



STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

This article explores strategies for inclusive education and intercultural communication in primary schools. The primary objective of this study was to identify effective practices that address the challenges faced by primary school educators, such as inadequate training, limited resources, and managing large class sizes. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collected through surveys of 75 novice teachers in Sofia, Stara Zagora, and Pazardzhik, Bulgaria. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify trends, strategies, and barriers to current practices. The results highlighted the predominant use of differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and culturally sensitive teaching as key strategies for fostering inclusion and intercultural communication. Based on these findings, this study recommends enhancing teacher training programs, improving access to resources, and promoting co-teaching partnerships between primary and resource teachers to better support inclusive practices in primary education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, intercultural communication, primary teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education and intercultural communication are vital components of fostering a harmonious and equitable learning environment for students in primary schools. These concepts are increasingly being recognized as essential in today's globalized world, where classrooms are becoming more diverse. Inclusive education ensures that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equal access to learning opportunities. On the other hand, intercultural communication promotes understanding and collaboration among students from different cultural backgrounds, enabling them to work together effectively and respectfully.

Recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of these concepts in the educational setting. For example, Comia (2021) emphasized that teachers play a crucial role in creating classrooms that celebrate diversity and provide opportunities for all students to thrive. This involves adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse learners and fostering an environment in which differences are respected and valued.

Theoretical Infrastructure of the Research

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the principles of inclusive education and intercultural communication, both of which have been supported by extensive research and international policy guidelines. Inclusive education is based on the understanding that education is a fundamental human right, as outlined by UNESCO (2017), which advocates the removal of barriers to education for all students. This concept is further supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which emphasizes the need for educational systems to adapt to the diverse needs of students, rather than expecting students to conform to a one-size-fits-all model.

Intercultural communication, as defined by Gudykunst and Kim (2003), involves the exchange of information among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the context of education, this concept is crucial for promoting social harmony and reducing cultural bias among students. Recent



research by Banks (2022) underscores the role of intercultural communication in enhancing students' social skills and preparing them for participation in a multicultural society; the integration of these concepts into primary education is not without challenges. Teachers often report difficulties in implementing inclusive practices because of a lack of resources, inadequate training, and the complexity of managing diverse classrooms (Smith & Benavides, 2022). However, recent advancements in educational theory, such as the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, offer promising strategies to overcome these obstacles by promoting flexible teaching methods that can be customized to meet the needs of all learners (Rose & Meyer, 2021). This study builds on these theoretical foundations to explore the current state of inclusive education and intercultural communication in Bulgaria's primary schools. It aims to identify effective strategies and potential barriers that contribute to the ongoing discourse on how to create more inclusive and culturally responsive educational environments.

Inclusive education is a multidimensional and multifunctional concept. The literature offers diverse interpretations, with some researchers focusing on social inclusion (Gerschel, 2005b; Walker & Walker, 1997), others on educational inclusion (Tilstone et al., 1998), and others on the values and principles that support the inclusive approach (Cheminais, 2005, 2006; Clough & Corbett, 2000). These different perspectives reflect the complexity of this concept and the challenges associated with its implementation in the educational system, as affirmed by the National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN) in the UK: "Inclusion must cover broad notions of educational access and recognize the importance of responding to diverse needs..." (NASEN, 1998).

Using a human rights-based and social model approach, inclusive education promotes the idea that children should adapt to the educational system, not the other way around. Inclusive education is based on the understanding that all children have the potential to learn, integrating both activities from the sphere of formal education and those related to the child's community (Armstrong et al., 2011). This process supports educational structures, systems, and methodologies in their endeavor to meet the needs of all students, being flexible, dynamic, and constantly evolving depending on the cultural and social context (UNESCO, 2017).

Inclusive education does not allow for disparities in education, discrimination, and exclusion of various groups of children and students based on age, sex, ethnicity, language, disability, etc. (OECD, 2012). Topping and Maloney (2005) consider inclusion as a dynamic process, not a static state, describing it as "a journey, not a destination."

Analogous to learning, which is presented as a continuous process (Booth 2000), inclusive education is an integral part of the continuous improvement of school systems. This is perceived as a key and positive principle for schools engaged in policies to improve educational standards, creating the assumption that an inclusive school is, by definition, a good school (Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Zemelman, 1998).

In recent years, Bulgaria has made substantial progress in the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream environment (Damyanov, 2010). Despite opposition from staff working in special and segregated schools, an increasing number of parents choose to educate their children alongside other children in mainstream schools and kindergartens. Over time, many mainstream teachers who feel unprepared to work with children with special educational needs in their classrooms have joined the opponents of inclusive education.

Throughout history, a great number of children and youth in Bulgaria have not had equitable access to school due to a variety of challenges related to learning and surroundings. A common theme in the history of society's attitude towards people with disabilities is the presence of various periods of discrimination and rejection that vary in duration and temporal disposition, but are invariably present. (Baeva, 2009). This is a problem not only in Bulgaria but also globally. However, it is our role to change this, as negativity towards difference leads to nothing good.



In inclusive education, the most important thing is to engage all students to ensure, on the one hand, an equal start and, on the other, the best care in their interest. Inclusive education is both a philosophy and a policy that aims to reform mainstream schools and kindergartens and make them accessible to all children so that every child can love school, achieve success there, contribute to society, and prepare in the most comprehensive way for their future social life as an adult.

"Assessment of Educational Inclusion" (Ofsted 2000) says that inclusion refers to:

boys and girls;

Ethnic and religious minorities, Roma refugees

students for whom the national language was not their native language.

Students with Disabilities

Students exposed to a lack of attention or at risk of exclusion.

gifted, talented children.

children in care;

Children with Chronic Diseases

young people caring for others

Children from families under stress.

Pregnant Students and Young Mothers

The British NGO "Save the Children" (2016) also published a statement in its report on the right to inclusive education: "The basic concept underlying inclusive education is that every child has the right to access quality education in the mainstream school system and is capable of learning. In this sense, every child, regardless of differences based on age, gender, ethnicity, disability, or other barriers to learning, can and should be educated in mainstream school. Inclusive education aims to meet the needs of every child, paying special attention to groups of children who are at risk of being socially isolated or excluded from the mainstream system."

Grossman (2004) argued that inclusion is increasingly considered a leading challenge for all school leaders, regardless of whether they are engaged in mainstream or special education. Others, such as Leithwood et al. (1999), believe that with the increasing diversity in admissions driven by new societal demands for knowledge, schools need to develop new forms of knowledge management suitable for working in increasing uncertainty and varying educational needs. This diversity of children requires different forms of communication among them and with them.

Inclusive education is present when all students, regardless of the challenges they may face, are in age-appropriate mainstream classes in their local schools, to receive quality instruction, interventions, and support that allows them to achieve success in the core curriculum (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2018). The school and classroom operate on the principle that students with disabilities are just as competent as students without disabilities. Therefore, all students could be full participants in their classrooms and in the local school community. Much of the movement for inclusive education around the world is linked to legislation that requires students to be educated in the least restrictive environment. This means that they are with their peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible, with general education as the first choice for all students (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Apply Universal Design for Learning.

Intercultural communication is defined as communication between people from different cultures (Gudykunst & Kim 2003). It is important to promote mutual understanding and respect among people from various cultural backgrounds.

In the educational context, intercultural communication plays an important role in supporting cultural diversity and achieving social harmony (Banks 2004). Strategies for promoting intercultural communication include culturally sensitive training (Gay, 2002) and intercultural education (Bennett, 1993).



This article aims to build on these two concepts to explore strategies for inclusive education and intercultural communication in primary schools. Specifically, it analyzes how teachers understand and apply these concepts in practice, as well as the difficulties and opportunities they encounter along the way.

METHOD

Model of the Research

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This model was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how novice teachers implement and perceive practices related to inclusive and intercultural communications. The combination of these methodologies allows for a richer and more nuanced analysis, facilitating the exploration of measurable trends and in-depth contextual insights.

Population and Sample of the Research

The study participants consisted of 75 novice teachers from three cities in Bulgaria: Sofia, Stara Zagora, and Pazardzhik. The participants were selected using a random sampling method to ensure diverse representations across different geographical regions. The sample included a balanced distribution of teachers in terms of gender, age, and teaching experience, with the aim of enhancing the validity and generalizability of the findings. The sample was composed of 55 female teachers (73.33%) and 20 male teachers (26.67%), with age groups ranging from under 30 to over 50 years.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through an electronic survey that included both closed- and open-ended questions. The survey was designed to capture participants' demographic information, their understanding of inclusive education and intercultural communication, the strategies they employed, and the challenges they faced. The data collection instrument was developed by educational researchers with expertise in inclusive and intercultural communications. The validity of the survey was established through a pilot study and its reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the survey were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data, such as demographic information and responses to closed questions, were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends among the participants. Statistical analyses, including frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, were used to interpret data. Qualitative data derived from the open-ended survey questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns that were then grouped into broader categories. The qualitative analysis provided deeper insights into participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of inclusive education and intercultural communication strategies.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were fully informed of the objectives and procedures of the study and provided their consent to participate. The study ensured anonymity and confidentiality of all participants, with data stored and processed in compliance with personal data protection laws. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

Limitations of the Research

Although this study offers valuable insights, it is subject to certain limitations. Although adequate, the sample size was limited to novice teachers in specific regions of Bulgaria, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the research design relied on self-reported data, which may have introduced a bias. Future research could expand the scope to include other stakeholders such as students and parents, and explore the implementation of inclusive education and intercultural communication in different educational contexts.



Presentation of Results and Explanation of Analysis

Before presenting the results in tables and figures, it is essential to provide a detailed explanation of the analysis techniques used and the specific results that will be highlighted. This approach not only clarifies the methodology but also ensures that the interpretation of data is coherent and meaningful.

Explanation of Analysis Techniques

Data collected through the survey were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitative data, including demographic variables and responses to closed-ended questions, were analyzed using descriptive statistics. This involved calculating frequencies, percentages, and means to identify patterns and trends among the participants. These statistical measures help provide a clear picture of the distribution and commonalities within the sample, which are critical for understanding the broader implications of the study.

Qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved systematically coding responses to identify recurring themes and categories. Thematic analysis allows for a deep exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, offering insights into the contextual factors that influence the implementation of inclusive education and intercultural communication strategies.

Presentation of Results

The results of the analysis are presented in the following tables and figures: Each table and figure is accompanied by a brief description explaining what is being represented and how the data contribute to the overall findings of the study.

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the study participants, including their gender, age, and teaching experience. This information is crucial for understanding the context in which this study's findings are situated.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Demographic Variable	N	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	55	73.33
Male	20	26.67
Age		
Under 30 years	10	13.33
30-50 years	40	53.33
Over 50 years	25	33.33
Teaching Experience		
Under 5 years	15	20
5-15 years	30	40
Over 15 years	30	40

Table 1 is formatted according to APA guidelines, with three horizontal lines separating the header, the main body, and the footer of the Table 1. This layout provides a clear and professional presentation of the data.

Figure 1 illustrates the various strategies employed by the participants in their inclusive education practices. The percentage of instructors using various tactics, such as cooperative learning, differentiated teaching, and universal design for learning, is shown in a bar chart style based on the data.

This figure is critical for understanding which inclusive education strategies are most commonly used among the participants. It highlights the prevalence of cooperative learning and the adoption of differentiated instruction as key approaches to inclusion.

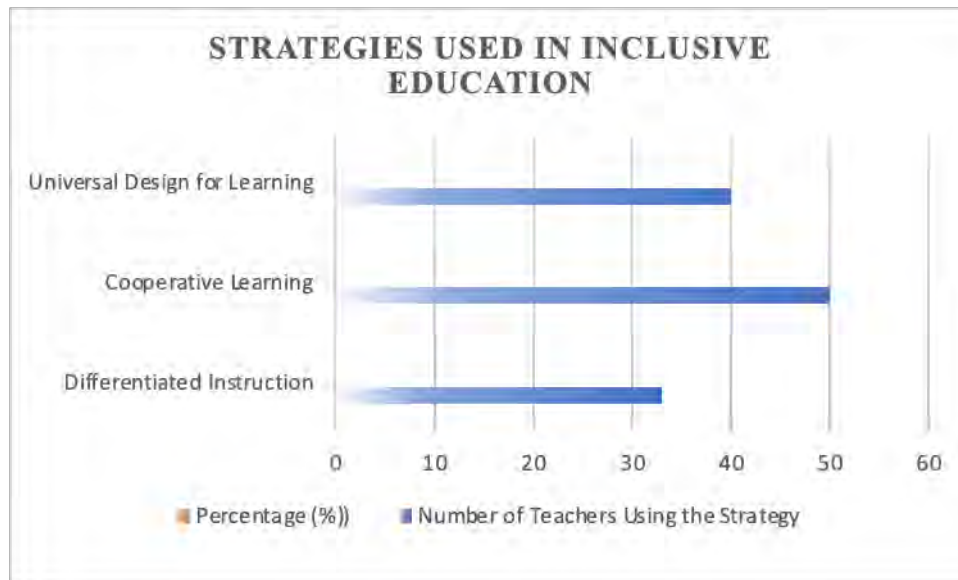


Figure 1. Strategies used in inclusive education.

According to the collected data, the differentiated instruction strategy is employed by about one-third of the teachers (33% or $n=25$) who integrate it into their daily instructional practice. Differentiated instruction is characterized by adapting the learning process to the varying needs of the students, with such adaptability being an essential feature of inclusive education.

The cooperative learning strategy is also widely employed, with about two-thirds of the study participants (66.67% or $n=50$) incorporating it into their pedagogical practices. This strategy focuses on group work and promoting cooperation among students, which aids in integrating all students into the learning process.

Ultimately, the universal design for learning strategy is applied by approximately half of the participants (53.33% or $n=40$). This strategy emphasizes the importance of designing the learning process and environment to be accessible and appropriate for all students.

These results demonstrate that teachers implement a variety of inclusive education strategies, but they also highlight the significance of cooperative learning as the most widely utilized pedagogical practice among primary school teachers in Bulgaria.

Figure 2 depicts the strategies used by participants to promote intercultural communication in their classrooms. Similar to Figure 1, this data is presented in a bar chart format, which clearly shows the distribution of strategies such as culturally sensitive teaching and intercultural education.

The figure aids in identifying the most often used tactics for promoting cross-cultural communication, emphasizing the value of culturally aware instruction in particular.

According to the data analysis, the most frequently encountered strategy is "culturally sensitive teaching", which is applied by 60% of the teachers ($n=45$). This strategy focuses on understanding and acknowledging the diverse cultural contexts of students, aiming to provide education that responds to their unique needs and perspectives.

The "intercultural education" strategy is also widely applied, involving around half of the study participants (46.67% or $n=35$). Intercultural education aims to develop students' skills to communicate and interact effectively and respectfully with people from different cultural backgrounds.

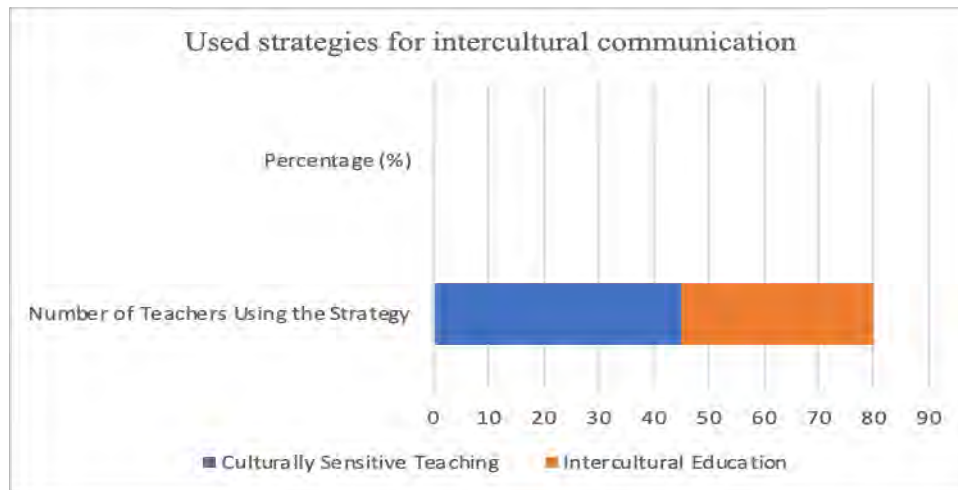


Figure 2. Used strategies for intercultural communication.

These findings demonstrate that educators use a variety of approaches to facilitate cross-cultural communication, with "culturally sensitive teaching" being the most often used approach. However, a significant proportion of teachers also apply "intercultural education", which emphasizes the importance of competencies for effective interaction in diverse cultural contexts.

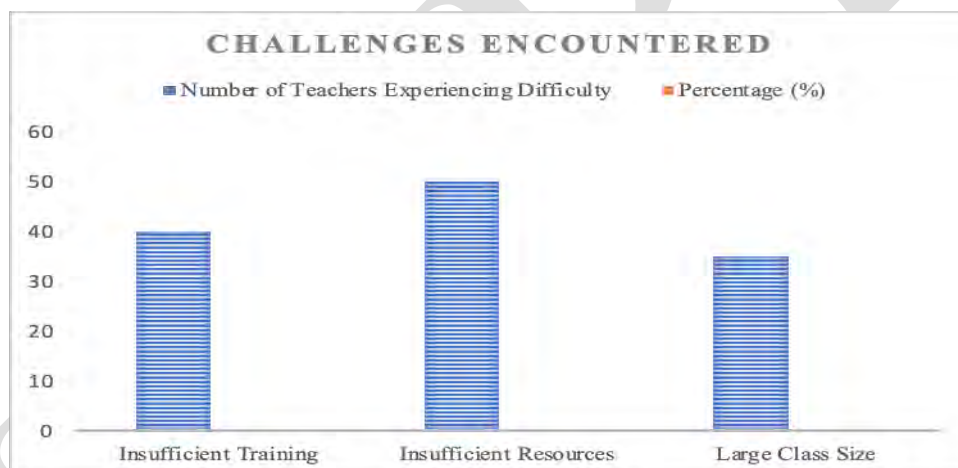


Figure 3. Challenges encountered by teachers in implementing inclusive education and intercultural communication strategies.

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the challenges that teachers face when implementing strategies for inclusive education and intercultural communication. The data reveal that the most significant barrier is the lack of sufficient resources, which encompasses a broad range of needs, including physical materials, specialist support, and institutional assistance. This challenge is reported by 66.67% of the participants (n=50), highlighting the critical need for enhanced resources to support effective implementation.

This finding underscores the importance of addressing resource-related issues to ensure that teachers are adequately equipped to deliver inclusive and culturally responsive education. The figure clearly illustrates the urgency of improving resource allocation as a fundamental step toward overcoming the obstacles that hinder the successful integration of these strategies in primary school settings.

The next most common difficulty is insufficient training. Nearly half of the teachers (53.33% or n=40) have encountered this hurdle. This may suggest that a significant number of teachers do not feel adequately prepared or trained in this area, highlighting the need for more education and preparation.



The third most common difficulty is managing large classes, encountered by approximately 46.67% (n=35) of teachers. This emphasizes the difficulties associated with working with large groups of students, particularly in the context of inclusive education and intercultural communication.

These results highlight the significant challenges that need to be overcome to optimize the implementation of inclusive education and intercultural communication strategies in primary school.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, and SUGGESTIONS

The study's conclusions provide a thorough grasp of the difficulties and solutions pertaining to inclusive education and cross-cultural dialogue in elementary schools. Through the analysis of the collected data, it is evident that while teachers actively employ various strategies to foster an inclusive environment, they encounter significant obstacles, particularly those related to insufficient resources, inadequate training, and managing large class sizes.

Addressing Resource Constraints

One of the most pressing challenges identified in this study is the lack of adequate resources, which aligns with findings from other research in the field. For instance, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasized that resource availability is a critical factor in the successful implementation of inclusive practices. The need for culturally sensitive educational materials, specialist support, and institutional assistance is paramount. This study suggests that improving learning resources and materials through the development of diverse culturally relevant content can significantly enhance the inclusivity of the educational environment. The role of resource teachers in supporting novice teachers is crucial, as they can offer tailored resources and strategies that address the specific needs of students, thereby bridging the gap in resources (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010).

Enhancing Professional Development

Another major challenge is the inadequate training of teachers in inclusive education and intercultural communication. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as that of Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2017), who highlighted the importance of ongoing professional development in equipping teachers with the skills needed to effectively manage diverse classrooms. The literature, which argues that ongoing professional development is necessary for teachers to stay current with the newest inclusive practices and pedagogical approaches, supports the suggested strategy to improve teachers' professional skills through regular training and seminars (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2022). Collaboration between novice and resource teachers in professional development activities can lead to more effective implementation of inclusive strategies and a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics in the classroom.

Managing Large Class Sizes

The challenge of managing large classes is another significant barrier to effective inclusive education, as noted by Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2012). Large class sizes can dilute the attention each student receives and make it difficult to implement individualized instruction or small-group work, which are critical components of inclusive education. The proposed strategy of resizing classroom structures by employing alternative approaches, such as small group work or individualized instruction, is consistent with recommendations in the literature. Research indicates that reducing class sizes or reorganizing them into smaller groups can improve student engagement and learning outcomes, especially for students with special needs (Mitchell, 2014). Resource teachers can play a pivotal role in this process by assisting in the organisation and management of classroom structures that facilitate inclusive education.

Although the proposed strategies offer practical solutions to the identified challenges, it is important to recognise the limitations of this study. The strategies developed were based on data from a specific context, and their applicability may vary in different educational settings. Moreover, the implementation of these strategies requires substantial resources, including time, finances, and training, which may not be readily available in all schools.



Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies in various contexts to determine their generalizability. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore how teachers perceive these strategies and how they impact students' academic achievement and social integration. Research could also investigate the influence of external factors, such as family background, political climate, and socioeconomic conditions, on the success of inclusive education and intercultural communication practices. This study sheds light on critical challenges and strategies associated with inclusive education and intercultural communication in primary schools. The data indicate that while teachers employ diverse strategies, they face significant obstacles that hinder the full realisation of inclusive education. Schools may build more inclusive and equitable learning environments by tackling these issues with focused techniques include regulating classroom structures, expanding professional development, and upgrading resources.. However, further research is needed to explore the broader applicability of these strategies and to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that influence their success. Despite these challenges, educators' commitment to fostering inclusive classrooms is evident, and with the right support, significant progress can be made in this important area.

Ethics and Conflict of Interest

All ethical rules were observed at each stage of the research. The author declares that he acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research.

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