

## Teachers' Professional Development in Inclusive Education in Albania.

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### Abstract

Inclusive education is a central component of the education reform agenda in Albania, emphasizing equal participation and achievement for all students. As schools increasingly accommodate students with diverse learning needs, the role of teachers and their professional preparation has gained importance. This study analyzes the current situation of teacher professional development in inclusive education in Albania, focusing on the relevance and effectiveness of training programs. The research draws on national and international literature, as well as teachers' reported needs and challenges, to assess how well current professional development opportunities prepare them to implement inclusive practices in the classroom.

Findings from the literature indicate that, despite policy advances, teachers often lack the practical training, ongoing support, and specialized knowledge needed to address the needs of students with disabilities. Training initiatives tend to be short-term, theoretical and fragmented, limiting their impact on teachers' long-term professional growth. Other barriers include large class sizes, limited resources and insufficient collaboration with support staff.

This study highlights the need for sustainable, practice-oriented and school-based professional development programmes that strengthen teachers' teaching competencies. Strengthening the professional development system is essential for improving inclusive practices and ensuring that all students in Albania receive a quality education.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education; teacher professional development; teacher competences; educational reform.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Marcucio (2015), continuous teacher education brings essential benefits to the quality of teaching and contributes to the development of teachers' competencies in making more complex instructional decisions. From this perspective, continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers represents a crucial need that directly leads to improved teaching performance, enhanced student achievement, and more effective student assessment throughout the learning process. Professional development encompasses both formal and informal learning opportunities that deepen and broaden teachers' professional competencies, including their knowledge, beliefs, motivation, and self-regulatory skills (Delvaux et al., 2013).

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) emphasize that educators, school principals, and teachers are increasingly challenged by high expectations in preparing future generations for the demands of the 21st century. Continuous professional development for teachers is therefore a central focus in school transformation efforts. School transformation within contemporary educational systems depends, in part, on how teachers collaborate with school leaders and colleagues. Both general education teachers and paraprofessionals require adequate training to improve the implementation of new interventions in inclusive classrooms, particularly in relation to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Brock & Carter, 2013).

Regular teacher training should not be limited solely to experienced teachers (Wolff et al., 2017). Teachers are responsible for implementing and ensuring the successful functioning of inclusive education models in mainstream classrooms (Hughes, 2011). The preparation of general education teachers is especially critical, as they play a vital role in decision-making processes related to school climate (Brock & Carter, 2013). Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between teacher training and higher levels of academic success among students (Chung et al., 2015).

Steyn's (2016) study supported this by finding that special schools supporting mainstream schools resulted in benefits for both students and teachers. However, it can be argued that a study in the category of basic inclusion is not of interest in contexts where inclusion in the classroom is the main definition of how inclusive education should be organised. Instead, in this category, Juma, Lehtomäki and Naukkarinen (2017) found that collaborative action research resulted in both inclusive teacher pedagogy and student presence.

Hart and More (2013) found that teachers who participated in a greater number of individualized educational training courses demonstrated increased patience and understanding within inclusive classrooms. Similarly, Brock and Carter (2013) reported that teachers with substantial training in autism-related competencies tended to hold higher expectations for their students compared to teachers with limited or no experience in inclusive teaching environments. Furthermore, studies by Hart and More (2013) and Masterson et al. (2014) revealed that schools engaging all teachers in autism-specific training achieved higher academic outcomes than schools with a lower proportion of teachers participating in such professional development.

Teachers who possess a deeper understanding and knowledge of inclusive education models tend to demonstrate more positive attitudes and greater emotional calmness toward students with diverse abilities (Hughes, 2011). Coates et al. (2017) highlighted that teachers involved in autism-specific programs developed a wider range of interventions and instructional strategies and were more willing to welcome students with autism into their classrooms. Moreover, the development of various teaching and learning programs has shifted attention from information-transmission models toward approaches that emphasize teaching quality (Thomas et al., 2013).

These authors suggest that teachers exposed to autism-specific professional training are more open-minded and better prepared to adopt and implement inclusive education models than those with limited training exposure. Professional development modules typically include a range of activities and advanced seminars aimed at supporting teachers in learning new practices and integrating them into their daily classroom instruction. These modules go beyond the mere

presentation of ideas; their primary objective is not only to familiarize teachers with new practices but also to ensure their effective implementation in classroom settings. Within educational institutions, professional development is often organized through subject-based team activities and seminars (Sinjari, 2017).

## 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Inclusive education emphasizes the need for all students, including those with disabilities or special educational needs, to participate meaningfully in mainstream education. Teachers' professional development (PD) is a critical factor in enabling effective inclusion, as it enhances their competencies, attitudes, and classroom practices (Delvaux et al., 2013; Marcucio, 2015). Beyond knowledge acquisition, PD programs influence teachers' ability to make informed decisions, adapt curricula, and employ differentiated instruction strategies suitable for diverse learners (Florian & Spratt, 2013).

### 2.1. Models and Approaches to Professional Development

Continuous professional development (CPD) is seen as a tool for the personal development of teachers, providing an opportunity to ensure quality control. Professional development models vary widely but are most effective when they integrate theory and practice, promote collaboration, and offer ongoing support. Collaborative learning communities, coaching, and mentorship programs are identified as particularly effective in fostering inclusive practices (Vangrieken et al., 2017). Brock and Carter (2013) emphasize autism-specific PD as a model for equipping teachers with practical skills and evidence-based strategies. More recent studies highlight the importance of technology-enhanced PD, such as online modules, virtual coaching, and webinars, which provide flexible, context-specific learning opportunities for teachers, especially in regions with limited resources (Smith et al., 2020). Through this process, teachers reassure the public that they remain at a contemporary level of knowledge, keeping pace with technological advances (Miyake, A., Friedman, N. P., Emerson, M. J., Witzki, A. H., Howerter, A., Wager, T. D., 2000).

According to Lieberman (1996), continuous professional learning occurs in three environments:

- Direct learning
- Learning outside the classroom
- Learning within the classroom

The goals of the CPD model according to Mulcahy-O'Mahony (2013) are:

1. To give teachers the opportunity to determine the focus of their own CPD.
2. To allow teachers to propose and test a CPD process they believe best meets their needs.
3. To introduce teachers to a constructivist model of science learning, including familiarizing them with common student misconceptions and the use of formative assessment to determine appropriate interventions.
4. To support teachers in integrating more inquiry-based learning approaches.

5. To encourage teachers to engage in collaborative discussions and reflect on the “next steps” needed for developing scientific concepts in children.
6. To support teachers in developing their understanding of scientific concepts.
7. To empower parents to support their children’s scientific development by providing them with knowledge of the topics taught in school.
8. To assist teachers in reviewing their identity as educators and their concept of lifelong learning.
9. To empower individual teachers and the school community to cultivate a sense of need for self-development.

The deepening of knowledge and skills is an inseparable part of any profession. An important goal in this context is to create an environment that facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge, shaping both professional and personal growth.

## **2.2. Teacher Competencies, Attitudes, and Beliefs**

Teacher competencies play a central role in shaping teachers’ attitudes and beliefs toward inclusive education. Guerriero and Révai define teacher competence as “a broad term that refers to the ability to meet demands in a given context by mobilizing various psychosocial resources (cognitive, functional, personal, and ethical). In this sense, competence is a process-oriented and dynamic construct that includes the ability to use and adapt knowledge” (Guerriero & Révai, 2017).

The literature consistently highlights a strong relationship between teachers’ professional competencies and their attitudes toward inclusion. Teachers who receive specialized training in inclusive education tend to demonstrate higher levels of self-confidence, employ more flexible and creative instructional strategies, and show greater empathy toward students with disabilities (Hart & More, 2013; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Moreover, teachers’ beliefs about inclusion—often influenced by cultural, institutional, and systemic factors—significantly shape their classroom practices and their willingness to implement inclusive approaches (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Continuous professional development (PD) is crucial in strengthening teachers’ competencies and aligning their beliefs with evidence-based inclusive practices. Such development supports positive attitudes toward diversity and contributes to the creation of an inclusive school climate (Forlin et al., 2011). Research on general and specialized competencies suggests that teachers should develop a range of skills, including intellectual, interpersonal, managerial, and professional competencies (Hong et al., 2008).

Additionally, studies on qualitative assessment indicate that its effective implementation enhances teachers’ instructional practices and beliefs, leading to increased knowledge (Rezaie, 2007), improved learning outcomes (Haghighi, 2006), better mental well-being (Karimi, 2006; Shokorolahi, 2007), greater student inclusion (Mohammadi, 2006), and higher levels of student effectiveness (Van Evera, 2004).

### **2.3. Challenges in Professional Development**

Despite the clear benefits of professional development (PD) in enhancing teaching quality and student outcomes, multiple persistent challenges continue to hinder its effectiveness. One of the primary obstacles is limited access to high-quality training, which is often exacerbated by geographic, economic, and infrastructural barriers (Sinjari, 2017; Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2017). In many contexts, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, teachers face difficulties attending relevant PD sessions due to travel costs, scheduling conflicts, and lack of digital connectivity, which restricts their professional growth opportunities.

Institutional support, or the lack thereof, also plays a critical role in shaping PD effectiveness. Without strong backing from school leadership and education authorities, PD initiatives may remain isolated or short-lived. Insufficient funding, inadequate time allocation within the school calendar, and the absence of systematic follow-up mechanisms often result in PD programs failing to translate into sustained classroom improvements. Furthermore, the quality and relevance of PD content are sometimes questioned, as standardized or one-size-fits-all programs may not address the diverse needs of teachers across different subjects, grade levels, or school contexts.

In Albania, these challenges are compounded by specific systemic issues such as large class sizes, which place significant strain on teachers' time and energy, reducing their capacity to engage deeply with PD activities. Additionally, inconsistent and irregular PD opportunities mean that many teachers receive sporadic or outdated training, limiting their ability to keep pace with evolving pedagogical approaches and inclusive education practices.

Research also highlights that novice teachers, who are at a critical stage in developing foundational teaching skills, often require tailored and ongoing support. However, many PD programs tend to prioritize experienced teachers, assuming they have already acquired basic competencies (Forlin, Keen, & Barrett, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013). This oversight leaves new educators without the necessary scaffolding to build confidence and effectiveness in inclusive and adaptive teaching methods. As a result, early-career teachers may feel isolated or overwhelmed, increasing the risk of burnout and attrition. Moreover, the content and delivery methods of PD programs sometimes fail to integrate principles of adult learning theory, such as active participation, collaboration, and contextualization of learning. When PD is overly theoretical or disconnected from teachers' real classroom experiences, its impact diminishes. Effective PD should be responsive to teachers' immediate challenges and provide practical strategies that can be implemented and reflected upon.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and systemic approach. This includes increasing investment in accessible, contextually relevant PD opportunities, strengthening institutional support structures, and developing differentiated PD pathways that cater to teachers at various stages of their careers. Emphasizing mentorship, peer coaching, and communities of practice can also foster continuous professional growth and mitigate feelings of isolation among teachers.

In summary, while the advantages of PD are well-established, overcoming the barriers related to access, institutional support, resource availability, and relevance—particularly for new

teachers—remains essential to realizing its full potential in improving educational quality, both globally and within the Albanian context.

#### **2.4. National Context: Albania**

Albania has made notable strides in promoting inclusive education through a combination of policy reforms, strategic planning, and international collaboration. Legislative initiatives, such as the National Strategy for Inclusive Education and relevant amendments in the Law on Pre-University Education, have established a framework aimed at guaranteeing equal access to education for all students, including those with disabilities and special educational needs. These policies reflect Albania's commitment to aligning with international standards and recommendations, particularly those outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education.

Despite these advances, significant implementation gaps persist, revealing a discrepancy between policy intentions and classroom realities. The Ministry of Education and Sports (2018) emphasizes that continuous professional development for teachers is crucial to bridging these gaps. Teachers often lack the necessary training to effectively identify, support, and adapt instructional strategies for students with diverse learning needs, which can limit the overall effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives.

International organizations, including UNESCO and UNICEF, have played a key role in supporting Albania's efforts. These organizations have facilitated workshops, training programs, and resource development aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge, confidence, and practical skills in inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Such initiatives not only provide technical guidance but also encourage the adoption of innovative teaching methods and collaborative practices, fostering a more inclusive school culture.

Empirical studies suggest that the frequency and quality of PD opportunities have a direct impact on teachers' classroom practices. Teachers who participate in regular, targeted PD programs tend to demonstrate improved classroom management, hold higher academic expectations for students with disabilities, and implement inclusive teaching strategies more effectively (Masterson et al., 2014; Hughes, 2011). Moreover, ongoing training that incorporates collaborative learning, peer coaching, and reflective practices has been shown to strengthen teachers' problem-solving skills, enhance their self-efficacy, and support a culture of continuous professional growth.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Many teachers report insufficient time for PD, a lack of follow-up support after training, and limited access to resources that address the specific needs of students with diverse abilities. Rural and under-resourced schools, in particular, struggle with these constraints, which can exacerbate educational inequities. Addressing these challenges requires a systemic approach that integrates policy, school leadership, and teacher development, ensuring that PD initiatives are sustained, contextually relevant, and aligned with classroom realities.

## **2.5. Additional Perspectives and Emerging Trends**

Recent literature expands the discussion to global trends and innovative practices in professional development (PD) for educators, emphasizing the need for adaptive and context-sensitive approaches. Smith et al. (2020) highlight the transformative potential of digital PD platforms, which offer scalable and sustainable learning opportunities, especially in under-resourced or remote areas where traditional face-to-face PD is often limited. These digital platforms not only facilitate access but also allow for personalized learning pathways, asynchronous collaboration, and integration of multimedia resources, which cater to diverse teacher needs.

Vangrieken et al. (2017) emphasize the effectiveness of collaborative and networked PD models. Such models promote teacher reflection, peer feedback, and continuous improvement by fostering communities of practice. This approach moves beyond isolated professional learning to sustained social learning environments where teachers can share experiences, co-construct knowledge, and collectively address classroom challenges. This collaborative dimension is increasingly recognized as a key driver for deeper learning and lasting changes in instructional practice.

Forlin et al. (2011) provide important insights into the integration of cultural and contextual factors within PD programs. They argue that PD initiatives tailored to local cultural norms and educational contexts significantly boost teacher motivation and the likelihood of effectively implementing inclusive education practices. This perspective underscores the importance of culturally responsive training that respects diverse learner backgrounds, supports equity, and promotes social justice in education.

Furthermore, emerging research consistently highlights the necessity of multi-level support systems to sustain the impact of PD initiatives. Florian and Spratt (2013) point out that beyond individual teacher capacity-building, policy guidance, strong school leadership, and peer collaboration networks are essential components. Policies that provide clear frameworks and resources, school leaders who champion and model continuous learning, and collegial peer support create an enabling environment that nurtures ongoing professional growth.

Recent trends also show increasing attention to integrating data-driven approaches in PD. By utilizing student performance data and classroom observations, PD programs can be more targeted and responsive to specific teacher needs (Desimone & Pak, 2017). This data-informed practice supports teachers in making evidence-based decisions and adapting instructional strategies to improve student outcomes.

Moreover, there is a growing focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) and teacher well-being within PD frameworks. Recognizing that teacher stress and burnout negatively affect instructional quality, innovative PD models now include components that foster emotional resilience, mindfulness, and self-care strategies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Supporting teachers holistically ensures they are better equipped to manage classroom dynamics and create supportive learning environments.

In addition, the shift toward hybrid and blended PD models—combining face-to-face sessions with online activities—is emerging as a flexible solution that balances the benefits of direct interaction with the accessibility of digital tools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This hybrid

approach caters to diverse learning preferences and logistical constraints, making PD more inclusive and adaptable.

Finally, attention is increasingly paid to the role of teachers as active agents in their own professional growth. Participatory PD models, which involve teachers in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their learning experiences, foster a sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Empowering teachers to take leadership in their development aligns with broader goals of professionalization and teacher agency.

In summary, the evolving landscape of professional development emphasizes a holistic, contextually responsive, and collaborative approach, supported by multi-level systems and innovative technologies. These trends point to a future where PD is more personalized, sustainable, and integrated into the fabric of everyday teaching practice, ultimately enhancing educational equity and quality on a global scale.

### **3. METHOD**

This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology to examine teachers' professional development within the framework of inclusive education, with particular emphasis on the Albanian educational context. The literature review approach was selected as it enables the structured identification, critical analysis, and synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical research, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of how professional development initiatives support teachers in implementing inclusive practices, while also identifying challenges and gaps in the literature.

The reviewed literature was sourced from a broad range of academic and institutional publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, national and international policy documents, doctoral dissertations, and reports published by educational institutions and international organizations. The primary databases used for literature retrieval were ERIC, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. In addition, official documents and strategic frameworks issued by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, as well as reports published by UNESCO and UNICEF, were examined in order to capture policy-level developments related to inclusive education in Albania.

A systematic search strategy was implemented using key terms such as “teachers' professional development,” “inclusive education,” “special educational needs,” “teacher training,” and “Albania,” combined through Boolean operators to refine search results. The review focused on studies published between 2010 and 2025, ensuring the inclusion of both foundational research and recent developments in the field. Publications written in English and Albanian were considered to integrate international perspectives with context-specific evidence.

The selection of studies followed clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and methodological quality. Studies were included if they addressed teachers' professional development or training related to inclusive education at the preschool, primary, or secondary education levels. Studies focusing exclusively on higher education, those not directly addressing teacher professional development, and opinion-based publications lacking a clear theoretical or empirical foundation were excluded.

Following the selection process, the included studies were analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach. Each publication was systematically examined to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and themes related to teachers' professional development for inclusive education. The analysis focused on: (a) models and approaches to professional development, (b) teachers' competencies and attitudes toward inclusion, (c) challenges in implementing inclusive practices, and (d) the role of institutional and policy support, with particular attention to the Albanian context. Comparative analysis enabled the identification of similarities and differences between international research findings and evidence emerging from Albania.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the review, sources were cross-checked and prioritized based on academic rigor, relevance, and credibility. The inclusion of peer-reviewed studies and official policy documents strengthens the robustness of the findings and ensures that the conclusions are grounded in reliable evidence. This methodological approach provides a solid foundation for future research, policy development, and practical interventions aimed at strengthening teachers' professional development in inclusive education in Albania.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Teachers' professional development represents a critical mechanism for the effective implementation of inclusive education, particularly within education systems shaped by evolving legal and policy frameworks, such as Albania (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Forlin et al., 2011). Although inclusive education is formally endorsed through national legislation and policy documents, the translation of these legal provisions into inclusive classroom practices largely depends on the quality, continuity, and relevance of teachers' professional development opportunities (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

The Albanian legal framework provides a solid normative foundation for inclusive education. Law No. 69/2012 "On the Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania" guarantees the right to education for all students and emphasizes principles of equity, non-discrimination, and inclusion (Republic of Albania, 2012). The law explicitly mandates educational institutions to accommodate students with special educational needs and assigns teachers a central role in supporting diverse learners. However, despite establishing inclusion as a fundamental principle, the legislation offers limited operational guidance regarding the specific competencies teachers must develop or the structure and content of professional development required to support inclusive practices effectively (Ministry of Education, 2018).

The Normative Provisions for Pre-University Education Institutions further define teachers' professional responsibilities, including differentiated instruction, collaboration with parents and multidisciplinary teams, and continuous professional growth (Ministry of Education, 2018). These provisions frame professional development as a professional obligation rather than an optional activity, thereby reinforcing its importance within the education system. Nevertheless, evidence from the literature indicates that professional development initiatives in practice often remain fragmented, short-term, and insufficiently aligned with the complex pedagogical and emotional demands of inclusive education (Forlin et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2020).

The analysis reveals a persistent gap between the expectations placed on teachers by legal and policy frameworks and the professional support available to help them meet these expectations. While Albanian legislation promotes inclusive values, teachers frequently report limited access to sustained, practice-oriented professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy (Hart & More, 2013; Florian & Spratt, 2013). This gap contributes to uncertainty, increased workload, and emotional strain, which may negatively influence teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion. Research consistently shows that teachers who lack adequate preparation struggle to adapt instruction, manage diverse classrooms, and respond effectively to learners with varied needs, despite supportive legal mandates (Sharma et al., 2012).

Furthermore, although the Albanian legal framework emphasizes accountability and quality assurance in education, comparatively less attention is given to reflective and collaborative models of professional development. International research highlights that inclusive education is most effectively supported through continuous, school-based professional learning, mentoring, and peer collaboration (Huntly, 2003; Florian & Spratt, 2013). In contrast, professional development initiatives in Albania are often delivered through centralized, top-down training models, which limit opportunities for contextual adaptation, reflective practice, and sustained professional learning. This misalignment reduces the potential impact of professional development on teachers' inclusive competencies (Forlin et al., 2011).

Another significant challenge concerns the coherence between pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development. Although Albanian legislation promotes lifelong learning for teachers, limited alignment exists between initial teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development related to inclusive education (Republic of Albania, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2018). As a result, many teachers enter the profession with insufficient knowledge of inclusive pedagogy, placing additional pressure on in-service professional development to compensate for these gaps (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012).

Despite these challenges, the Albanian legal and policy context also presents important opportunities for strengthening teachers' professional development. The explicit recognition of inclusion and equity as core principles within national legislation provides a strong normative basis for reforming professional development frameworks (Republic of Albania, 2012). Aligning professional development programs with legal requirements and international standards could enhance teachers' competencies, attitudes, and beliefs necessary for inclusive education (Guerriero & Révai, 2017; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Emphasizing practice-oriented training, mentoring, and collaborative learning within the existing legal framework would contribute to the sustainability and effectiveness of inclusive practices (Forlin et al., 2011).

Overall, the findings indicate that the successful implementation of inclusive education in Albania depends not only on the existence of supportive legislation but also on the effectiveness of teachers' professional development. Bridging the gap between policy intentions and classroom practice requires systematic, continuous, and context-sensitive professional development that equips teachers with both technical competencies and inclusive values. Only through such an approach can inclusive education move beyond formal compliance toward meaningful and equitable educational practice for all learners (Sharma et al., 2012; Forlin et al., 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The current landscape of teachers' professional development (PD) in inclusive education in Albania reveals both promising initiatives and persistent gaps that shape how educators acquire, apply, and sustain inclusive teaching practices. Research indicates that initial teacher education programs in Albania have begun to integrate inclusive education principles, including dedicated courses on inclusive pedagogy within teacher training programs. However, the depth and consistency of this integration remain limited across institutions, suggesting that pre-service preparation does not yet comprehensively equip all future teachers with the competencies required for diverse classrooms (UNICEF, 2023).

The first category, classroom inclusion, refers to the education of students with disabilities within mainstream schools and emphasizes how teachers can develop the professional skills required to address an increasingly diverse student population. Within this body of research, the right of students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers is largely taken for granted. Teacher professional development is consistently identified as a critical factor in improving instructional quality and advancing inclusive education. Brusca-Vega, Alexander, and Kamin (2014) argue that at least 40% of educational provision for students with disabilities should occur in general education classrooms. Their analysis also highlights the long-standing research tradition on inclusive education in the United States.

The second category, basic inclusion, does not assume access to mainstream education, as students with disabilities in the examined contexts are not consistently guaranteed the right to education. Consequently, inclusive education remains underdeveloped in these settings. Kempen and Steyn (2016) examined the situation in South Africa, where resource schools are intended to support special education within mainstream schools. More recently, Simpson et al. (2016) investigated the context in China, where students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) lack a legally guaranteed right to education, placing substantial responsibility and pressure on parents, who are required to assume full responsibility for their children's education.

The third category, general inclusion, conceptualizes inclusive education from a broader perspective that extends beyond disability to include socio-economic and cultural dimensions. Studies within this category were conducted in Hong Kong, Canada, and the United States. Two of these studies focus on equity (Chan & Lo, 2017), examining teachers' identities and attitudes toward inclusive teaching practices. The third study (Katz, 2015) addresses the issue of teacher attrition in Canada, reporting that approximately 47% of teachers leave the profession. Notably, Katz (2015) found that teachers with stronger pro-inclusive beliefs were also at greater risk of burnout. Findings in this category are primarily derived from teacher-reported data.

The fourth category, content inclusion, includes studies that focus on strengthening content knowledge to prevent future academic failure by identifying students at risk at an early stage and reducing subsequent exclusion. Three studies were identified within this category (Rinaldi, Averill, & Stuart, 2011), all conducted in the United States and focused on literacy. The instructional approaches examined include reading instructional effectiveness methods, curriculum-based measurement (CBM) of reading fluency, and response to intervention (RTI) models (Rinaldi et al., 2011). Findings in this category are primarily based on student learning outcomes.

In practice, in-service professional development opportunities—such as workshops, modules, and external projects—play a crucial role in filling this preparation gap. Initiatives such as specific modules on inclusive education help teachers identify students' special needs, develop individualized educational plans, and adapt curricula accordingly. Nonetheless, empirical studies highlight that many educators still face significant challenges in applying newly acquired knowledge to real classroom contexts. For example, teachers in pre-school inclusive settings in Durrës reported difficulties in addressing diverse learner needs and stressed the importance of enhanced training focused on practical adaptation strategies (Richtmann, 2022).

Large-scale projects such as EU4Inclusive Teaching demonstrate systemic efforts to strengthen inclusive teaching competencies by aligning PD with national curriculum reforms and competence-based education frameworks. These initiatives provide structured training for teachers and emphasize a cascade model of professional learning, where trained teacher-trainers support peers, increasing the reach and sustainability of PD interventions (EU Projects Albania, 2023). Despite these efforts, national surveys indicate that a substantial proportion of teachers—especially those working with students with autism spectrum disorders—report inadequate specialized training and a pronounced need for further professional learning in areas such as communication and behavior management.

Knowledge of students' educational needs is essential for identifying their individual learning requirements (Demchenko et al., 2021). Teachers should also be aware of different instructional strategies to select the most appropriate approaches for their students (Lindsay et al., 2014). Implementing innovative teaching methods can enhance students' learning behaviors and academic achievement, allowing teachers to observe positive impacts on students' performance (Harris et al., 2014; Lauth-Lebens et al., 2016). Observation of students who face challenges benefiting from instructional changes can promote the development of positive attitudes toward inclusive education and facilitate the acquisition and practical application of relevant knowledge through structured programs (Ewing et al., 2018).

Since the implementation of inclusive education varies depending on the context, researchers may focus on different aspects and select different indicators to examine successful implementation (Van Mieghem et al., 2018; Waitoller & Artiles, 2016). In this study, outcome variables were grouped into four main categories derived from the literature: (a) **knowledge**, measured through self-reports and knowledge tests; (b) **teacher skills**, assessed by evaluating the quality of inclusive teaching practices (e.g., collaborative teaching, individualized instruction, Universal Design for Learning, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), frequency and variation of methods used, and teachers' perceived self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices; (c) **attitudes and perceptions** toward inclusive education, reflecting teachers' beliefs and concerns; and (d) **student behavior**, including academic achievement (standardized tests, research-based assessments, school grades) and other behaviors (learning behavior, school participation, attitudes toward school). Student behavior data were collected via teacher surveys, school records, and student self-reports.

This pattern points to a broader issue: while positive attitudes toward inclusive education are evident among Albanian teachers, attitude alone does not guarantee effective inclusive practice.

High-quality professional development must be continuous, contextually relevant, and closely linked with classroom realities. International guidance, such as the European Agency's Profile of Inclusive Teachers, emphasizes that inclusive competence comprises not only foundational knowledge but also attitudes, values, and self-reflective practices enabling teachers to adapt instruction for all learners (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021).

The impact of professional development on student achievement appears to diminish when a larger number of teachers from the same school participate. This may be because mandatory participation involves teachers who are less intrinsically motivated, unlike voluntary participation, which depends largely on teachers' willingness to engage. These findings suggest that imposing professional development on teachers can potentially hinder positive outcomes. Moreover, attitudes toward professional development tend to be socially contagious among colleagues (Pedaste et al., 2021), meaning that negative perceptions can spread within a school and compromise individual teachers' efforts. In contrast, intensive professional development programs have been shown to positively enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs, as well as improve student behavior.

In conclusion, teachers' professional development in inclusive education in Albania has made meaningful strides through curriculum enhancements, targeted training modules, and internationally supported projects, yet substantial work remains to ensure that all teachers develop and sustain practical competencies needed in diverse classroom contexts. Effective PD must be lifelong, systemic, and practice-oriented—combining pre-service preparation with ongoing in-service learning, supported by policy, institutional leadership, and community networks. Structured follow-up, mentoring, and collaborative learning opportunities will be essential for realizing the full potential of inclusive education reforms and ensuring equitable educational experiences for every learner.

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