Introduction: Teacher Education for Inclusion – Policies and Practices in Europe (TEIPPE)

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Abstract

This introduction situates inclusive teacher education within global and policy contexts that link academic quality with social justice. Following Cochran-Smith et al. (2016), it highlights a persistent tension in teacher education between excellence and equity. Growing migration, widening inequalities and diversity movements have intensified these challenges. Since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Education 2030 Framework (UNESCO, 2015), inclusion has evolved from integrating pupils with disabilities to embracing diversity across race, gender, class and ability, while recent research (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Walton, 2016) emphasises the cultural and power dimensions of inclusion.

Teacher education occupies a strategic position in addressing these systemic inequities. Van Peteghem & Consuegra (2021) reviewed twenty-six meta-studies and identified ten key principles for preparing teachers for inclusion—from integrating inclusive values across curricula to using digital tools that promote accessibility. These principles underpin the *Teacher Education for Inclusion: Policies and Practices in Europe (TEIPPE)* special issue, which draws on collaborative research within the EUTOPIA European University alliance (France, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Ireland). The issue analyses how teacher-education programmes enact inclusive policies and practices across contexts, using Van Peteghem & Consuegra's framework to link empirical studies and theoretical advances.

In this introduction of the special issue, we present the context, what is at stake, the ten principles and how each contribution is related to these principles.

What is at stake?

Global policy context of inclusive education

One of the most persistent challenges in contemporary teacher education is to align the pursuit of high academic standards with the imperative of social justice. This tension has been described by Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) as a core dilemma for initial teacher education programmes, and it is echoed in policy debates across Europe and beyond.

The challenges are not new. There have always been pupils who are marginalised by the education system and these systemic inequities have continually shaped the context in which teachers have to do their work (e.g. Gadsden, Davis & Artiles, 2009). However, today the dimensions of diversity and inequality have increased due to recent migration patterns (OECD, 2019) and social justice, equity and inclusion movements that gained importance during the last decades (Biesta, 2012).

Inclusive education itself has evolved from early efforts to enroll learners with disabilities into mainstream schools to a broader commitment to welcome diversity across race, class, gender and ability (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education highlighted that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and achieving education for all (UNESCO, 1994). More recently, the Education 2030 Framework for Action emphasised that inclusion and equity are foundational to quality education (UNESCO, 2015).

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Researchers have since extended the discussion to interrogate the cultural, historical and power dynamics that shape inclusive practices (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Walton, 2016).

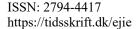## Challenges in teacher training in inclusive education

In this field of inquiry, teacher education occupies a strategic position. As Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) argue, preparing teachers to teach for equity requires programmes to address the systemic inequities that shape schooling. The literature on teacher preparation for inclusion has expanded exponentially: Van Peteghem & Consuegra (2021) review twenty-six meta-studies and identify recommendations addressed to teacher education in primary-school. They synthesise these recommendations into a ten-principles grid that serves both as a diagnostic tool and a guide for programme development (Van Peteghem & Consuegra, 2021). These principles call for integrating inclusion throughout the curriculum, providing guidance during recruitment and study progression, fostering critical inquiry and self-reflection, offering mentoring and coaching, engaging with local communities, collaborating with schools and colleagues, creating safe spaces, addressing both general and specific needs and using digital technology to support inclusion. This grid serves as a conceptual framework for this special issue. The present special issue — Teacher Education for Inclusion: Policies and Practices in Europe (TEIPPE) — builds on this research base and on the collaborative work of the EUTOPIA European University alliance. This alliance gathers ten European universities, including CY Cergy Paris University (France), Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium), Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Spain), and the University of Gothenburg (Sweden). Within these institutions, a Connected Research Community entitled "Inclusive Education" was examining how teacher education programmes in different European contexts implement inclusive policies and highlight innovative practices. Drawing on empirical studies conducted in France, Spain, Belgium, Sweden and Ireland, as well as a hybridisation project that explores digital pathways to inclusion, the issue offers a panorama of policies and practices. We invited Peter Hick (Edge Hill University) to discuss our findings from an external perspective and to synthesise the main tensions and insights emerging from the papers. His concluding article reflects on these contributions in light of current challenges and future directions.

In this introductory article, we first recapitulate the analytical framework proposed by Van Peteghem & Consuegra (2021). We then summarise the six empirical studies, noting how each engages with one or more principles from the grid. A final section announces the synthesis article and outlines the contributions of this special issue to the field.

Ten principles for training teachers for inclusive education

The ten principles outlined by Van Peteghem & Consuegra (2021), drawn from Van Peteghem (2021), provide a comprehensive framework for analysing teacher education programmes:

1. **Integrate inclusion throughout the curriculum**: Inclusion should not be confined to a single module but should pervade all courses and years of study to be efficient. Studies of curriculum reforms indicate that integrating diversity throughout teacher education fosters more consistent inclusive practices (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016).
2. **Diversity of students during recruitment:** Admissions processes should encourage diversity among candidates and provide ongoing support to ensure retention and success (Van Peteghem & Consuegra, 2021). Evidence suggests that teachers from diverse backgrounds can better address the needs of diverse learners (Villegas & Irvine, 2010), and the variety of role models is important. This principle is not really addressed in this issue, but a comparative study between the countries involved would be very interesting, since in some countries, such as England, schools are fully autonomous in recruiting teachers, whereas in others, such as France, schools have no choice at all in the recruitment process.

3. **Foster critical inquiry and self-reflection:** Teacher candidates should learn to question their assumptions about learners and to reflect on their positionality (Freire, 1968). Self-reflection is associated with greater responsiveness to student diversity (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Portfolios, reflective journals, and "informal discussion boxes" are put forward as examples to foster introspection (Van Peteghem, 2021).

4. **Offer mentoring and coaching:** Novice teachers benefit from structured mentoring relationships that connect theory to practice (Hobson et al., 2009). Mentoring by experienced teachers and coaches helps novices navigate the complexities of classroom practice and reflect on their development. Such support helps them develop inclusive pedagogies (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

5. **Engage in community-based learning:** Programmes should involve student teachers in community projects and partnerships, enabling them to understand learners' contexts and build reciprocal relationships (Zeichner, 2010). Community service-learning and participatory action research are ways to immerse student teachers in neighbourhood dynamics.

6. **Foster lifelong learning from the initial training:** Teacher education programmes should help student teachers develop the disposition and skills needed for lifelong learning, enabling them to keep engaging in professional development after graduation. Close partnerships between universities and schools reduce the "practice shock" experienced by beginning teachers and align theoretical learning with classroom realities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Co-teaching and professional learning communities are examples of such collaboration.

7. **Foster collaboration** within and outside school: Inclusive education requires cooperative work among general educators, special educators, families, and other stakeholders (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). This principle provides a basis for reflexivity, professional development, and collective engagement; fundamentally, including students requires including educators.

8. **Create safe spaces:** Teacher candidates need environments where they can discuss doubts and experiment with ideas without fear of judgment. It is essential to provide a secure environment that valorises diversity instead of marginalising it (Gay, 2010) and that avoids power hierarchies (Freire, 1968). Safe spaces foster critical consciousness and collective learning.

9. **Balance general and specific needs:** While inclusive principles apply to all learners, teachers also need specific knowledge of particular disabilities or linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Balancing the general and the specific prevents tokenism.

10. **Harness technology for multiperspectivism:** Digital tools can enhance inclusion by providing accessible materials, facilitating collaboration, and connecting learners across contexts (Florian & Beaton, 2017). However, programmes must address digital divides and develop educators' digital competence.

These principles serve as a touchstone for the contributions in this special issue. By examining diverse contexts through this lens, the issue seeks to advance both theory and practice in inclusive teacher education and to extend Van Peteghem and Consuegra's grid to secondary and university levels.

Contributions of this special issue

France: Co-teaching and the transformation of deficit discourses

The first empirical study, by Pascal Champain, investigates how co-teaching between special education teachers and general classroom teachers influences pedagogical practices and discourses about pupils labelled as having deficits. Conducted in the Académie de Versailles, the qualitative study involved seven pairs of teachers who engaged in joint planning, observation, and reflective seminars. The analysis reveals that co-teaching evolves from asymmetrical relationships—where the specialist focuses on a few pupils and the generalist remains on the sidelines—to a collaborative model in which both teachers share responsibility for all pupils and co-regulate instruction. Over time, the teachers abandon deficit labels and adopt contextualised descriptions of individual needs. This transformation exemplifies principles 4

and 7, demonstrating the power of mentoring and collaboration. It also illustrates principle 3, as reflective seminars enable teachers to reconsider their assumptions.

Spain: Accessibility in higher education

The second study, by Blanca Arias-Badia and Irene Hermosa-Ramírez, examines how lecturers in Andalusian, Basque and Catalan universities perceive and implement accessibility measures for students with sensory disabilities. Despite legal frameworks such as the Royal Decree 193/2023 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the authors find that lecturers often lack guidance and institutional support to provide effective access solutions leading to inclusion. Participants report that preparing accessible materials is time-consuming and not recognised by their institutions, and some express negative attitudes toward students with disabilities. The study highlights the need for specialised training, effective communication channels with student support units, and changes in institutional culture. It illustrates principles 6 and 9 by showing that general commitments to inclusion must be accompanied by specific knowledge and collaboration with support services. Principle 10 is also tackled with the importance of teaching digital tools for accessibility.

Belgium: Collaborative research for school development

The third contribution, led by Jetske Strijbos, investigates a collaborative research project at the CityScope Lyceum in Brussels. The project is aiming to strengthen student–teacher relationships through regular student talks. A team comprising teachers, students, pre-service teachers, a school leader and a teacher educator conducted bi-monthly discussions and concept-map-mediated interviews. Analysis of role dynamics identified four clusters—cooperators/communicators, contributors/critics, consuls, and creators/contractors—that collectively contributed to breakthroughs in the school development process. While some role expectations remained unmet, the study shows that multiple actors sharing key roles can create participatory and reciprocal spaces. This research exemplifies principles 5 and 7 by engaging the community and fostering collaboration, and it highlights the importance of reflective inquiry (principle 3) in clarifying roles and expectations.

Sweden: Integrating inclusion into teacher education programmes

The fourth article, by Girma Berhanu is a pilot study exploring how inclusive education is integrated into teacher education programmes in Sweden. Most programmes include a short module on special education, conflict management and social relations, but the extent to which inclusive content permeates the core curriculum remains unclear. Using document analysis and interviews with programme leaders and teacher educators, the study investigates how the ten principles are reflected in policies and curricula. Preliminary findings suggest that inclusion is only marginally integrated into subject areas, and that educators perceive a gap between policy and practice. The study underscores principles 1 and 6 by highlighting the need for curriculum integration and stronger university–school partnerships, and it draws attention to the role of teacher educators' conceptions (principles 3 and 4) in shaping programmes.

Ireland: Critical 'legitimate peripheral participation' in initial teacher education for inclusion

The fifth article derives from research into the impact of a major reform program in Ireland, in which teacher education programs were extended and required to introduce additional content on inclusive education. This represented a unique opportunity for a longitudinal study of system-wide change across all teacher education providers within a European state. The Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion project was a mixed methods study conducted by a team at Manchester Metropolitan University and University College Cork, led by Peter Hick and Yvette Solomon. Many of the key findings echo closely the principles proposed in Van Peteghem and Consuegra's grid, for example: embedding inclusive pedagogy across the teacher education curriculum; fostering collaboration within and across schools; and creating safe spaces. This paper from the research team, for which the first author is Kevin Cahill, develops the principles of fostering critical inquiry and reflection, in relation to mentoring and coaching, by building on the notion of learning as legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice (Lave, J. & Wenger, E., 1991) to highlight the importance of critical reflection for beginning teachers in the context of inclusive education.

Hybridisation: Digital pathways to inclusion
The sixth contribution, by Muriel Epstein, examines how hybridising teacher education—combining online and face-to-face learning—can support inclusion. Building on work by Fenoglio (2024) on digital tools and inclusion, the author studies a hybrid curriculum that allows student teachers to engage in online safe spaces, collaborate across institutions and access diverse resources. The study finds that hybridisation creates opportunities for reflection and differentiation, particularly for students who cannot attend campus regularly. It also supports principles 8 and 10 by exploiting technology to foster multiperspectivism and by creating safe spaces for dialogue. However, the author cautions that digital divides and varying digital competences must be addressed.

Concluding synthesis article
The special issue concludes with a synthesis article that draws together the findings from the empirical studies and situates them within broader debates on teacher education for inclusion. This article revisits enduring challenges—such as the tension between policy and practice and the balance between general and specific knowledge—and proposes directions for future research. By integrating insights from France, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Ireland and the hybridisation project, the synthesis aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of how the ten principles can be operationalised across diverse contexts.

Global understanding and implications

The TEIPPE special issue contributes to the global discourse on inclusive teacher education in several ways.
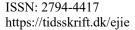First, it operationalises and expands the ten-principles grid by examining how principles manifest in disparate settings and by exposing the tensions and synergies among them. For example, the French co-teaching case demonstrates that mentoring and collaboration can change deficit discourses (principles 4 and 7) but also highlights the need for deeper curriculum integration (principle 1). The Spanish accessibility study underscores that general inclusive discourse must be complemented by targeted training and institutional support for specific disabilities (principle 9). The Belgian participatory project shows that community-based learning fosters shared leadership and mutual learning (principles 5 and 7) but also reveals challenges in role allocation and expectations (principle 3). The Swedish pilot study illustrates the structural gaps between policy and curriculum integration and calls for systemic collaboration and reflective teacher education (principles 1, 6 and 3). The Irish study highlights the importance of context and of fostering spaces for collaborative critical reflection (principles 3, 4, 7 and 8). Finally, the hybrid study opens new possibilities for technology-enhanced inclusion (principle 10) while reminding us of digital inequalities.
Second, the issue highlights the importance of context. While the ten principles provide a universal framework, their implementation depends on national policies, institutional cultures and local school dynamics. By juxtaposing cases from different European countries, the issue encourages readers to recognise that inclusive teacher education cannot be transplanted wholesale from one context to another; rather, principles must be adapted to local realities. This comparative perspective resonates with critiques of the "colonisation" of inclusive education, which caution against imposing Western models on diverse contexts.
Third, the special issue encourages a shift from deficit-oriented to asset-oriented perspectives.
Several studies show how language matters: moving away from "deficit-labelled pupils" to contextualised understanding of needs (France), from "fixing individuals" to creating accessible environments (Spain), and from seeing communities as lacking to seeing them as partners in knowledge production (Belgium). This shift aligns with broader human-rights discourses and emphasises that inclusive teacher education must challenge systemic norms and biases.
Finally, the issue suggests directions for future research and practice. Areas requiring further investigation include the selection and retention of diverse teacher candidates (principle 2), mentoring structures in different contexts (principle 4), and the integration of inclusive content across curricula

beyond isolated modules (principle 1). Moreover, the studies call for more robust collaborations between universities, schools and communities, as well as for professional development opportunities that address specific disabilities and digital competences. As education systems grapple with the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic and the imperative to "build back better", the findings underline that teacher education for inclusion is not merely a pedagogical concern but a social and ethical imperative.

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