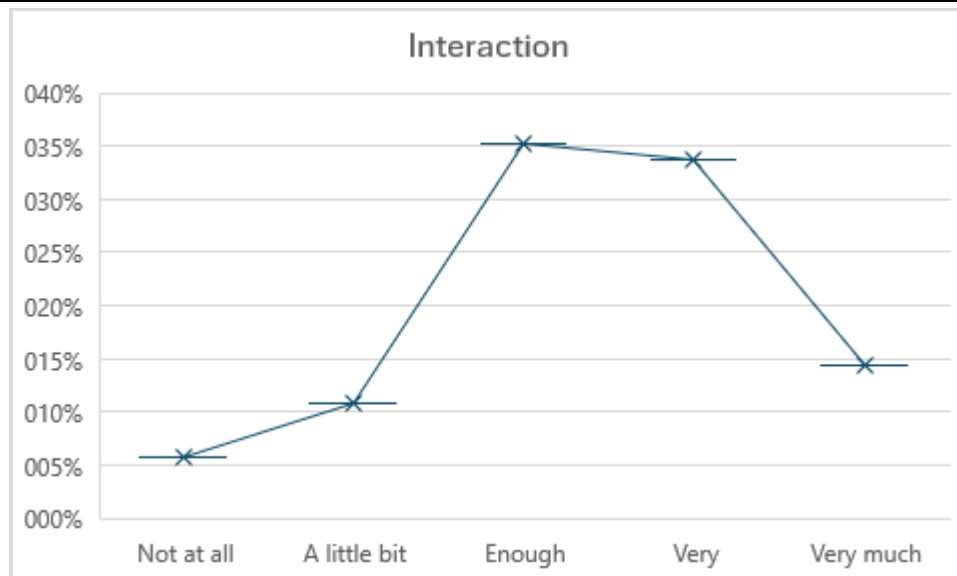

Graph 3: Quantitative Overall Results for the Category:
Learning Situations with Game Features

We also asked if they organize appropriate learning situations taking into account features of the game, which give the learning process a playful mood, and the kindergarten teachers answered that they plan the learning process using movement (82%), set rules at the beginning and during the game (66%), reinforce their students with internal motivation and rewards (57%). They also give the opportunity to explore space and materials, to experiment (47%) focusing on the process and not the result (39%). A percentage gives objects and concepts metaphorical properties for the needs of the game and the progression of the action (37%).

"Play is the main medium I use, so yes I do involve movement and puppetry while trying to get the kids to enjoy the process," was one of the responses we received.

4.4 Do you give children opportunities to interact in different situations and with different goals?

Graph 4: Quantitative overall results for category: Interactions

Kindergarten teachers provide opportunities for children to interact in different situations and with different goals, a lot (33.70%) and very much (14.40%). However, the percentage that answered quite a lot (35.30%) and the percentages of teachers who were negatively positioned are small (A little 10.90% and Not at all 5.70%).

4.5 Do you support children to become familiar, gradually, with different roles in the group with the aim of developing and practicing multiple skills based on their differentiated capabilities and needs, ensuring an inclusive education framework?
Here are some of the answers given by the kindergarten teachers during the interviews:

"We organize games that alternate roles and responsibilities so that students with special educational needs are also involved."

"We include games with emotions in the educational process and use the arts so that all students can participate."

"We use in our teaching scenarios the music and dance that help our students develop and practice multiple skills."

"Cooperative activities and group investigations play an important role in our teaching design."

"We work collaboratively with groups of mixed abilities, skills and ages (4 -6)."

4.6 Inclusive education in kindergarten is a practical approach to diversity as an element that unifies and enriches the learning experience.
For this purpose, you combine and utilize targeted and complementary:

1) The principles, methods and practices of differentiated teaching,
2) Culturally sensitive teaching,
3) As well as the framework of education for disability and special educational needs.
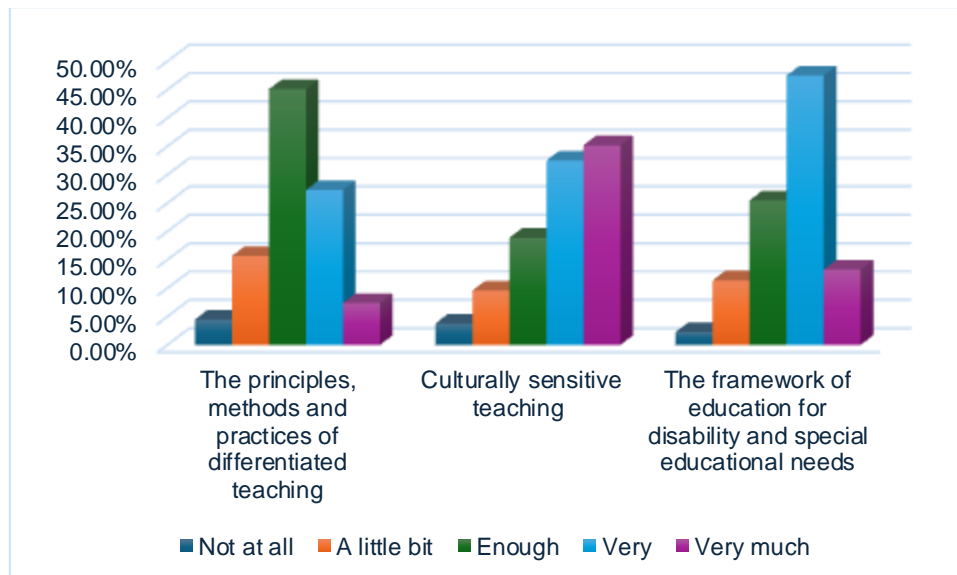
Graph 5: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Inclusive Education

The participants in our research answered that they use the principles, methods and practices of differentiated teaching in the largest percentage Quite (45%) and Very (27.30%). Low percentages for those who answered, Not at all (4.50%), A little (15.70%) and Very much (7.40%). Regarding culturally sensitive teaching, they combine and use its principles and methods a lot (32.50%) and a lot (35.20%). The percentages are lower for those who answered Not at all (3.80%), A little (9.60%) and Quite a bit (18.90%). They also use the context of education for disability and special educational needs Very (47.50%) and Very Much (13.30%) with smaller percentages in the responses Quite a bit (25.50%), A little (11.40%) and Not at all (2.30%).

4.7 Does differentiated instruction, which is a system of strategies aimed at adapting the Curriculum to the needs and abilities of the children in the class, help you implement your program?

Here are some of the answers kindergarten teachers gave during the interviews about differentiated instruction:

"We differentiate teaching because it helps us in grouping, dramatic art and playful activities, theatre improvisations."

"We use the teaching strategies of differentiated teaching and learning in the work plans we implement."

"We know minimal teaching strategies of differentiated teaching and we find it difficult to use them."

"The New Curriculum proposes differentiated teaching and learning as a teaching strategy and practice but we are not trained enough to implement it."

"I don't know how to implement differentiated teaching and learning."

4.8 Do you create opportunities for intercultural communication through the interconnection of ideas, customs and cultural products, enabling all children to feel proud of their cultural and family capital?

Here are some of the answers given by the kindergarten teachers during the intercultural communication interviews:

"Through skills workshops on diversity and acceptance of others and through school activity programs with customs and traditions of different regions we create opportunities for intercultural communication."

"We organize workshops at Christmas and Easter and invite all parents to participate and to create constructions with their children."

"We create workshops on the topic of human rights and upload material from our actions to the school's website."

"We invite parents to the kindergarten to talk to us about their homeland, their food and their way of life."

4.9 From your training and practical experience so far, please rank the factors that affect the inclusion of children with typical and atypical development in order of importance 1-6, starting with 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important

Table 3: Hierarchy of Co-education Factors

Factors of Co-education	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Teaching style	240	4.38	1,457	,084
The classroom environment	240	3.89	1,751	,101
The modification of the syllabus	240	3.16	1,658	,095
The teacher's ability to deal with behavior problems	240	3.23	1,302	.075
The social integration of children with special needs with their peers	240	3.74	1,544	,089
Class support from a second teacher	240	2.52	1,841	,106

Analyzing the data, we find that the kindergarten teachers choose as the most important factor of co-education the support from a second teacher in the classroom (mean 2.52), then the modification of the syllabus (mean 3.16), the ability of the teacher to solve behavior problems (mean 3.23), social integration with peers (mean 3.74), the classroom environment (3.89) and the last important factor for kindergarten teachers, the teaching style (mean 4.38).

5. Concluding Discussion

The role of the preschool teacher should be a facilitator, supporting children through various forms of cooperative interaction. At the same time, take into account the children's characteristics, wishes and interests for the formation of heterogeneous groups, in order to ensure the maximum learning results for all children (Hännikäinen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010; Mitsi, 2020; Taye *et al.*, 2024). Kindergarten teachers who participated in our research claim that they help children gradually become familiar with different roles in the group with the aim of developing and practicing multiple skills based on their differentiated capabilities and needs, ensuring an inclusive education framework. However, they feel insecure about the implementation of differentiated teaching and learning.

Kindergarten teachers who participated in our research study try to give the learning process a playful mood. They seemed to know from our discussions that children develop intrinsic motivation for learning and are actively involved in activities when they have playful features or are in a playful mood. Kindergarten teachers, according to the curriculum in Greece, should organize appropriate learning situations taking into account basic features of the game, which give the learning process a playful mood (IEP, 2022): a) focus on the process and not on the result, b) internal motivations, where the joy and enjoyment of the game are the main factors of the child's participation in a learning situation, c) metaphorical qualities, where the real meaning and function of things can be altered, d) movement, which is often inherent in a activity with a playful mood and provides children with the motivation to carry out alternative courses of action, e) rules that take into account children's knowledge, cultural background and experience, and are flexible, so that they can be negotiated by children themselves; and f) possibilities for exploration and experimentation, stimulating high levels of intellectual activity (Chen, 2021; Donasco, & Vertulfo, 2024). From the responses of the kindergarten teachers, we found that they mainly make use of movement, rules and internal motivation.

They also believe that inclusive education in kindergarten is a practical approach to diversity as an element that unifies and enriches the learning experience, and other researches in Greece and other countries reach a similar conclusion (IEP, 2022; Zoniou-Sideri *et al.*, 2020; Sakellariou, Strati & Mitsi, 2020). For this purpose, kindergarten teachers combine and make targeted and complementary use of the principles, methods and practices of differentiated teaching (Sakellariou, Mitsi & Strati, 2021) and culturally

sensitive teaching, as well as the context of disability and special education educational needs (Sakellariou *et al.*, 2024).

There are, however, some practices that can serve as a set of principles that can be used to guide educators in inclusive education. From the literature review in this area, we noted that successful inclusion in inclusive schools includes (Haug, 2017; Mitchell, & Sutherland, 2020; Ní Bhroin, & King, 2020; Strati, 2017; Yüksel, & Polat, 2022):

- Understanding and recognizing inclusion as an ongoing and evolving process.
- Creating a learning environment that meets the needs of all students. Social, emotional, physical and mental development is thus achieved.
- A broad and appropriate curriculum that will be tailored to meet the needs of all students.
- Enhancing and maintaining the participation of students, teachers, parents and parents as members of the community in the work and activities of the school.
- Provide educational settings that focus on identifying and reducing barriers to learning and participation.
- The restructuring of policies and practices in schools, taking culture into account, in order to respond to the diversity of students in each region.
- Identifying and providing the necessary support for teachers and students.
- Appropriate training and professional development for all school staff.
- Ensuring the availability of accessible information about inclusive policies and practices in the school for students, parents, support staff and all those involved in each student's education.

In their years of study, teachers should have the opportunity to develop basic skills that will enable them to teach all children. These skills include planning and teaching for inclusive education and accessing the curriculum. They also include managing behaviour, as well as being aware of students' emotional and psychological needs (building their self-esteem as learners), assessing learning and finally, understanding when professional advice is needed and where to find it. In the context of inclusion, general and special education teachers work together equally and harmoniously to adapt the curriculum based on the needs of all children and to integrate the individualized educational program of children with atypical development into the educational process. In this context, they adopt and combine various models of teaching and co-teaching, demonstrating flexibility and coordination during the implementation and evaluation of the program (Duncan *et al.*, 2021; Molbaek, 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

Studying the interviews of kindergarten teachers, we conclude that a clear frame of reference for teacher skills is needed to provide common ground between different teaching and learning settings, stages (initial education, transition to the profession and continuing professional development), activities and of the organizations that each school cooperates with. It also needs. careful selection, preparation, professional development and support of teacher educators so that they can provide appropriate conditions for the development of teacher potential at school and university (Desimone,

2009; Gouëdard *et al.*, 2020; Pyle *et al.*, 2018). Kindergarten teachers state that they need training on modern teaching approaches. The results of our study lead us to argue that a common policy framework for effective school leadership is needed to ensure school quality leaders who can monitor and support teachers' motivations and practices for improving teaching and learning.

In conclusion, we believe that the kindergarten teacher wishes to develop a deep knowledge of the learning contents, principles and strategies suggested by the curriculum. This, combined with knowledge about children and their needs, but also about the possibilities and limitations that exist in the school and wider environment, can shape a unique mix of educational practices and learning experiences in school, ensuring a balance between learning child- and teacher-initiated experiences to maximize learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Villasin, 2020). It is important to record, interpret, communicate and support the ideas, needs and achievements of children at school, but also in other contexts of their daily experience, coordinating all partners with the aim of defending children's rights for their development, education and well-being. In addition, the teacher can be a vehicle for exchanging messages, verbal and non-verbal, both between members of the school community and with networks of schools and agencies. Thus, it emerges as a mediator of intercultural communication (Epstein, 2018; Gottschalk, & Borhan, 2023; Tankosic, & Grbic, 2023).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest in the production and publication of this article.

About the Author

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