



## INCLUSION OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY IN EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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### **Abstract:**

In the modern globalised environment, the extended immigrant and refugee crisis is at the centre of the scientific, social, and political debate. Meanwhile, the field of Intercultural Education is of paramount importance for social cohesion as the education system is affected by the aforementioned crisis. Against this complicated backdrop, the double challenge of the promotion of educational inclusion of students with diverse cultural backgrounds and disability should be the focus of attention for teachers and policymakers. The present study examines the issue of inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability. It employs the qualitative method of thematic analysis, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with teachers who work in Reception Classes and Typical Classes of Intercultural schools in the Prefecture of Epirus, Greece. The data analysis revealed that the participants highlighted the need for restructuring the Greek education system on two levels: the macro level and the micro level. This study underlines the need for systemic change and cooperation to create an environment without exclusion.

**Keywords:** intercultural education, special education, immigrant/refugee background, disability, inclusion

### **1. Introduction**

During the last decades, the international immigration and refugee crisis has escalated dramatically, posing multifaceted challenges for the nations on a global level (Walia, 2021). Chamie (2020) states that although the relocation of populations is a constant

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global phenomenon, today, international immigration has evolved significantly in terms of scale, reasons, and causes, while the recent trends render it a decisive matter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that affects all societies. One of the most important challenges that arise from this crisis is the integration of immigrant and refugee students in the educational systems of the reception countries (Keridis, 2023). The increasing relocation of people beyond the borders has led to a rise in the population of students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019), including those who face the additional complexity of existence with a disability (Klas *et al.*, 2022).

In the wake of this continuing global crisis, the role of the educational system has become more and more vital regarding the parameter of the social integration and inclusion of those people, as education is not only a measure of socioeconomic integration but also a fundamental human right and a key to personal fulfillment, personal empowerment, and social cohesion (Boyle & Anderson, 2020 · Pruvot & Estermann, 2018 · Vaccari & Gardinier, 2019). However, the evolving demographic parameters within the classroom require the complete understanding and re-evaluation of educational practices without constraints so as to satisfy the different needs of the students. Inclusion in education is a concept that is rooted in the principles of equality and non-discrimination and has been at the forefront of modern educational discussion. Inclusion underlines the pressing need to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, their skills, or limitations, have equal access to quality education (Magos, 2022 · Sorkos & Hatjisotiriou, 2021 · Hatjisotiriou, Karousiou & Aggelidis, 2019).

The present research aims to shed light on the crucial matter of the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability within the Greek educational setting, since, given Greece's pivotal geographical location as a crossroad of three continents, Greece receives a great part of the global relocation wave and the complexities that ensue from the rising global immigration and refugee crisis (Mpagkavos & Papadopoulou, 2006). The importance of the present research lies in the examination of the two factors – the immigrant/refugee status and the existence of disability. While the existing literature has explored the educational experiences of immigrants and refugees separately from the experiences of students with disability, there is a notable research gap in the examination of those two factors combined. These students, whose inclusion is often neglected, face a plethora of challenges including language barriers, cultural adjustment as well as the need for specialized educational support regarding the management of their disability.

The literature review and research on the subject of inclusion of immigrants and refugee students with disability are the focus of the present study and are of utmost importance as they have far-reaching consequences not only for the educational repercussions for these students but also for the wider goals of social integration and cohesion. Consequently, the following parts of the present study will delve into the examination of literature regarding immigrant and refugee students with disability and their experiences as well as inclusion policies in education, thus leading to a comprehensive thematic analysis aiming to promote the discussion of the successful inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability in education.

As a result, in the following sections, the literature about the education of immigrant and refugee students with disability, their experiences, and the implemented inclusion practices will be investigated.

## 2. Literature review

Inclusion, or “non-exclusionary education”, as Zoniou-Sideri (2000) states, has transformed the educational scenery, aiming at the provision of equal opportunities to all students (Imellou, 2017), regardless of their different skills, their background, or their needs, leading, thus, to the direction of the complete achievement of social inclusion (Magos, 2022). The aforementioned approach and the educational design in the light of inclusion constitute the cornerstone of the modern educational philosophy highlighting at the same time the principle of democracy (Slee, 2018). Thus, this approach sets itself apart from previous models of integration and mainstreaming that put students in segregated and specialized educational environments. More specifically, the integration model does not respect the personal characteristics of students (Soulis, 2002), while the mainstreaming model accepts the students but demands adaptation and change on their part (Nikolaou, 2011). It is the inclusion model that places the students at the typical classroom manifesting the values of respect, acceptance, equal access, equity, justice and socialization (Bakhmat, Vyshnyk, Moskaljova, Fediy & Lisovska, 2022) and plays an important role in removing the barriers and providing equal educational chances (Dahiru & Magaji, 2023 · Erkinovna, Jo’rayevich & Ilxomovna, 2022 · Walstra & Chukwuma, 2023).

Inclusion represents the fairest and most progressive approach to promoting diversity and ensuring equal educational opportunities for all (Fung, Su, Perry, & Garcia, 2022). While the concepts of inclusion and integration have a historic value, the modern commitment to inclusion underlines the quest to promote diversity, equality, and social justice in education (Barnabe *et al.*, 2023 · Domingo-Martos, Domingo-Segovia & Pérez-García, 2022 · Tzotzou, Poulou, Karalis & Yfanti, 2022). The adoption of the perspectives and practices of inclusion is not only beneficial for students of different cultural backgrounds or students with disability, but it also enriches the educational experience of the student population in general as it promotes a fairer society (Byram, Golubeva, Han & Wagner, 2017 · Karim, 2023 · Portera, 2011 · Roux, 2002).

Nonetheless, the practical implementation of inclusive education reveals the existence of major impediments which are further intensified by the introduction of additional variables stemming from the complicated crossover of the factors of disability and the immigrant/refugee status of the students (Koukou, 2023). Immigrant and refugee students with disability face a complicated combination of obstacles in education and later in social integration, the double challenge of their disability coupled with their cultural diversity. First, linguistic diversity may impede effective communication (Banks & Banks, 2019 · Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019), making it hard to evaluate them and support them with the necessary means (Cerna, 2019). Furthermore, many students who belong to this group have experienced severe psychological trauma (Sagaltici, Alpak &

Altindag, 2020 · Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Thus, their overall emotional well-being is affected as well as their educational progress. This factor, in combination with the linguistic barrier, makes it difficult to locate the root of the educational and social problems that the particular group of students faces (Arar, 2021). Steigmann (2020) highlights the practical nature of the most important obstacles that students with the double challenge of immigrant/refugee origin and with disability, face when they are confronted with cultural adaptation and receive education in a school setting where there is not a climate of respect and acceptance.

Indeed, Babik & Gardner (2021) report that, because of the different cultural stances and behaviors and given the social prejudice against disability, negative attitudes are formed that might aggravate the isolation of the particular group of students and impede their educational and social inclusion. Another obstacle to the implementation of inclusionary education for immigrant and refugee students can be identified in the insufficient intercultural education training of the teachers who staff the reception schools (Maligkoudi & Tsaousidis, 2020 · Mogli, Kalbeni & Stergiou, 2020 · Papageorgiou, Digelidis, Syrmpas & Papaioannou, 2021 · Sgoura, Manesis & Mitropoulou, 2018). This is a parameter that undoubtedly also affects immigrant and refugee students who face the additional challenge of having a disability. The lack of intercultural ability and the disorientation of teachers from the acknowledgment of the challenges of intersectionality – a theory which, according to Crenshaw (1989) proposes that a person might belong to more than one disadvantaged group, thus, experiencing complex forms of prejudice and discrimination which arise from the interaction of different social characteristics, affecting their social integration or their social exclusion - leads to insufficient awareness, lack of training and impediment of integration (Bešić, Paleczek & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2020). Bešić (2020) suggests that the focus on the subject of intersectionality can eventually become the path that will lead to a successful implementation of inclusion. Meanwhile, the limited funds and the inadequate infrastructure of schools can limit the access to the necessary accommodations and support services of students with disability in the reception countries (Werner, St Arnold & Crea, 2021).

The achievement of inclusion of immigrants and refugees with disability in the school community requires targeted actions and a precise orientation toward the values of inclusive education. Within this context, the cooperation between school, state, and community including the parents of the students, is a necessary prerequisite to achieving inclusion (Ainscow, 2020 · Zagka, Kesidou & Mathaioudaki, 2015 · Mitakidou, Tressou & Daniilidou, 2009). As Steinmann (2020) suggests even if there is a strong legal framework, there are serious practical problems such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of adequate staff, and issues of accessibility which must be overcome in order to have an improvement in the education system. The practical difficulty of diagnosing the special educational needs of immigrant and refugee students with disability is a challenge that requires the state's involvement and cooperation with school communities (Bircan & Sunata, 2015). The involvement of the community is deemed necessary since the cooperation of schools, local organizations, and families creates a friendly environment,

reduces discrimination, and provides additional funds (Stubbs, 2008). Meanwhile, the support of parents is of vital importance for fair access to educational opportunities (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002). In general, actions on a state level are necessary to ensure the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability. The state must adopt policies that prioritize equal access to quality education, allocate funds, and promote interdepartmental cooperation (Asamoah, Hau-lin Tam & Abdullah, 2022), as well as staff schools with teachers who are capable of handling the aforementioned socio-cultural and practical challenges and cooperate to create an appropriate educational climate (Govaris, 2011 · Lei, 2020). Schools must implement curriculums that are flexible and without exclusions along with individualized support for culturally diverse students demonstrating, in this way, their commitment to the principle of inclusion (Belli, 2021). On the other hand, the teachers need specialized training and professional development to support this group of students effectively (Creaet *al.*, 2022).

Given the gap in the literature in relation to the effective educational inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability and given the serious challenge of social integration of these students, the aim of the present research is to examine the ways in which educational inclusion is achieved. The understanding of this issue and the probing into all of its dimensions is of vital importance as it can have far-reaching effects on the successful educational practices and support systems offered to immigrant and refugee students with disability.

### **3. Research methodology**

The method that was used to carry out the present research is qualitative analysis with thematic categories. This particular kind of analysis consists of a systematic recognition, organization, and understanding of repeated patterns of meaning within a collection of data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this way, the researchers can locate numerous patterns of meaning within the collected data (Tsiolis, 2016) while focusing on what is relevant to the subject that is examined and especially on what is useful to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The thematic analysis is not a 'technical' procedure, during which the researchers identify issues or categories of issues hidden within the data waiting to be revealed (Braun & Clarke, 2012). On the contrary, the researchers must adopt a 'creative and active role' in making up and producing the research topics rather than revealing them (Tsiolis, 2016).

The research aim of the present study is to highlight the complicated issue of educational inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability. The research tool that was used, the qualitative data that were collected, their analysis, and the discussion of the results are presented below. The research question that is posed and the present study aims to answer is the following:

- In what ways can the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability be achieved?

The sample of the research consists of 30 teachers who served in various schools in the prefecture of Epirus which had Reception Classes. More specifically, 15 of them taught in Reception classes and the other 15 taught in Typical Classes.

**Table 1:** Schools in Epirus

Prefecture	Number of Schools	Reception Classes	Typical Classes
Ioannina	7	9	9
Preveza	3	4	4
Arta	1	1	1
Thesprotia	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>

The research tool that was used for the data collection was the semi-structured interview which consisted of predetermined thematic areas allowing flexibility to the researchers to pose questions depending on the course of each interview (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi & Syam, 2022). To answer the research question of the present study the responses of the interviewees regarding the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability were utilized. During the course of the interview, the researcher followed the thematic guide yet she adapted the questions depending on the interviewees' answers and asked for clarifications and explanations whenever it was deemed necessary – a practice that ensures freedom of speech and expression for the participants (Bryman, 2016).

Regarding the research procedure, there was initial communication with the participants through e-mail and telephone in order to determine the time to carry out the interview. Subsequently, the order of steps of the qualitative analysis was followed: the interviews were recorded and transcribed so that the researcher could familiarize herself with the material and gather the necessary qualitative data (Tsiolis, 2018). Then, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) program was used which is a code grouping tool that helps manage and analyze the data in a shorter period of time with greater flexibility and research validity (Chandra, Shang, Chandra & Shang, 2019 · Olapane, 2021). More specifically, Nvivo 12 was used, which is suitable for the educational research analysis providing the opportunity to analyze the interviews through material sorting tools and locate correlations for a rationalized extraction of thematic units (Dhokal, 2022). This research procedure is considered reliable since it is solely based on the reported experiences of the research participants and depicts their perceived reality in relation to the investigated issue (Allsop, Chelladurai, Kimball, Marks & Hendricks, 2022).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Thematic categories and subcategories

Through a thorough examination of the interviews of the participants in the present research, key points were highlighted which can ensure ways in which inclusion of

immigrant and refugee students with disability can be achieved. The participants suggested the need to completely restructure the educational system in order to achieve inclusion.

The analysis showed that the restructuring must focus on two systems: the macrosystem of education, which is the Greek education system in its entirety, and the microsystem of education, which is the organization and creation of the environment of multicultural classes.

**Table 2:** Wider issues regarding ways to achieve inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability

Thematical Categories	Subcategories	
Restructuring of the educational macrosystem (educational system)	Care by the state to restructure the educational system	Staffing the educational system with adequate teachers
Restructuring of the microsystem in education (multicultural classes)	Teacher training through new, innovative programs	Teachers create a climate of acceptance and respect within multicultural classes

On the level of the macrosystem, it was found that there is a need to restructure the educational system by placing emphasis on the structures and political aspects since there was a direct reference to the state’s care for the restructuring and the successful staffing of schools with adequate staff of well-trained teachers with updated knowledge.

On the level of microsystem, there are two important subcategories. First, there is the need for teacher training through new and innovative programs in order to be able to cater to the different and special needs of immigrant and refugee students with disability. Secondly, it is important that teachers foster an environment of acceptance and respect within the intercultural classes which can be achieved if they acknowledge their own personal need for change and improvement of their work. This requires a constant effort to develop new skills and evolve the educational practices and strategies, so as to be able to adapt to the different needs of the students. This process of focus on change and evolvement is deemed crucial for the promotion of full inclusion of students with different and special needs and prepares the teachers to tackle the challenges of the intercultural classroom.

## **4.2 Restructuring of the macrosystem of education (educational system)**

### **4.2.1 Care by the state to restructure the educational system**

#### **4.2.1.1 Care by the state to diagnose and educate immigrant and refugee students with disability**

The diagnosis of students who have a disability and come from a different cultural background requires special attention because of the different approaches and the existing language barriers. Special care is required by the state regarding the procedures of diagnosis as well as the subsequent inclusion strategies for immigrant and refugee

students with disability because in this way an educational environment providing equal access to all students can be created within a context of social justice.

A plethora of difficulties and barriers such as the cultural and linguistic differences as well as the psychological trauma, that children who were dislocated from their native country may suffer, hinder even the initial stage of managing the disability of these students which is the diagnosis. The solution and the main way to achieve inclusion is the cooperation with specialized personnel which utilizes appropriate practices of diagnosis and management of the disability of immigrant and refugee students. The state must ensure that the school policy meets those needs as it does with the native student population with disability.

*“The school and the state take care of students who are Greek and have a type of disability. The same thing should happen to immigrants and refugees who have a disability.”*  
(Interview, Typical Class, 3)

*“If a child has dyslexia, how am I supposed to know? It is already hard to diagnose it in Greek children, now imagine a child who is learning Greek as a foreign language, how can I tell if it has special educational needs, dysorthography, difficulty in reading etc. I need help from specialized staff.”* (Interview, Typical Class, 6)

#### **4.2.1.2 Combined function of parallel support and Reception Classes**

The present analysis showed the importance of parallel support and Reception Classes for the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability in the school setting. Students' needs are those which determine the adaptation of the educational system in a way that it addresses the issues of cultural diversity and disability management in a supportive educational context. It is imperative that the fields of Special Education and Intercultural Education should cooperate towards the same goal – that of inclusion. The cooperation between the teachers of Reception Classes and Typical Classes is deemed necessary for the successful implementation of the aforementioned suggestions and fulfillment of the particular learning goals of each student.

*“..depending on the type of disability, students can be also placed in a Reception Class where the special educator will help them learn the Greek language in a more targeted way.”* (Interview, Reception Class, 6)

*“..so there can be a combination: in other words, students can attend both Parallel Education and Reception Class aiming at the same goals.”* (Interview, Reception Class, 16)

#### **4.2.2 Staffing the educational system with adequate teachers**

##### **4.2.2.1 Adequate, specialized staff in schools that cooperate with each other for the management of immigrant and refugee students with disability**



The successful inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability rises above personal responsibility and the knowledge base of general education teachers. Thus, the need to staff schools with specialized personnel is emphasized, such as healthcare professionals, psychologists, and sociologists with experience and solid training in issues of disability management. The cooperation of special education and general education teachers is crucial for successful inclusion. It is confirmed that the school personnel's specialization in the inclusion of students with cultural diversity and disability is of vital importance.

*"Surely a teacher on their own cannot handle all situations, in other words, there should be cooperation with the experts." (Interview, Reception Class, 16)*

*"There are different cases, special cases where we need the help of a social worker, of a psychologist and of other experts. The state must staff the schools."(Interview, Typical Class, 1)*

*"..it's highly likely that students might need additional help, that is with Parallel Support I believe we could have positive results." (Interview, Typical Class, 5)*

### **4.3 Restructuring of the microsystem of education (multicultural classes)**

#### **4.3.1 Teachers' training through new, innovative programs**

##### **4.3.1.1 Introducing the issue of Special Education in the context of the training of teachers in Intercultural Education**

The synergy of Intercultural Education and Special Education for the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability is the strategy on which the State must be based in order to staff the schools of the Greek education system. This combination, however, needs to be introduced in the context of teacher training. It is deemed essential to incorporate the issue of special education in the continuous training of intercultural education teachers. The aligning of these two fields is important for a unified evolution of the education system and the formation of accessible multicultural classes. It is a crucial investment in the training of teachers regarding issues of cultural diversity and disability on all levels of education, as in this way, the provision of equal opportunities in education is promoted.

*"..since there is so much effort in Special Education, in my opinion, it should be combined with Intercultural Education." (Interview, Typical Class, 5)*

*"..a separate seminar is required regarding Intercultural education and students with disability." (Interview, Typical Class, 8)*

*"..there should be seminars because of course there will be such cases in the classroom and the teachers must know how to handle students with disability and cultural diversity"*  
(Interview, Reception Class, 8)

#### **4.3.1.2 Teacher training in managing immigrant and refugee students with disability**

The serious challenge that teachers of intercultural classes face regarding the inclusion of students with diverse backgrounds and disability brings to the forefront the need for additional, appropriate teacher training. The challenge of inclusion is complex because it is not only limited to the management of disability but it also includes the handling of cultural and linguistic variables. The teachers' inadequacy to cope with such situations raises doubts about the efficiency of the education system and its provision of equal opportunities to students. The need for specialized training is obvious but it is also required to create a complete educational framework that encompasses the issues of disability, interculturality, and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on the preparation of teachers in the emotional and social sectors as well as on the religious diversity of students.

*"... I felt weak and powerless to manage (...) I need training! We are not in a special education school, nonetheless, we are sure to face special cases with special disabilities in the classroom, it is not something that we can avoid, nor can we close our eyes to this. We need further training to be ready to handle all this at the same time."* (Interview, Reception Class, 7)

*"..it is a great challenge if there is an immigrant or refugee student with a disability in class. I don't feel I am appropriately trained, neither on a professional nor on an emotional level, in order to handle such a characteristic. A lot of work needs to be done for sure."*  
(Interview, Reception Class, 8)

#### **4.3.2 Teachers creating a climate of acceptance and respect within multicultural classes**

##### **4.3.2.1 Focusing on the issue of school inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability**

The main point for the creation of a school climate of acceptance is the appropriate teacher orientation towards students' inclusion while placing emphasis on fostering positive feelings regarding multicultural diversity in the school classroom. Emotional support is considered more important than the achievement of learning skills and the promotion of acceptance towards diversity is a priority for teachers who aim towards inclusion. Yet, more attention is needed so that the emphasis on emotional support does not lead to further divergence from the achievement of the learning goals which is important for the students' future integration in Greek society.

*"That's what I would try to do for this child too, I wouldn't worry about setting learning goals but instead I would focus on the integration of the student and its emotional wellbeing."* (Interview, Reception Class, 2)

*"... the only thing that would interest me is the student to be integrated into the class and be accepted by the classmates, to create an atmosphere of respect."*(Interview, Reception Class, 6)

*"...to feel warmth and a sense of belonging in the classroom (...) to make the other students accept the disability as something unique and not as something that will hold their classmate back. To make them realize that it is not a special need but something that makes their classmate special. I focus on creating a climate of positivity and acceptance in my class"* (Interview, Reception Class, 6)

## 5. Discussion

The present research investigated the subject of the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability as they are a group that faces the double challenge of disability and cultural diversity during their educational and social integration in the reception country (Koukou, 2023). Emphasis was placed on the ways of achieving inclusion of the particular student population. As a result, the findings of this research highlight the need for a complete restructuring of the education system so as to ensure the inclusion of immigrant and refugee students with disability. This restructuring has to be done on two levels. First, on a macro level, emphasis should be placed on the structural and political aspects of the education system including the staffing of schools with well-trained teachers. Secondly, on a micro level, the focus should be on teacher training in innovative programs and the fostering of a classroom environment without exclusion, as in this way, the different needs of the students are met. This approach leads to change, development, and full inclusion while taking into account the multiculturalism of the class.

More specifically, the critical role of state intervention is highlighted in restructuring the education system, with the State's responsibility being twofold:

- 1) The state must provide strong support for the diagnosis and education of immigrant and refugee students with disability. The complexity of the diagnosis of disability in students of different cultural backgrounds is often made more difficult by the language barriers and the emotional trauma caused by the dislocation. To promote inclusion the state must invest in specialized personnel with specialized knowledge regarding the diagnosis of students with diverse backgrounds and disability. The importance of the cooperation of the state and the school community is in line with the findings of many researches in the Greek and international literature (Ainscow, 2020 · Asamoah, Hau-lin Tam & Abdullah, 2022 · Zagka, Kesidou & Mathaioudaki, 2015 · Mitakidou, Tressou & Daniilidou, 2009).

Similarly, the issue of the state helping in the procedure of diagnosis is also underlined in the research of Bircan & Sunata (2015).

- 2) The adequate and appropriate teachers' training and the preparation of schools to facilitate inclusion are crucial (Creaet *al.*, 2022). Schools must have health professionals, psychologists, and sociologists with knowledge in the management of disability and cultural diversity (Asamoah, Hau-lin Tam & Abdullah, 2022 · Govaris, 2011 · Lei, 2020). The cooperation of the aforementioned professionals with the special and intercultural education teachers, the reception classes teachers, and general education teachers is deemed vital for the achievement of inclusion (Dahiru & Magaji, 2023 · Walstra & Chukwuma, 2023).

What is more, the importance of the incorporation of special education training programs in the context of intercultural education is highlighted. In this way, teachers can successfully manage the double challenge of this particular group of students and effectively cooperate with students and other professionals toward the common goal of inclusion. Even though the literature shows a focus on the challenges of intersectionality as a modern problem in the field of education (Bešić, 2020 · Bešić, Paleczek & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2020), there is no planning in teacher training in issues of special education and intercultural education combined. Furthermore, what the present study has shown is that the cooperation of different teachers in various school settings is an important parameter in adapting the education offered so as to cater to the needs of each student, in this way, promoting equal access to education (Lei, 2020).

The findings of this research draw attention to the critical role of teacher training (Creaet *al.*, 2022) in managing the double challenge of disability and cultural diversity while they also show the need to cultivate a school climate without exclusions (Govaris, 2011 · Lei, 2020) for immigrant and refugee students with disability. Within this context, the integration of Special Education into Intercultural Education proves to be crucial. This approach acknowledges the multifaceted challenges of students with such needs and makes it necessary to view disability and cultural diversity holistically. It is a valuable investment in the teachers' knowledge and skills needed to ensure equal opportunities.

The design and the provision of opportunities for appropriate training of teachers are absolutely necessary to ensure the specialization of teachers in multicultural classes. The complexity of managing the disability, the cultural diversity, and the language barriers requires an overall preparation of teachers adapted to the needs of the students (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019 · Banks & Banks, 2019). The failure to face those challenges can ultimately endanger the effectiveness of the education system as far as the provision of equal opportunities is concerned. A complete education system that includes issues of disability, and intercultural and linguistic diversity is of vital importance along with placing emphasis on emotional, social, and religious dimensions of students' diversity. Additionally, the creation of a climate of acceptance and respect for multicultural classes is of vital importance for the promotion and achievement of inclusion (Govaris, 2011 · Lei, 2020). Teachers play an important role in the cultivation of positive attitudes towards diversity and in fostering environments without exclusions. Even though emotional

support takes precedence, the academic goals must not be underestimated as these two factors are necessary for the student's future social integration into Greek society. The achievement of this balance is an important challenge for the teachers as well as those who are in charge of policymaking in their effort to create equal education without exclusions.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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