Preparing Future Teachers for Inclusive Education – Conceptual Frameworks and Curriculum Opportunities

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Abstract
In the context of global interest in inclusive education, the demand for effective teacher training on inclusion in education has grown significantly. This paper aims to identify opportunities for engaging pre-service teachers in learning about inclusive education within Romania's existing initial teacher education curriculum. The analysis delves into the curricula of psycho-pedagogical training programs (Level I and II) offered by universities through the Teacher Education Departments and the curricula of four subjects included in the teacher training program (Level I). Specific subject contents suitable for an infusion approach of inclusive education are identified. The study suggests learning activities that can be integrated into the analysed subjects' curriculum. The proposed approach and activities represent valuable resources for university teachers involved in psycho-pedagogical training programs, offering adaptable strategies for university teaching practice and potential extension to other disciplines with necessary adjustments.

Keywords: initial teacher education, inclusive education, learning activities, teacher educators, curriculum.

JEL Classification: I21, I23, I29.

1. Introduction
Inclusive education has become a focal point in international educational policies, evident in various treaties and declarations advocating for equal educational opportunities for all students,
irrespective of their abilities or backgrounds. Notable examples include the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO, 2006), and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). These agreements represent significant milestones in promoting and solidifying the concept of inclusive education on a global scale. For instance, goal number 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) emphasizes inclusion and equity as the fundamental pillars for quality education and learning. This goal emphasizes the necessity of creating safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for everyone. Finding strategies to include all children in schools is a significant challenge for education systems around the world (Ainscow, 2020). Beyond the realm of politics, inclusion is a continuous process that must be nurtured daily within the specific contexts of schools and universities. Teachers play a pivotal role in implementing inclusive practices within educational systems. Inclusion can only be achieved if teachers possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to instruct diverse groups of learners based on their individual needs. Both initial and in-service teacher training programs must consider ways to prepare teachers for inclusive education (Rusconi and Squillaci, 2023; Sharma, 2018; Troll et al., 2019). Despite the widely acknowledged need for teacher preparation in inclusive education, research lacks detailed insights into how this goal is achieved. There is a pressing need for explicit approaches to address this issue.

This paper advocates for the embedding of inclusive education theory and practice into initial teacher education through an infusion-type approach. Consequently, this paper aims to identify opportunities for engaging pre-service teachers in learning about inclusive education within Romania's existing initial teacher education curriculum, specifically focusing on the training programs offered by universities through the Teacher Education Departments. We hypothesize that, through an in-depth analysis of relevant curriculum documents, potential opportunities for implementing an infused approach to inclusive education within the existing curriculum for teachers' initial training will be identified. Furthermore, we anticipate that such identified possibilities have the potential to support the areas of competence associated with the inclusive teacher profile, developed by European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012).
Two research questions guided our study:

- What learning opportunities about inclusive education are present within Romania's current initial teacher education curriculum, and how can these be expanded, specifically through the implementation of an infusion-type approach?
- How do these opportunities align with the development of areas of competence associated with the inclusive teacher profile?

2. Literature Review

Historically associated with the education of children with disabilities, inclusive education is now widely regarded as a "process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners" (UNESCO, 2017). Calls are being made for all education stakeholders to extend their perspective on inclusive education, aiming to encompass all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities (UNESCO, 2020). Aligned with international education policy documents, in Romania, an inclusive school is described as one where "education is provided for all children and serves as the most effective means of combating attitudes of discrimination and segregation" (Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sport, 2011). The presence of individuals with diverse abilities in mainstream education necessitates teachers who are adept at working in inclusive classrooms.

In recent years, teacher educators have devoted their research and projects to the opportunities and challenges linked to teacher education for inclusive classrooms (Florian & Camedda, 2020). Bibliometric studies underscore that teacher education for inclusion has emerged as a significant research theme at the international level (Cretu & Morandau, 2020; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). Numerous international initiatives have been launched to prepare teachers for inclusive education. Among them, the Teacher Education for Inclusion project, initiated by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012), stands out. The outcomes of this project, which engaged experts from 25 countries, have been consolidated in the Profile of Inclusive Teachers. This profile delineates the fundamental values and areas of competence that must be cultivated through initial training programs for all teachers to be effective in inclusive classrooms (Table 1).
Core values | Areas of competence
--- | ---
1. Valuing Learner Diversity | 1.1 Conceptions of inclusive education  
 | 1.2 The teacher’s view of learner difference  
2. Supporting All Learners | 2.1 Promoting the academic, practical, social and emotional learning of all learners  
 | 2.2 Effective teaching approaches in heterogeneous classes  
3. Working With Others | 3.1 Working with parents and families  
 | 3.2 Working with a range of other educational professionals  
4. Personal Professional Development | 4.1 Teachers as reflective practitioners  
 | 4.2 Initial teacher education as a foundation for ongoing professional learning and development

**Table 1.** Profile of inclusive teachers.


The profile serves as a guiding framework for initial teacher education programs, even though it does not specify the methods for fostering these values and competencies (knowledge, attitudes, and skills). In this study, the inclusive teacher profile inspired our exploration of relevant contents and the formulation of learning activities that could support the development of these values and competencies through an infusion approach within the existing curriculum.

Another pertinent framework for teacher education programs, from an inclusive perspective, is one developed by Sharma (2018), influenced by Shulman's (2004) conception of the three "apprenticeships" necessary for teachers: the "apprenticeship of the head", the "apprenticeship of the heart", and the "apprenticeship of the hands". Sharma (2018) aligns these apprenticeships with the requirements of inclusive education, providing a conceptual framework applicable to teacher education programs. The "apprenticeship of the head" represents the intellectual or cognitive aspect of inclusive education. Inclusive educators need to have the knowledge, understanding, and expertise related to inclusive practices, diverse learning needs, and relevant laws and policies. The "apprenticeship of the heart" delves into beliefs and attitudes regarding inclusive education. Future teachers need to have empathy and positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. The "apprenticeship of the hands" concerns future teachers' abilities to practice inclusion in real classrooms. All these aspects can be supported through teachers' training programs, fostering close collaboration between universities and schools, as well as
between teacher educators and schoolteachers engaged in the teaching placement of future educators (Sharma, 2018).

Drawing from an analysis of various studies in the field, Pérez-Castejón and Vigo-Arrazola (2021) emphasize three conditions that must be met and integrated into the initial training of teachers to cultivate positive attitudes and perceptions toward inclusive education. These conditions involve appreciating the relevance of real-world experiences, engaging in group reflection along with relevant theoretical content, and investigating and enhancing inclusive education contexts.

These previously mentioned frameworks have inspired the approach developed in this study. More specifically, the inclusive teacher profile guided our search for relevant content and learning activities within the existing curriculum to assist future teachers in the development of their knowledge, attitudes, and abilities. The recommended activities are aligned with the framework developed by Sharma (2018), by engaging the heads, hearts, and hands of the aspiring teachers. Additionally, the three conditions highlighted by Pérez-Castejón and Vigo-Arrazola (2021) in their study inspired us to suggest activities emphasizing future teachers' active participation and reflective thinking.

3. Methodology

To identify inclusive education learning opportunities within the initial teacher training program, an analysis of the main curriculum documents was conducted. Specifically, the Romanian curricula for psycho-pedagogical training programs (Level I and II) were examined in terms of the included subjects. A content analysis was then performed for four subjects: Educational Psychology, Pedagogy I (covering the fundamentals of Pedagogy and Curriculum Theory and Methodology), Pedagogy II (focusing on Instruction theory and methodology, and Assessment theory and methodology), and Teaching Practice. These subjects were chosen due to their close relevance to inclusive education themes and their presence in the core curriculum of training program Level I. This represents a program allowing university graduates the qualification to teach in various education levels, including pre-school, primary, secondary, vocational, and lower secondary education, upon accumulating a minimum of 30 credits (Ministry of Education, 2022). The syllabi of these subjects, developed by teacher education departments from two
universities, were scrutinized to identify explicit materials related to inclusive education. Additionally, efforts were made to identify contents that could provide learning opportunities for inclusion using an infusion approach (Figure 1). The identified contents were then associated with the areas of competence outlined in the profile of the inclusive teacher.

Figure 1. An infusion-based approach for embedding inclusive education into the curriculum for initial teacher training under the guidance of the inclusive teacher profile.

4. Results and Discussions

The analysis of the national curricula for psycho-pedagogical training programs - Level I and II (Ministry of Education, 2022) revealed the absence of a standalone subject named "Inclusive Education". The subject closest in name, "Integrated Education", is provided as an optional subject at Level II, predominantly attended by a small fraction of Level I graduates. While this subject offers some learning opportunities regarding integration and inclusion, it's crucial to note that integration differs from inclusion. Integration aims to assimilate students with special needs into the existing educational structure, expecting them to adapt to the system. In contrast, the inclusion model advocates adapting the educational system to cater to the unique needs of each student, eliminating labels and barriers that hinder full participation. Given these distinctions, we consider replacing the subject "Integrated Education" with "Inclusive Education" would be necessary. However, this change should extend beyond mere terminology; it necessitates a shift in vision, content, resources, and more.
Since "Inclusive Education" does not appear as a distinct subject in the core curriculum for initial teacher training, the associated competences could be fostered through existing subjects using an infusion approach. Consequently, an analysis of the programs for the four chosen subjects was undertaken to identify learning opportunities related to inclusive education. The four disciplines are spread across the three years of study in the teacher preparation program (Level I), which would bring the advantage of continuity in the proposed approach. Although the issue of inclusive education did not emerge as a separate theme in the analysed syllabi, specific subject-related contents were identified as potential entry points for an infusion approach to inclusive education. Table 2 aligns these subject-specific contents within the four disciplines with the areas of competence outlined in the profile of inclusive teachers (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). The areas of competence have been listed by their numbers in Table 1. It's essential to note that other contents might also facilitate the infusion of knowledge, attitudes, or skills related to inclusive education.

To support the infusion approach to inclusive education, we identified several potential learning activities for future students that can be integrated within the existing curricula of the four subjects. More specifically, the contents listed in Table 2 can serve as starting points for the implementation of these activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of competence</th>
<th>Subject-specific contents as potential entry points for an infusion approach of inclusive education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>EP: Development and education; Personality development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>P I: Trends of contemporary education; Educability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P II: Traditional didactics/modern didactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP: Assisting teaching activities in schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>EP: School success and failure; Learning difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>P I: Dimensions of education. Self-education. Lifelong learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P II: Teaching principles; Curriculum content; Teaching methods and tools; Designing instructional activities; Student assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP: Design and development of materials for teaching and learning activities; Teaching, self-evaluation, and evaluation of teaching activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>EP: The psychological dimension of teacher preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>P I: Stakeholders in education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Correlation of the subject-specific contents with the areas of competence from the profile of inclusive teachers.

For theoretical psycho-pedagogical subjects such as Educational Psychology and Pedagogy I and II, we suggest the following activities for pre-service teachers:

- Creating a dictionary defining education-specific terms, including those related to inclusive education such as diversity, equity, disability, inclusive education, special education, special educational needs, integration, inclusion, inclusive school, curricular adaptation, personalized intervention program etc.
- Reading and analysing national legislation pertinent to inclusive education and international documents on the topic.
- Exploring the concept of "inclusive education" using methods that encourage critical and creative thinking, such as the cube method, the six thinking hats method, starburst, brainstorming etc.
- Organizing debates on topics such as "Segregated education versus inclusive education".
- Evaluating school textbooks in terms of their reflection of inclusion (content, accessibility, multimodal resources, representation of diversity, language, assessment etc.).
- Conducting real or simulated case studies involving students with diverse needs, including students with disabilities, or learners from different cultural backgrounds.
- Engaging in role-plays simulating teacher interactions with students with particular educational needs.
- Analysing personal school experiences from an inclusion perspective and extracting meaningful insights.
• Viewing films that address issues of human diversity in education or inclusive education (e.g., The Ron Clark Story, Front of the Class, Wonder etc.).

• Writing argumentative essays on the topic of inclusion, drawing from various bibliographic sources.

• Participating in reflective exercises based on questions such as: How can I identify and address the diverse needs of my future students? What strategies can I use to create an inclusive and welcoming classroom environment that respects and celebrates diversity? How can I adapt and differentiate my instructional materials and methods to meet the needs of all students in the classroom? How can I design assessments that are accurate and accessible to all students? What strategies can I use to communicate effectively with parents and support teachers? Where can I find resources or professional development opportunities to enhance my knowledge and skills in inclusive education? etc.

• Inviting teachers with expertise in inclusive education, parents of children with particular needs, or even children themselves to share their professional or school-related experiences with aspiring educators.

• Involving future teachers in the development of (research) projects on various topics related to inclusive education.

For Teaching Practice, we suggest additional learning activities for future teachers:

• Observing teaching and educational activities in classrooms where inclusion is practiced, followed by analysis.

• Identifying unresolved problems or needs at the classroom level related to inclusive education.

• Conducting SWOT analysis of the school where the practice takes place from the perspective of inclusive education practices.

• Conducting interviews with experienced mentors on inclusive education issues, school managers, parents of children with particular educational needs, or students with specific needs.

• Analysing a meeting with parents or an activity in which they were involved from an inclusiveness perspective.
Maintaining journals reflecting their experiences, learning, and attitudes related to inclusion inspired by pedagogical practice.

Designing and teaching lessons that respond to the diversity of students and their needs, followed by self-evaluation.

Evaluating lessons taught by pre-service teachers from the standpoint of the inclusive strategies used.

Including products and materials reflecting diversity and inclusion (photos, articles, collages, posters, audio-visual materials, etc.) in the practicum portfolio.

These learning activities can occur during courses, seminars, or school practicum, and can also be adapted as homework assignments or projects for future teachers to complete outside the classroom. Teacher educators have the flexibility to choose how to incorporate these learning activities or design additional activities in their instructional strategies.

Other disciplines within the core curriculum of the initial teacher education program, such as Classroom Management, Didactics of Specialization, and Computer Assisted Instruction, can also serve as avenues for inclusive education learning. This presents a potential direction for the continuation of this study, which would require specialized teacher educators in these disciplines and well-informed about inclusive education. Beyond these subjects, additional activities could be implemented through workshops on inclusive education, conferences involving teacher educators, school educators, and pre-service teachers, campaigns for inclusive education. Furthermore, there could be professional development projects focusing on inclusive education, and volunteering activities for future teachers in associations and organizations supporting children's participation in education and student learning. These initiatives have the potential to aid in the preparation of future educators for diverse and inclusive learning environments.

Principals, school counsellors, and support teachers must provide further assistance to prospective teachers in schools to implement inclusive practices effectively. Continuing professional development for teachers should remain open in this direction as well. Based on our findings, we underscore the need for a more visible and explicit approach to inclusive education in initial teacher training programs. This can be achieved through the inclusion of the subject "Inclusive Education" in the curriculum or through an infusion approach, utilizing existing subjects. Furthermore, we firmly believe that teacher educators in universities and mentor...
teachers in schools should serve as exemplars for the philosophy and, particularly, the practice of inclusion in education. They have a crucial role in assisting pre-service teachers in acquiring the information, abilities, and attitudes essential for working in inclusive environments.

5. Conclusions
Given the widely recognized imperative to prepare teachers for the complexities of inclusive education, this paper explored frameworks for initial teacher training for inclusion. If providing inclusive education is a shared responsibility among teachers, it is crucial that initial teacher education provides pre-service teachers with training contexts enabling the development of competences related to inclusive education.

Through an analysis of curriculum documents, we identified opportunities to prepare future educators for inclusive education within the framework of psycho-pedagogical training programs in Romania. As inclusive education was not identified as a distinct subject in the core curriculum, we proposed an infusion approach to address this gap. Specific contents were identified within four subjects as potential entry points for inclusive education, and an array of learning activities were recommended. We firmly advocate that all future educators should have access to inclusive education learning opportunities, which they can complement with other forms of continuous education. Inclusion should be a fundamental component of teachers' training. This research highlights the pressing need for a national consensus on the issue of teacher preparation for inclusive education and coordinated efforts among teacher educators.

Future research endeavours should focus on verifying the effectiveness of the suggested learning in terms of supporting the values and competencies outlined in the inclusive teacher profile. Investigating opportunities for learning about inclusive education during in-service teacher preparation represents another promising area for research exploration.

References


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