

THE INCLUSIVE TEACHER IN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE WITH THE ERASMUS PROJECT

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Abstract

School inclusion represents a central challenge for the European educational system, requiring effective strategies to enhance the diversity that characterizes today's school environments. This particularity necessitates transversal intercultural and relational skills, aimed at creating an equitable and welcoming learning environment that fosters the growth and development of every student. In this context, the Erasmus programme serves as a crucial educational opportunity for teachers, fostering the acquisition of new educational perspectives and the dissemination of inclusive teaching practices through mobility experiences. This paper aims to explore the role of the Erasmus project in teacher training, highlighting its impact on the development of methodologies sensitive to diversity and social cohesion.

Keywords: Erasmus, Inclusion, Training, Key competencies, Interculturality

1. Introduction

At the heart of the educational experience lies the encounter. This idea is powerfully expressed by the philosopher and pedagogist Martin Buber, who stated that “all real living is meeting.” These words compellingly convey the central role of relationships in human existence, as the space where meaning is generated and, more broadly, where learning takes place.

In today's schools, this perspective is embodied daily in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms, where students with different backgrounds, languages, cultures, and life experiences share the same educational space. For several decades now, the European educational landscape has reflected rapid and complex social, cultural, and economic transformations, turning

classrooms into true microcosms of diversity. This plurality is, on the one hand, an extraordinary resource for learning and personal growth; on the other, it presents significant challenges to the entire educational system, which is called upon to provide effective learning experiences for all students.

Within this framework, school plays a crucial role as a space for encounter, dialogue, and the construction of conscious citizenship. It is a place where every student should feel recognized, welcomed, and respected, so they can fully develop their potential. At the forefront of this process are teachers, key actors in educational change. They are required not only to master disciplinary content but also to develop transversal, relational, and intercultural skills that are essential in the teaching-learning process to address the complexity of contemporary classrooms. In fact, it is these skills, perhaps even more than disciplinary knowledge, that determine the effectiveness of educational action.

European educational policies, such as the 2018 Council of the European Union Recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning, as well as international documents like UNESCO's 2030 Agenda, strongly emphasize the need to promote high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education. These documents highlight the importance of educating conscious citizens within a pluralistic society such as our own.

It is within this complex framework that the Erasmus programme emerges as a valuable resource for the initial and ongoing training of teachers. International mobility experiences allow teachers to engage with different educational models, broaden their perspectives, and directly experience otherness. Through such opportunities, they can acquire tools to more consciously address the challenges posed by diversity in school contexts.

This paper aims to explore the characteristics of an inclusive teacher and the role of the Erasmus programme in teacher education, highlighting how firsthand intercultural encounters can translate into more attentive, flexible, and diversity-enhancing pedagogical practices. Through a qualitative analysis of international mobility experiences undertaken by future and in-service teachers, this contribution seeks to identify the factors that most significantly influence daily pedagogical practice and outline new perspectives for teacher training that responds to the challenges of today's educational landscape.

2. *The inclusive teacher: key competencies*

Inclusion is undeniably an urgent priority in today's educational landscape, more than just a challenge. The increasing cultural, linguistic, social, and economic diversification characterizing today's classrooms requires a profound transformation of the teacher's role. Inclusive teaching is becoming a categorical imperative – a deliberate ethical, moral, and even political choice¹. Teachers are expected to design learning environments where every student is represented and supported along their educational journey, using teaching methodologies that take differences into account and leverage them as resources.

From this perspective, inclusion cannot be reduced to a set of strategies applied in exceptional cases but must be understood as a structural dimension of the educational system. As Morganti and Bocci state², inclusive teaching «is not only about students who are 'included' or 'to be included' in 'mainstream' settings but aims to make school environments inclusive». This implies a profound cultural shift, seeing the teacher as a promoter of equity and a facilitator of learning for all. Such an approach acknowledges that inclusion concerns not only students with disabilities or various special educational needs, but all students. Every learner, for different reasons and at different times in their journey, may exhibit specific needs, demands, and vulnerabilities, which the teacher must be able to address in a timely, decisive, and effective manner. This approach seeks to overcome the conceptual and operational limitations of traditional definitions of inclusion, which often retain the idea of a group that has «the power or the right to include»³ another. As Canevaro and Ianes point out⁴, these limits can be overcome by adopting a new perspective grounded in the principle of *universality*, through teaching designed to work for as many students as possible. This approach is in full alignment with the Universal Design for Learning model, which involves actively removing learning barriers and designing accessible pathways for every student.

The central role of teacher training in an inclusive perspective thus becomes clear. Theoretical knowledge alone is not sufficient; it is essential

¹ P. AIELLO, C. GIACONI (A CURA DI), *L'agire inclusivo. Interfacce pedagogiche e didattiche. Manuale per l'insegnante*, Scholé, Brescia 2014.

² A. MORGANTI, F. BOCCI, *Didattica inclusiva per la scuola primaria*, Giunti, Firenze 2017.

³ V. GHENO, *Chiamami così*, Il Margine, Trento 2022.

⁴ A. CANEVARO, D. IANES, *Un'altra didattica è possibile*, Erickson, Trento 2021.

to develop a wide range of competences that deeply influence the teaching-learning process and ensure its effectiveness. Cottini states that «the profile of the inclusive teacher is based on four essential values of teaching and learning»⁵ which include: recognizing student diversity; supporting students with high expectations for each of them; working with others, promoting collaboration as an essential approach for every teacher; and engaging in continuous professional development, viewing teaching itself as a learning process.

These values translate into observable behaviours, specific knowledge, and attitudes that enable the teacher to recognize students' educational needs and adapt their teaching accordingly. Among the fundamental skills for this purpose, flexibility and adaptability are of central importance. The teacher must be able to adjust their practice according to the specific needs of the class and respond promptly to unexpected and complex situations. This requires the willingness to revise strategies, experiment with alternative approaches, and modify planning to ensure favourable learning conditions for every student. Closely related to this dimension is the capacity for problem-solving, understood as the ability to creatively address the difficulties that arise in students' school experiences. Alongside this, it is essential to respond with empathy and relational sensitivity to understand and respect students' experiences and backgrounds. Being aware of one's own emotions and those of others is crucial to building a welcoming and motivating school environment, allowing emotions to be used as tools for teaching and as levers for meaningful learning⁶. These competences fall under the relational domain, which is expressed through the ability to build meaningful and trusting relationships, an essential foundation for a positive and collaborative classroom climate and authentic learning for all students. Among these, effective communication stands out as especially important, a communication that is clear and assertive, serving as a powerful relational tool to strengthen students' sense of belonging and engagement, particularly for the most vulnerable.

The relationships formed and nurtured within the school context represent both the foundation and the essence of learning. The foundation, because, as has been discussed, every learning experience is closely tied

⁵ L. COTTINI, *Didattica speciale e inclusione scolastica*, Carocci, Roma 2017.

⁶ M. BUCCOLO, *L'educatore emozionale. Percorsi di alfabetizzazione emotiva per tutta la vita*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2019.

to the emotions that accompany it: a calm and positive classroom environment is essential for effective learning. The essence, because it is through relationships that the educational process takes shape in its most authentic dimension. The educational relationship is not merely an accessory to teaching; it becomes the very object of learning. Each student, even before acquiring content and disciplinary competences, learns relationships and relational models, experiences what is “other” and learns to mediate with it, supported by peers and adults who act as facilitators of the learning experience.

In this regard, it is crucial to distinguish three types of relationships that the teacher is called to intentionally foster: relationships among students, which, with the teacher’s mediation, can form the foundation of learning and a lasting sense of belonging; relationships with students, based on active listening, trust, and respect, essential for creating a space where every student feels welcomed and understood; relationships between the teacher and all other school stakeholders, which provide relational models for students and offer valuable support for meaningful learning that involves the entire educational community.

Finally, among the key competences of an inclusive teacher are intercultural competences, which are essential for at least two important reasons.

First, interculturality should be understood as the ability to consciously and constructively manage cultural differences among students from diverse socio-economic, linguistic, and value backgrounds. As previously noted, today’s classrooms are increasingly heterogeneous: the presence of students with migratory backgrounds, and diverse ethnic, religious, or linguistic affiliations has become a structural feature of the school system. This requires that teachers know how to value these differences, turning them into educational opportunities through teaching practices that include, represent, and engage with multiple worldviews. In this sense, intercultural competence goes beyond cultural knowledge and becomes a dialogical attitude and cognitive decentring: the ability to suspend judgment, renegotiate meaning, and reframe expectations and teaching models in light of present differences.

Second, the concept of interculturality must be expanded beyond ethnic or national belonging, encompassing a broader ability to relate to what is “other.” This is a form of sensitivity that involves the teacher’s capacity to mediate between individuals with different backgrounds, identities, and life experiences, even when those differences are not immediately ap-

parent. Diversity can concern abilities, cognitive styles, learning methods, family experiences, or worldviews. Therefore, intercultural competence requires work on implicit stereotypes, emotional resistances, and automatic reactions, developing openness, cultural empathy, and interpretative flexibility. As Deardorff also states⁷, this competence includes the ability to build meaningful relationships in contexts of otherness, fostering coexistence, co-construction of meaning, and authentic interaction. According to the author, it is a transversal and indispensable dimension of inclusive teaching, as it enables teachers to consciously inhabit the complexity of today's classrooms, recognizing the "other" not as an obstacle but as an opportunity for mutual growth and enrichment.

Intercultural pedagogy, in its deeply inclusive essence, is based on the recognition of such diversity, promoting it as a source of growth for everyone. It constitutes a critical and reflective stance in educational action, also proposing strategies and techniques for managing cultural diversity in the classroom. As Nigris⁸ points out, it requires teachers to be constantly aware of their own representations of reality, educational models, and cultural frameworks. Recognizing the non-neutrality of our educational approaches means understanding that what we consider "right," "appropriate," or "desirable" in teaching is always the product of a symbolic reference system, a cultural framework that profoundly influences how we perceive students, behaviours, and situations, whether related to immigration or more ordinary school dynamics.

Intercultural pedagogy thus calls for decentring, that is, shifting from one's own frames of reference to actively listen to the other, challenge personal beliefs, and suspend judgment. Only through this movement can teachers truly integrate intercultural competence into their professional practice and create learning environments that welcome, represent, and enhance the plurality of perspectives. In this sense, interculturality does not merely offer tools to manage difference but demands a radical rethinking of the very way school is conceived: designing more flexible curricula, promoting authentic educational dialogue, and moving beyond transmissive models in favour of co-constructed and participatory practices. The

⁷ D.K. DEARDOFF, *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, Thousand Oaks 2009.

⁸ E. NIGRIS, *Fare scuola per tutti. Esperienze didattiche in contesti multiculturali*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2003.

goal of pedagogy oriented in this way is to prepare students to live in an increasingly intricate and complex multicultural world, to educate for respect and empathy, and to provide the tools necessary to understand the challenges of contemporary society. It is an ethical and political choice that focuses on the humanity of the other and the potential to build, through education, a more just, dialogical, and cohesive society.

2. The inclusive teacher in European perspective

In the European context, inclusion, and particularly the role of the inclusive teacher, assumes a key position in responding effectively to growing cultural and social complexity. In UNESCO's 2030 Agenda, inclusion holds a central place among the Sustainable Development Goals, emerging as a key quality indicator for education. To echo the words of Maria Montessori: education «must be for everyone (and by everyone) or it is not education at all». It is also important to highlight that within the 2030 Agenda, inclusion is connected to the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens.

In recent years, the European Union has launched numerous initiatives to achieve these goals, making inclusion a priority for society and, more specifically, for educational institutions. The Council of the European Union's Recommendation of 22 May 2018, regarding the *promotion of common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching*, emphasizes these very themes. It urges Member States to promote inclusive education for all students, providing the necessary support «according to their specific needs». The same recommendation also calls for the sharing and promotion of common European values «in order to strengthen social cohesion and a positive and inclusive sense of belonging at the local, regional, national, and Union levels». From an intercultural perspective, this recommendation takes on even deeper meaning. Inclusion becomes both a means of access to education and a tool for more effectively educating for active citizenship, democratic coexistence, and the appreciation of cultural diversity. Promoting education based on shared values such as tolerance, justice, and solidarity means equipping students with the tools to build meaningful relationships in plural and complex societies like those of today. According to this vision, the inclusive teacher is called to play both pedagogical and social roles, becoming a facilitator of intercultural

dialogue and a promoter of an open classroom climate «to foster tolerant and democratic behaviour as well as social, civic, and intercultural competences».

In this context, the Italian experience serves as a crucial driver for reinforcing a culture of inclusion at the European level, offering reference models and best practices that can inspire equity-oriented educational policies and foster participation. As Amatori reminds us⁹, Italy stands out as a unique case of *full inclusion* in Europe, a system that guarantees quality education for all following the abolition of special schools and separate classrooms through Law 517/77. In many EU member states, a *dual unified system* persists, with varying levels of integration between mainstream and special education services¹⁰. However, this recognized leadership position is not without its challenges and responsibilities. It is only recently that scientific literature has begun to focus on the training of inclusive teachers and on the emergence of new professional development needs stemming from the profound socio-cultural changes of recent decades.

It is therefore clear that the Italian educational context represents a privileged laboratory for reflecting on the most effective inclusion practices from an intercultural perspective, acting as a driver of innovation and dialogue within the European educational space. Italy not only offers examples of good practice but also pedagogical and cultural perspectives capable of nourishing a shared vision of schooling. As rightly stated, those who act inclusively do so «on the basis of a sincere adherence to universal values»¹¹ (Bocci, 2024, p. 12). It is thus essential to promote the exchange of an inclusion-oriented culture, so that it may take root in teachers' everyday pedagogical choices and practices.

⁹ G. AMATORI, *Cornici pedagogiche per la formazione docente*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2019.

¹⁰ M. PAVONE, *L'inclusione educativa. Indicazioni pedagogiche per la disabilità*, Mondadori, Milano 2014.

¹¹ F. BOCCI, *Presupposti scientifico-culturali (quindi politici) dell'agire inclusivo*, in *L'agire inclusivo. Interfacce pedagogiche e didattiche. Manuale per l'insegnante*, a cura di P. Aiello, C. Giacconi, Scholé, Brescia 2024.

2.1 The Erasmus project for inclusion

The Erasmus+ project thus emerges as a valuable tool for promoting a European professional identity for teachers¹², one that combines pedagogical competences with a broad intercultural openness. In the 2018 Recommendations, the Erasmus+ programme is highlighted as a strategic lever for strengthening the European dimension of teaching by encouraging the sharing of best practices, cooperation among educational institutions, and training based on shared values of inclusion and solidarity.

Recent academic literature has shown growing interest in the impact of Erasmus mobility on teachers' pedagogical practice. Studies reveal that mobility projects can significantly contribute to the internationalization of schools, through the creation of collaborative networks and the exchange of ideas, values, and best practices among teachers and institutions. Within inclusive teacher training, Erasmus+ mobility experiences have a twofold educational value.

On one hand, they offer concrete opportunities for the exchange of ideas, methodologies, and best practices with colleagues from other European countries, fostering the circulation of innovative pedagogical approaches and the development of a transnational professional community. On the other hand, they provide a unique chance to directly experience cultural otherness, requiring the activation of transversal competences such as managing uncertainty, flexibility, adaptability, and problem-solving, skills that are essential for a pedagogy centred on the individual and responsive to the needs of all learners.

Living an international mobility experience means stepping out of one's comfort zone, engaging with different educational systems, encountering new linguistic and cultural contexts, and navigating unfamiliar relational dynamics. These direct experiences of otherness—often accompanied by communication difficulties, value differences, or organizational challenges, prove to be particularly effective in developing intercultural sensitivity and gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics faced daily by students with migrant backgrounds or those experiencing marginalization. In other words, they foster new intercultural awareness and, more broadly, greater sensitivity toward any form of difference, effectively challenging

¹² F. PALMA, *L'insegnante inclusivo nella prospettiva europea*, PensaMultimedia, Lecce 2025.

stereotypes and prejudices that may serve as significant barriers to learning within teaching practices.

Language also plays a key role in mobility experiences. Teachers participating in Erasmus programmes can develop their linguistic competences through communication with international colleagues and by living daily life in a foreign country. These competences can provide a significant advantage when teaching in multicultural classrooms and increasingly diverse learning environments.

Furthermore, such experiences help strengthen the sense of belonging to a European educational community in which inclusion is recognized as a shared value and guiding principle of educational action. Teachers who take part in Erasmus projects enrich their professional toolkit and return to their schools with a broader outlook and an enhanced ability to understand the complexity of educational contexts. They are then better equipped to propose innovative teaching solutions and to promote change even among colleagues who have not experienced mobility themselves.

Clearly, Erasmus+ represents a space for experiential and transformative learning, a deeply immersive and practical opportunity for both personal and professional growth. As we have seen, these experiences can contribute to the development of inclusive, skilled, and prepared teachers who can operate effectively in increasingly diverse educational contexts. They promote critical self-reflection and a thoughtful assessment of one's competences and educational actions. Experiences gained through the programme encourage the adoption of more flexible and innovative approaches, born from interactions with other educational settings, positioning the teacher as an agent of change and a bridge between different ways of schooling. This perspective builds a bridge between theory and practice, values and educational action, local schooling and the shared global dimension of education—training more aware and motivated professionals ready to face the challenges of inclusion.

2.2 The Erasmus project for teacher training: an exploratory study

Within this conceptual framework, an exploratory study was conducted during the 2022/2023 academic year, aimed at investigating the impact of Erasmus+ mobility experiences on both initial teacher training and in-service teacher development, with particular attention to the growth of professional, transversal, and intercultural competences.

This qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample consisting of in-service teachers and students enrolled in a Primary Education degree programme who had participated in international mobility initiatives in either university or school contexts. The objective was to understand the transformative impact of these experiences and how they concretely translated into the teachers' pedagogical practices.

The findings confirm the hypothesis of a significant impact of Erasmus+ experiences on the communicative, relational, intercultural, and organizational competences of participating teachers. Notably, participants demonstrated clear growth in open-mindedness, flexibility, initiative, adaptability, and problem-solving. These transversal skills proved crucial for classroom management, the design of inclusive educational activities, and the capacity to respond effectively to student diversity.

Moreover, the mobility experience brought about a profound personal transformation, strengthening participants' intercultural awareness, sense of self-efficacy, and commitment to more dialogical and participatory teaching practices. The interviews revealed that teachers adopted new methodologies learned abroad, successfully integrating them into their local school contexts. Even students not yet teaching independently expressed a clear intention to apply the competences acquired, highlighting the anticipatory and formative effect of mobility on their emerging professional identity. A particularly significant finding was the emergence of a heightened intercultural awareness and a critical-reflective attitude toward one's own practice. Participants reported a shift in their pedagogical outlook, becoming more attuned to students' needs, more sensitive to social complexity, and more inclined toward flexibility and personalization of learning paths. Additionally, the networks of collaboration established during mobility experiences became valuable sources of exchange and innovation, with direct positive effects on day-to-day teaching quality.

However, some participants noted the lack of formal recognition for the competences developed, expressing the hope that such experiences would be more adequately valued within their professional training paths. The study also highlighted the need for support in effectively transferring those competences into the school context. Furthermore, participants identified several challenges related to short-term mobility, particularly concerning organizational and bureaucratic aspects, issues also highlight-

ed in other studies¹³. Some interviewees also described difficulties related to communication and, consequently, integration into the host country and community. It is worth noting, however, that such challenges play a key role in transforming mobility experiences into opportunities for enhancing communicative and relational skills. In fact, interviews revealed a significant impact in this area: teachers who participated in short-term mobility stressed the importance of engaging in dialogue with students and encountering new environments. On the one hand, student participants reported developing communication and relational skills through continuous intercultural interaction; on the other hand, teachers shared similar growth through comparison with other educational systems, often having to explore diverse communicative strategies to overcome language barriers when communicating in English.

Overall, the study seems to confirm that Erasmus+ mobility is not merely an opportunity for internationalization, but a catalyst for pedagogical transformation, one that helps shape more aware, inclusive, and well-prepared teachers, capable of working in increasingly multicultural and complex educational contexts. The competences developed during such experiences, if properly recognized and supported, can decisively contribute to the creation of a more equitable, participatory, open, and responsive school system that reflects the complexity of contemporary society.

Conclusions

The path traced in this paper highlights how the inclusive teacher has become a key figure in today's European educational landscape, one capable of navigating the complexity of contemporary classrooms and, most importantly, of contributing to the construction of a fair, welcoming school that values diversity. The competences required for this professional profile, flexibility, empathy, intercultural awareness, relational skills, and critical reflection, are not merely additions to disciplinary knowledge but foundational elements of a new understanding of the teaching profession.

¹³ S.B. GOLDSTEIN, *A systematic review of short-term study abroad research methodology and intercultural competence outcomes*, in «International Journal of Inter-cultural Relations», 87, 2022, pp. 26-36.

Within this framework, the Erasmus+ programme emerges as a powerful and strategic resource to support and accompany this transformation. International mobility experiences represent high-impact training opportunities, capable of promoting an open, self-aware, and intercultural professional identity among teachers. These are invaluable moments of exchange and learning. Through exposure to other educational systems and direct engagement with otherness, teachers are given the opportunity to shift their perspectives, to question established practices, and to develop new ways of thinking and acting pedagogically.

Italy, with its long-standing inclusive tradition and its model of a school for all, serves in this regard as a privileged laboratory and an authoritative voice in the European debate on inclusion. However, as the latest academic literature suggests, to ensure these experiences lead to systemic change rather than remaining isolated, it is essential to invest more decisively and structurally in teacher training, recognizing competences acquired in international contexts and enhancing the inclusive practices that stem from them.

Ultimately, educating for inclusion means educating for democratic and compassionate citizenship, capable of engaging with complexity through responsibility and openness. A teacher who has experienced encounters with others, who has directly understood the value of communication, cooperation, and intercultural understanding, can truly become a promoter of a school that not only welcomes but creates opportunities; a school that not only integrates but celebrates difference. In this vision, Erasmus mobility is not an accessory experience, but a strategic pillar for training teachers capable of building the future, inside and beyond the classroom.