



TEACHERS' COMPETENCIES FOR PROMOTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION. INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN GREECE AND CYPRUS

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Abstract:

This paper reinterprets inclusive teacher competencies as dynamic, interconnected processes emerging through reflective engagement in digital, blended and collaborative learning environments. Based on a previous qualitative study in Greece and Cyprus, findings from student-teachers' free-writing texts highlight that inclusive education and teaching integrates knowledge application, digital literacy, and social-ethical awareness, offering a holistic, evolving conception of inclusive pedagogy and education for all in the 21st century.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusive pedagogy, digital pedagogy, collaborative teaching, equity, professional development, student well-being, education for all, inclusive teacher, inclusion competencies, inclusive skills

1. Background

First, everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills (European Education Area, 2024). Second, accord to European Agency for Special Needs & Inclusive Education, the Teacher Education for Inclusion project has explored how all teachers are prepared via their initial education to be inclusive. The Profile has been developed around this framework of core values and areas of competence: Valuing Learner Diversity, Supporting All Learners, Working With Others, Personal Professional Development (European Agency for Special Needs & Inclusive Education, n.d.). Third, the competencies of inclusive teachers have traditionally been understood as pedagogical knowledge and skills, classroom management and the ability to address the needs of students with special educational

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needs or/and disabilities in inclusive contexts. In this framework, previous research has focused on collaborative, communicative and ethical skills as central point to inclusive teaching (Ioannidi, 2024):

"It is fact that inclusive education has developed and established itself as a field of educational research and pedagogical practice in Higher Education. This empirical research explored how university students (postgraduate and lifelong) – teachers perceive the skills of inclusive teachers in the Greek-speaking international area (Greece and Cyprus). The research is based on the principles of qualitative methodological design without making generalizations. Two focus groups of participants with experience in different educational contexts took part in the digital context of Higher Education. The data were collected based on free-writing texts in an e-learning environment. The free-writing texts were subjected to content analysis. The analyses of the data show that the dominant view of the participants concerning the inclusive teacher focuses on collaborative, creative, communicative, and moral dimensions. The application of inclusion is determined by the pedagogical practice and the characteristics of the inclusive teacher, according to teachers' perceptions. Conclusions cannot be generalized. However, this kind of knowledge can used within an understanding of the inclusive educational praxis and in supporting teachers' -digital and pedagogical- competencies and professional development. The teachers' skills in inclusive learning environments can contribute to a more inclusive educational landscape in Greece and Cyprus, fostering and ensuring the well-being of all students, with and without specials educational needs.

In summary, it highlighted the challenges of implementing inclusive practices and the influence of inclusive education policies on student outcomes. University student-teachers' written reflections revealed that attitudes, values and pedagogical skills are central to fostering inclusive thinking, social justice, and equity in classroom practice. While findings were specific and not generalizable, they provided valuable insights for supporting teachers' digital and pedagogical competencies and for informing training programs. In total, the previous research concerned the Greek-speaking international context and it emphasized the importance of learner-centered approaches and inclusive principles as practical frameworks for enabling all students to succeed in diverse and digitally enhanced learning environments."

Overall, the present paper aim to examine in greater depth how teachers understand key issues related to the implementation of Inclusive Education and the instruction of all learners (Bartlett & Burton, 2019), as well as in the implementation of solutions that may contribute to strengthening and enhancing the effectiveness of the inclusive educational process within educational institutions (Gumennykova et al., 2023).

Extending this foundation, the present work offers a new interpretation: rather than considering these competencies as discrete skills, they can be understood as dynamic, interconnected processes that emerge through reflective engagement in digital,

blended and collaborative learning environments. Further, the qualitative analysis of student-teachers' free-writing texts suggests that inclusive teaching is not only about applying knowledge but also about embracing inclusive values, fostering digital literacy and cultivating moral and social awareness within school and cultural interactions. This perspective shifts the focus from a static skill set to a holistic, evolving conception of inclusive pedagogy and education for all, highlighting how reflection, technology and educational-social engagement co-construct teacher competencies in the 21st century.

2. Teachers' competencies for inclusion - Insights and challenges from a qualitative study in Greece and Cyprus

Beyond examining teacher competencies (Ioannidi, 2024), this new work can be interpreted as a approach for pedagogical, social and digital innovation in education. Inclusive teaching skills are not only didactical and pedagogical but also represent digital ethical consciousness, cross-cultural collaboration, and real-time management of classroom diversity. The analysis of free-writing texts can be seen as a qualitative study of meaning-making, where participants uphold inclusive values, ethics, and professional identity in their reflections. The use of digital platforms for data collection is itself an innovative aspect, highlighting how technology can facilitate self-reflection and skill development. Furthermore, the study underscores the moral and professional formation of teachers, emphasizing creativity, collaboration, ethical responsibility, and digital competence as central to their evolving professional identity.

Consequently, within this context, the research offers a meta-cognitive perspective, showing how reflective practices enable student-teachers to connect theory with practice and develop higher-order skills that are essential for inclusive and equitable learning environments. Communication, collaboration, and creativity in an inclusive school are essential components that foster meaningful participation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among all members of the school community, enabling teachers and students to work together in supportive learning environments that respond to diverse needs and promote equitable and effective educational outcomes (Katsamboxaki-Hodgetts, 2023).

This article highlights the challenges of implementing inclusive practices and the influence of inclusive education policies on student outcomes. University student-teachers' written reflections reveal that attitudes, values, and pedagogical skills are central to fostering inclusive thinking, social justice, and equity in classroom practice (Zembylas, 2019). While findings are context-specific and not generalizable, they offer valuable insights for supporting teachers' digital and pedagogical competencies and for informing training programs. The study emphasizes the importance of learner-centered approaches and inclusive principles as practical frameworks for enabling all students to succeed in diverse and digitally enhanced learning environments (Kokolaki & Katsamboxaki-Hodgetts, 2023).

Similarly, contemporary literature indicates that pedagogical issues related to inclusion and the instructional decisions necessitated by the implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom (Amzat & Padilla-Valdez, 2017; Haug, 2017; Forlin, 2012), as well as the maximization of teachers' competencies and mentoring opportunities within the school (Somma & Bennett, 2020), are of fundamental importance. Inclusive education aims to address the diverse needs of all students by increasing participation and decreasing learning barriers (Lindner et al., 2026; Ioannidi, 2026).

Findings underline that especially students who have special needs benefit from teacher acceptance (Vanhanen et al., 2026). Four critical dimensions of participation and inclusive education are (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Beaton, 2018):

- 1) Participation and Access – Ensuring that all learners have equitable access to classroom environments and the curriculum, while critically examining teaching strategies and practices that either facilitate or impede such access.
- 2) Participation and Collaboration – Investigating who learns together and who may be excluded from shared learning experiences, and identifying pedagogical practices that promote or hinder collaboration.
- 3) Participation and Achievement – Identifying instructional approaches that foster meaningful achievement for all students, as well as those that may create barriers to learning and attainment.
- 4) Participation and Recognition of Diversity – Promoting the acknowledgment and acceptance of diversity, while reflecting on practices that may obstruct recognition, respect, and inclusion.

In reality, inclusion requires: Classroom Environment and Accessibility, Curriculum and Instruction, Universal Design for Learning, Collaboration and Support, Behavioural and Social-Emotional Support, and Social-Emotional Learning (Al-Zboon et al., 2026) in all contexts and Collaborative School Culture between educators (De Jong et al., 2025).

In total, an inclusive school is grounded in the principles of ethical responsibility and respect for human rights, which constitute the foundation for ensuring access for all learners, promoting the quality of the learning process, and fostering effective teaching and meaningful pedagogical interaction. These core elements collectively support equitable participation, enhance teaching effectiveness, and contribute to the creation of educational environments that respond to the diverse needs of all students (Unesco, 2007, 2017, 2020). The need to reimagine education in response to contemporary social challenges has been highlighted in the literature (Quirke & Galvin, 2025; Kauffman et al., 2022; Hallett & Hallett, 2022). *“Yet, achieving this vision requires acknowledging that equity does not mean sameness. It means recognizing that students arrive with different strengths, challenges, and lived experiences. The future of education must be flexible enough to honor these differences while holding all learners to high expectations”* (Poulos, 2025). This is important because students with special needs deserve quality education that revolves around equity. It is argued that special education teachers require increased support that

empowers them to effectively engage students and promote their learning (Rodriguez, 2024).

3. Conclusion

It is fact that inclusion is not a new idea (Understanding Inclusion, 2020). However *“in the contemporary era, education systems across the globe are undergoing profound transformations, shaped by forces of internationalization, technological advancement, demographic shifts, and rising demands for social equity. Traditional models of education—often rigid, standardized, and one-size-fits-all—are increasingly being challenged by the complex realities of diverse learner needs, fluid labor markets, and the pressing imperatives of sustainability and global citizenship. In this evolving landscape, there is an urgent need to reimagine education as a dynamic, inclusive, and lifelong process that transcends the boundaries of formal schooling”* (<https://link.springer.com/collections/hddjhadfdj>).

Thus, in light of the findings of research (Ioannidi, 2024), this paper demonstrates that inclusion competencies extend beyond discrete skills to encompass dynamic, reflective, and context-sensitive practices. By integrating knowledge application, ethical responsibility, collaboration, and digital literacy, inclusive educators can foster equitable and socially responsive learning environments. In conclusion, this short report suggests that reflective engagement in digital and collaborative settings strengthens teacher competencies while promoting a holistic and evolving pedagogy, where equality, diversity, inclusion, technological innovation, social interaction and moral awareness co-construct professional development (see: Özbilgin & Erbil, 2023).

In the international Greek-speaking context, these insights provide practical guidance for curriculum design, teacher training, and policy-making, emphasizing the preparation of educators who can respond flexibly and ethically to the diverse needs of 21st-century learners (see Wilt et al., 2026). They also underscore the need for coherent inclusive pedagogical frameworks to support teachers' instructional decision-making across diverse educational contexts (Chen et al., 2026). Finally, by focusing on the perspectives of student-teachers in Greece and Cyprus, the study provides insights into how teachers understand inclusion, while also contributing to broader debates about the future of teacher education in increasingly diverse and technologically mediated learning environments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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