



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

### Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

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# **Comparative Analysis of Inclusive Education Practices in Italy and Bulgaria: Reflections from the Erasmus Plus ASuMIE Project**

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## **Abstract**

School systems in the European territory, while sharing guidelines and based on ideological, practical, and methodological beliefs found in the main European documents on inclusion, maintain traits and procedures in line with the singularities of different territories both from a cultural and welfare systems point of view. Trying to compare historically, culturally, and politically different territories is not only complex but in some ways it might be fruitless. This paper does not aim to create a ranking of the most inclusive country but wants to share reflections and similarities between good inclusive practices in Italy and Bulgaria. The analysis, qualitative and quantitative, is the result of an extrapolation of data on the two countries, collected within the Erasmus Plus ASuMIE (Additional Support and Mediated Learning in Inclusive Education) project through a questionnaire. In this specific analysis, 100 questionnaires per country were collected and analyzed.

ASuMIE is part of a larger European Union project aimed at keeping the focus on inclusive education in and out of school that involved 7 partner countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Italy, Norway, Slovenia, and Portugal. The data and reflections in this paper will be linked to a comparison only between Italy and Bulgaria for the homogeneity of the data and the significance of the reflections that emerged in comparing the responses of the two countries. The questionnaire interrogates the key-players in inclusive processes (schools, principals, families, practitioners, and rehabilitation therapists) about what really works in Inclusive Education (approaches, methodologies) and, at the same time, tries to trace emerging needs, and areas on which there is still room for improvement, and which turns out to be an emergency to work on. The intentions behind these analyses and reflections are the Well-being and Quality of Life of SEN students, their families, teachers, and therapists. Inclusion is never an individual project; inclusion is always a team effort that affects everyone, no one excluded.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; equity; best practices.

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a global movement aimed at providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their background, learning needs, or abilities (Unesco, 2020). Over the last few decades, there has been a significant shift from exclusionary practices to more inclusive approaches in schools across Europe and beyond. This movement is underpinned by international policies and conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which underscores the importance of inclusive education for all children and emphasizes the need for accessible and flexible educational environments.

Despite the shared framework of principles, European countries implement inclusive education in diverse ways, influenced by their unique historical, social, political, and cultural contexts (Simón & Medina, 2019). Countries like Italy and Bulgaria, for instance, while both aligned with broader European Union (EU) objectives on disability rights and inclusive education, have evolved different educational practices. This paper seeks to explore these differences, focusing on the similarities and contrasting elements that define the inclusive education systems in Italy and Bulgaria.

The research is primarily based on data collected through the Erasmus Plus ASuMIE (Additional Support and Mediated Learning in Inclusive Education) project. This project aimed to investigate the key players in inclusive education, including schools, families, professionals, and rehabilitation therapists, to understand what practices are most effective in fostering inclusion and where further improvements are needed (Cairo, Carruba, 2023). The ASuMIE questionnaire, administered to educational stakeholders in both Italy and Bulgaria, serves as the primary data source for this comparative analysis.

## 2. Pedagogy and special education: the evolution of inclusive practices

To better understand the current state of inclusive education in Italy and Bulgaria, it is important to review the historical evolution of special education and its shift toward inclusive practices. Traditionally, children with disabilities were segregated from mainstream education, either through specialized institutions or separate educational settings within schools. The predominant educational approach was rooted in the medical model of disability, which viewed disability as a deficit or abnormality that needed to be "cured" or "treated."

The shift toward inclusive education, however, can be traced back to the mid-20th century, when global movements for human rights and social justice began to influence educational policies. This shift was solidified with the adoption of the social model of disability, which argued that it is not the disability itself but rather societal barriers—physical, attitudinal, and structural—that prevent individuals from fully participating in society. This framework advocates for an educational system that removes these barriers, ensuring that students with disabilities can participate in the same classroom settings as their peers.

Inclusive education, therefore, is not merely about the physical presence of students with disabilities in mainstream schools; it involves creating a supportive environment where these students can learn alongside their peers, participate in activities, and achieve academic and social success. Teachers and practitioners play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive practices, through differentiated teaching methods, collaborative planning, and ongoing professional development.

In European countries like Italy and Bulgaria, the implementation of inclusive education has been influenced by both international policies and national legislation. The Salamanca Statement (1994) and the subsequent EU Disability Strategy have provided the blueprint for inclusive education in Europe, while national laws and regulations have guided the practical application of these principles.

### 2.1. Italy's Approach to Inclusive Education

Italy has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to inclusive education, with Law 517/1977 representing a pivotal turning point in the country's educational landscape. This legislation mandated the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools and resulted in the abolition of *differential classes*—separate sections within schools designated for students with disabilities.

Importantly, however, the law did not explicitly ban the existence of special schools, and a small number of such institutions continue to operate in Italy today. Nonetheless, Law 517/1977 marked a paradigm shift from segregated to inclusive educational practices, laying the foundation for a rights-based, equity-oriented approach aligned with the emerging social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). In the decades following its enactment, Italy has progressively developed a comprehensive support framework for students with special educational needs (SEN). Central to this system is the integration of *docenti di sostegno* (special education support teachers), rehabilitation professionals, and various assistive technologies within general education settings. A defining feature of the Italian model is its collaborative ethos: mainstream teachers, support teachers, and external specialists engage in joint planning and implementation of individualized education plans (IEPs), which are tailored to the specific needs and goals of each student.

Despite these advances, several persistent challenges continue to affect the consistency and equity of inclusive practices. Chief among these is the disparity between urban and rural school contexts. While schools in urban areas typically have better access to specialized personnel and support services, those in rural or underserved regions often face significant limitations in terms of human, financial, and infrastructural resources. These regional imbalances are well-documented in the literature (e.g., Ianes et al., 2020) and raise concerns about the universality of inclusive opportunities. Furthermore, there remains a pressing need to enhance both pre-service and in-service teacher education, ensuring that all educators are equipped with the pedagogical and relational competencies required to manage the complexities of diverse, inclusive classrooms.

## **2.2. Bulgaria's Journey Towards Inclusive Education**

In contrast, Bulgaria's journey toward inclusive education has been more recent. The country's transition from a communist regime to a democratic society in the early 1990s led to significant educational reforms, including efforts to integrate children with disabilities into regular classrooms. These reforms were driven, in part, by Bulgaria's desire to align with EU standards and by the pressure from international organizations to adopt inclusive educational practices.

Despite this progress, Bulgaria still faces significant challenges in fully implementing inclusive education. One of the major hurdles is the lack of trained teachers and professionals who can effectively support students with special needs. Additionally, there are deep-rooted cultural attitudes toward disability, which can sometimes hinder the acceptance of inclusive practices in schools and communities. Bulgaria's educational system has also been criticized for its reliance on external support services rather than embedding inclusion directly within mainstream classrooms.

Nevertheless, there are signs of progress. In recent years, Bulgaria has focused on improving teacher training and increasing access to specialized resources for students with disabilities. Urban areas, in particular, have seen improvements in inclusive practices, with some schools developing models of good practice that could serve as examples for other regions.

## **3. Methodology: the asumie project**

The ASuMIE project, which forms the empirical foundation of this comparative analysis, was developed within a transnational partnership involving seven European countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Italy, Norway, Slovenia, and Portugal. The project was conceived to investigate the current landscape of inclusive education across diverse contexts, with the dual aim of identifying best practices and uncovering systemic challenges and emerging needs. A core feature of the project was its participatory approach: data were gathered from key stakeholders—teachers, school leaders, families, and rehabilitation professionals—whose direct experiences and perceptions provide crucial insight into the realities of inclusion.

To ensure comparability while respecting contextual differences, a shared questionnaire was developed collaboratively by the partner countries. The instrument reflects a negotiated balance between the diverse educational frameworks, terminologies, and inclusion models represented across the consortium. It was informed by an extensive bibliographic review conducted in each

country and represents an effort to build a common evaluative tool, despite structural and cultural differences.

In this pilot study, the questionnaire was administered to 100 participants in both Italy and Bulgaria. It explored areas such as the implementation of inclusive practices, the availability and perceived adequacy of support systems, interprofessional collaboration, and teacher training needs. The data collected were analyzed using both quantitative methods and qualitative thematic analysis, enabling a nuanced interpretation of the contrasts and convergences between the two national contexts.

### **3.1. Key Findings from the Questionnaires**

The analysis of questionnaire responses yielded several important insights into the inclusive education systems in both Italy and Bulgaria. Respondents in both countries expressed strong support for inclusive education, highlighting a widespread commitment to its values among educators and practitioners. However, notable differences emerged in how inclusion is enacted and supported on the ground.

In Italy, inclusive practices are primarily characterized by the implementation of individualized education plans (IEPs), the use of specialized teaching staff, and robust collaboration between general and special education teachers. Most Italian respondents reported feeling well-supported in their inclusion efforts, although many also emphasized the ongoing need for professional development in differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogy.

In Bulgaria, inclusion tends to be managed through a more centralized and institutionalized framework. While schools often rely on external support services—such as special education teachers and rehabilitation therapists—less emphasis is placed on in-class differentiation and individualized support. Bulgarian respondents consistently noted a lack of adequate training opportunities and classroom resources to meet the needs of students with SEN.

It is important to highlight that the questionnaire used in this study was the result of a collaborative process that sought to balance the varied positions, terminologies, and tools employed by the seven partner countries involved in the ASuMIE project. This tool was developed through negotiated consensus and grounded in a comparative bibliographic review of inclusive education in different national contexts. As such, this is a pilot study with an exploratory intent: not to rank or judge which system is “more inclusive,” but to construct a shared evidentiary base and to recognize divergence as a product of differing cultural, legal, environmental, and institutional contexts. These differences are not obstacles but resources—elements of poikilia, or productive diversity—from which to extract and circulate good practices adaptable across systems.

## **4. Comparative analysis: Italy and Bulgaria**

Both Italy and Bulgaria have made significant strides in the field of inclusive education, yet their systems reflect distinct historical, social, and political influences. Italy's approach to inclusion can be traced back to the late 1970s, with the passage of Law 517/1977, which mandated the integration of students with disabilities into regular schools. This law was revolutionary at the time and set the stage for a more inclusive educational system in Italy. Over the years, Italy has developed a robust network of support services, including specialized teachers, rehabilitation professionals, and a range of assistive technologies, to support students with SEN in mainstream classrooms.

Bulgaria, on the other hand, has a more recent history of inclusion. Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, Bulgaria began transitioning to a more inclusive model of education, influenced by EU accession requirements and international conventions on disability rights. The Bulgarian education system has faced significant challenges, including a lack of trained personnel, inadequate resources, and deep-rooted cultural attitudes toward disability. Despite these obstacles, Bulgaria has made progress in implementing inclusive practices, particularly in urban areas, and has been working to align its policies with European standards.

The ASuMIE project provided valuable data on the inclusive education practices in both countries. The analysis of 100 questionnaires per country revealed several key themes related to the strengths and challenges of inclusive education in Italy and Bulgaria. Both countries reported high levels of support

for inclusive education among teachers and practitioners, but differences emerged in how this support was implemented and in the resources available.

In Italy, there was a strong emphasis on individualized support for students with SEN, with many schools employing specialized staff and using tailored teaching methods. However, challenges were reported in ensuring consistent implementation across all regions, particularly in rural areas where resources were more limited. In Bulgaria, there was a greater reliance on external support services and a more hierarchical approach to inclusion, where decisions were often made at the institutional level rather than by individual educators. This approach was seen as both a strength and a limitation, as it provided centralized oversight but sometimes lacked flexibility.

## 5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of inclusive education in Italy and Bulgaria demonstrates that both countries have taken important steps to promote equitable and participatory learning environments. However, persistent challenges—particularly in professional development, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement—highlight the complexity of translating inclusive principles into consistent practice. These challenges are not solely pedagogical, but reflect deeper structural, cultural, and legislative dynamics unique to each national context.

In Italy, inclusive education has a well-established foundation, thanks in part to long-standing legislation and institutional practices that emphasize individualized support and collaborative teaching. The integration of *docenti di sostegno*, the widespread use of individualized education plans (IEPs), and shared responsibility among educators reflect a robust commitment to inclusion. Yet, this commitment is not always matched by uniform implementation. Regional disparities—especially between urban centers and peripheral or rural areas—continue to affect the availability of specialized staff and support services. Additionally, while the infrastructure for inclusion is in place, there remains a pressing need to strengthen both initial teacher education and ongoing professional development for general education teachers, ensuring they are fully prepared to work in diverse classrooms.

Bulgaria, by contrast, has followed a more recent and centralized path toward inclusion, shaped by post-communist reforms and EU accession. Although policies now reflect international standards, inclusive practices within schools are still evolving. A strong reliance on external services and top-down decision-making structures often limits the autonomy and capacity of individual schools to respond adaptively to learners' needs. Teachers report insufficient access to training and limited resources for inclusive instruction, while traditional attitudes toward disability continue to influence school culture. Fostering a more embedded and culturally sensitive approach to inclusion requires systemic investment not only in infrastructure but also in shifting mindsets—through education, awareness campaigns, and inclusive leadership.

Ultimately, inclusive education is not just about academic outcomes for students with disabilities; it is about constructing school environments where every learner feels recognized, supported, and valued. Realizing this vision demands coordinated efforts across sectors and levels—linking teachers, families, school leaders, communities, and policymakers in a shared commitment to inclusion. Rather than seeking a uniform model, this comparative study embraces *poikilia*—the diversity of national experiences—as a generative force for identifying context-sensitive practices and mutual learning. Inclusion, in this view, is an evolving and relational process, grounded in collaboration and driven by the pursuit of educational justice.

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