

Research Article

Attitudes of preschool institution principals on the inclusion of children with special needs

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The following research represents the attitudes of preschool institutions principals towards the inclusion of children with special needs. Inclusion is highly recommended because it has beneficial effects on social integration and learning outcomes through the placement of children with special needs in regular educational settings with typically developing peers. The principals of the preschool institutions act as a very important driver in determining the policies and procedures that influence the educational experiences of all children within their institutions. This study explores, through qualitative interviews, the attitudes, challenges, and strategies identified by preschool institutions leaders in promoting inclusion for children with special needs. The sample of the study consisted of six preschool institutions principals from Prishtina, Kosovo-three representing public preschool institutions and three from community-based preschool institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and the sessions recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded for analysis, and thematic analysis was employed to process the data. By better understanding these attitudes, educators and policymakers can address both the opportunities and challenges posed by inclusive education at this foundational level of early childhood development.

Keywords: Children with special needs; Early childhood education; Inclusion; Preschool institutions; Principals

Article History: Submitted 25 February 2025; Revised 30 June 2025; Published online 22 July 2025

1. Introduction

It has emerged as an integral part of educational practice today, involving and teaching all children, including those with and without special needs. In many parts of the world, it has been established that the presence of children with special needs within a regular school system ensures unity and diversities among children are appreciated, as every child would receive quality education. Global frameworks, such as the United Nations' Education for All initiative and And UNESCO's 1994 Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education emphasized that inclusive practices must be adopted as the norm in regular schools – recognizing every child's unique needs and urging governments to prioritize inclusion in policy, legal frameworks, funding, teacher preparation, and early childhood programs (UNESCO, 1994). Furthermore, UNESCO's Education 2030: Incheon Declaration for Quality Education reinforces that "inclusive and equitable quality

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How to cite: Beka, A., Rasimi, A., & Zabeli, N. (2025). Attitudes of preschool institution principals on the inclusion of children with special needs. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 9(4), 53-66. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202534359>

education and lifelong learning opportunities for all" (SDG 4) are fundamental to achieving sustainable development, with specific targets for early childhood inclusion and equity (UNESCO, 2016).

In Kosovo, equal opportunities for children with special needs to be integrated into public and community-based preschool institutions remain one of the main directions of inclusive education legislation. Yet, it is often hard to realize these legislative goals in real life. The greatest disparities exist regarding lack of infrastructure, inequalities in institutional capacity, and economic barriers—all which can make some children feel less of an opportunity than others. Given the first contact with the family and children with special needs, preschool institutions administrators have an important responsibility in terms of the inclusive attitude to be displayed at schools. Their attitudes, approaches, and philosophies of management have a great impact on the effectiveness of the inclusive practices and the integration of children with special needs into society. In recent years in Kosovo, research has been conducted in the field of inclusive education across the entire education system. In this context, studies have focused on the attitudes of educators, teachers in pre-university education, and higher education, as well as research on the attitudes of parents. However, there has been no research on the attitudes of school principals in general, and specifically those of preschool institutions. Research findings show that early childhood teachers view inclusive education as crucial for young learners, especially those with special needs, yielding benefits across academic, emotional, social, and intellectual dimensions. However, they also report significant pedagogical challenges when supporting children with severe impairments or disorders (Zabeli & Gjellaj, 2020).

This study conclusively explores the attitudes of preschool institutions principals towards the inclusion of children with special needs in their schools. The article critically discusses how these school leaders perceive inclusivity, what the major barriers are that they face in their effort to realize inclusive practices, what strategies are effective in promoting social integration and learning, and what the differences are between public and community-based preschool institutions. This research will contribute seriously to the present discourse on inclusive education by identifying good practice and gaps, thereby illuminating how effective leadership can be used to break down the barriers that get in the way of inclusion. By focusing on the experiences and strategies of preschool institutions principals, this study clearly underlines how important leadership is in promoting inclusion but also determines what systemic support is required to ensure equal opportunities for all children.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education has been identified as an integral part of international policies on education, firmly claiming equal rights of access and participation for all children, regardless of their differing abilities or impairments (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Its main goal is to create a learning atmosphere that values diversity and promotes social integration, which will enable each learner to realize academic and personal development. In literature, there are numerous definitions related to inclusive education. A significant number of definitions refer to education for all, while others focus on respecting diversity or the right to education. Some refer to addressing disabilities, while others acknowledge the challenge of discrimination and marginalized categories (Volpe, 2016). Inclusive education is most commonly defined as the process of placing children with special needs in mainstream educational settings, enabling them to spend part or all of their day with typically developing peers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Loreman, 2017). This definition chimes well with the UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994 as a call to inclusive practices enshrined within a universal right to education. Notably, its 2030 Agenda also urges this necessity for the inclusion of all, including in education, as its basis for development through the call for systems of reform and adequately prepared personnel to enable its inclusion, not to mention other requirements. Inclusive education is an ongoing process and represents a set of equity indicators — including clear legislation, sufficient budgeting, policy targets, data systems, and teacher

training – that promote equality in access, participation, and learning (Schuelka, 2018). UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that beyond enrollment figures, monitoring achievement and lived experiences is fundamental to ensuring real inclusion in education systems.

Because of their essential role in ensuring that students with disabilities achieve positive outcomes in the classroom, many stakeholders in the field of education are interested in teachers' perspectives on inclusive education (Charitaki et al., 2022). It is not unexpected that several research have attempted to find elements connected to the implementation of inclusive education by examining teachers' self-efficacy. The determination of teacher self-efficacy involves self-referent decisions that pertain to the effective delivery of lessons and the active engagement of students in the learning process (Kourti et al., 2023). The implementation of high-quality inclusive learning environments depends on teachers' positive self-efficacy beliefs, so (advanced) teacher training is needed to optimally prepare (student) teachers for their inclusive education tasks and boost their self-efficacy (Franzen et al., 2024).

Scholars like Booth and Ainscow (2016) have elaborated on the philosophical underpinnings of inclusive education and contend that inclusion is much more than placing students in mainstream classrooms. A significant school reform that takes place in countries throughout the world is the movement towards teaching all students in mainstream classrooms (Kourti et al., 2023). It requires systemic changes that guarantee full participation, equity, and respect for diversity in all aspects of school life. Florian and Beaton (2018), argue that it is now time for a transformative approach from the exclusionary practices to excellence in inclusive education, which calls for innovative pedagogical methods and assertive leadership. Efforts to integrate student inclusion programs into regular educational institutions across countries have made significant progress, particularly in promoting inclusion for students with special needs (Charitaki et al., 2022).

Similarly, Artiles et al. (2011) signal the cultural and contextual dimensions of inclusion, which call for equity-focused strategies that are explicitly designed with local realities in mind. Inclusive education has been overwhelmingly successful depending on the leadership. The preschool institutions principal acts as a leading agent of change in developing schools that are accommodating to all diverse needs of their students. Angelides and Antoniou (2012), claimed that effective leadership was one which was cognizant of the particular local context within which it functioned, thus giving them a greater capacity to devise strategies that could directly meet those needs within the environment. Moreover, Humphrey and Symes (2011) support the view that inclusive education requires a common vision for all stakeholders, which the leaders should consciously foster through collaboration and mutual support. According to Sun and Leithwood (2012), transformational leadership styles are indeed related to positive effects concerning the development of inclusive practices since this kind of leadership encourages innovation, adaptability, and empowerment of the staff. Teachers' negative views toward students with disabilities are a major barrier to effective educational inclusion, according to a comparative study of six nations' perspectives on student inclusion (Charitaki et al., 2024).

While more support may enhance teachers' confidence, observing others may not be enough to meet different learners' varied requirements. To strengthen inclusive teaching practices, longitudinal research should also examine the influence of continuous professional growth and training (Franzen et al., 2024). Additionally, it is of the utmost importance to ensuring that educators have the self-efficacy to conduct inclusive education. Concerning this issue, there is a substantial amount of discussion taking on all over the world (Kourti et al., 2023).

The perspectives of preschool institutions principals regarding inclusion basically inform their practice and determine the kind of leadership and decision-making. Kargin et al. (2010) points out that, since the point of entry into their schools, inclusive attitudes of principals and their approach to children and parents, as well as other personnel, play a crucial role in determining the degree of possibility for inclusiveness. Indeed, such administrators often face numerous challenges, especially in contexts characterized by lacks and underdevelopments along policy lines. Farrell et al. (2007) identify several powerful barriers to effective inclusion, including inadequate funding,

rigid curricula, and a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers. Hodkinson and Vickerman, (2009) go on to argue that the needs of children with complex and multiple conditions call for specialist training and resources that are depressingly lacking in most educational systems. In Kosovo's resource-poor context, these challenges preschool institutions principals face are graver. Public and community-based preschool institutions operate under conditions that radically differ and influence their potential to realize inclusive practices. Public preschool institutions usually have more systematic policies and financing; however, they often face bureaucratic constraints that limit flexibility in their approach. On the other hand, community-based preschool institutions might be more flexible but often lack resources and adequate institutional support (Dotger & Coughlin, 2018). Such contextual differences create the dire need to consider different approaches in trying to meet the diverse needs of all children, as indicated by Florian and Rouse (2017). Policymakers and educational leaders must take concrete steps to ensure that inclusive education is not an ideal but a realistic goal, where every child can flourish in an equitable learning environment. Professional development will help teachers learn new skills and approaches that will effectively implement inclusive practices in their schools. Forlin and Chambers (2018) emphasized the need for continued training, with a focus on evidence-based practices to support an inclusive pedagogical approach aimed at the inclusion and learning of all students. Loreman et al. (2010) made several very practical and helpful suggestions to support diversity through collaboration and differentiation in the classroom. Conversely, Slee (2018) argues that inclusion must be reconceptualized to meet emerging needs within educational settings. Inclusive education is not a status, but a process continuously based on systemic reforming, strategies, and committed engagement by all the stakeholders involved. The position and practices of the principals of the preschool institutions under examination in the present study brought out significant leads pertaining to opportunities and challenges in nurturing inclusion. Addressing systemic barriers, using innovative strategies such as music-based activities, and professional development provide the opportunity for educational leaders to create inclusive environments where all children can achieve success regardless of their abilities. Children who participate in music-related activities benefit from a variety of factors, such as improved problem-solving abilities, autonomy, self- and cultural awareness, respect for diversity, and greater drive and self-esteem (Beka & Rasimi, 2024). This is reflective of broader imperatives in relation to social cohesion, equity, and sustainable development and reinforces the notion that inclusion is a cornerstone of contemporary education systems.

3. The Aim

The present study examined preschool institutions principals' perceptions regarding the inclusion of children with special needs. This study was guided by the following questions:

RQ 1) How do preschool institutions principals perceive the inclusiveness of children with special needs in the preschool institutions they lead?

RQ 2) What major challenges do preschool institutions principals face regarding the implementation of inclusive practices for children with special needs in public and community-based preschool institutions?

RQ 3) What are the strategies of preschool institutions principals in promoting social inclusion and learning outcomes of children with special needs within educational settings?

4. Method

4.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine preschool principals' perceptions and practices concerning the inclusion of children with special needs in Prishtina, Kosovo. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the research sought to understand participants' subjective experiences within their institutional contexts. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to allow both consistency in inquiry and flexibility for participants to elaborate on relevant experiences and

insights. The focus on both public and community-based preschool institutions facilitated comparative exploration of inclusive education practices.

4.2. Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure diverse institutional representation and informed perspectives. The final sample comprised six preschool principals – three from public institutions and three from community-based institutions – operating within the municipality of Prishtina. Eligibility criteria included holding a formal leadership role and active engagement in the implementation of inclusive education policies. While the sampling strategy enhanced depth and contextual relevance, the limited geographic scope and reliance on self-reported data may introduce potential biases. However, efforts were made to mitigate these limitations by including varied institutional types.

As indicated on the Table 1, the respondents are either bachelor's or master's degree holders which clearly shows these principals are not only well trained but also very qualified for the position.

Table 1

Demographic data of the participants

<i>Preschool institutions name</i>	<i>Type of preschool institutions</i>	<i>Principal's education level</i>	<i>Principal's work experience in preschool institutions (years)</i>	<i>Number of children in the preschool institutions</i>	<i>Number of children with special needs in preschool institutions</i>
Xixëllonjat	Public	BA	25	135	4
Lulevera	Public	BA	7.5	163	4
Gëzimi ynë	Public	MA	1.0	420	19
Ngjyrat	Community-based	BA	9.0	55	1
Cicërimat	Community-based	BA	4.5	200	2
Milingonat	Community-based	BA	5.0	200	1

From one to 25 years of experiences in managing preschool institutions is relatively a very broad and enriching experiences in educational management. The institutions under their oversight are, by majority large accommodating quite a high number of children in these places. Such an example can be found within the institution known as "Gëzimi ynë" - housing 420 children in one, 19 with special needs altogether. On the other hand, community-based preschool institutions differ in size. For example, "Ngjyrat" provided service for 55 children, out of whom only one had special needs; "Cicërimat" and "Milingonat," each provided service for 200 children and reported two and one children with special needs, respectively. These data show different capacities and challenges for various types of preschool institutions.

4.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted in person. An interview protocol was developed to explore four thematic areas: (a) perceived inclusiveness of children with special needs, (b) challenges in implementing inclusive practices, (c) strategies to foster social integration and learning outcomes, and (d) differences between public and community-based preschool settings. The protocol began with general questions and progressively addressed more specific topics to guide discussion while allowing for open-ended responses. Each interview was audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and data integrity.

4.4. Procedure

The interview was initiated with an extensive introduction of the researchers, accompanied by a very clear explanation of the purpose of the study. Full information regarding the objectives and the vital importance of their contributions was provided to the participants. Informed consent was obtained to make sure that participants understand their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with in-depth discussion based on pre-prepared questions that delved into essential issues related to perceptions of inclusiveness, the obstacles encountered in implementing inclusive practices, supporting strategies, and comparative practices between public and community-based preschool institutions. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes, balancing thorough exploration of topics with consideration for participants' busy schedules. The researchers ensured a non-judgmental environment where respondents were free to respond openly, sharing their experiences and views in detail. All interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate thematic analysis of the highest integrity. It was concluded with a short summary of what was discussed, an invitation for further comments, and words of appreciation for taking such a great time and effort for their time and opinions. This standardized and yet non-standardized method assured acquisition of complex, rich data without exhausting time limits.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical considerations are made to uphold the dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants. Also, participants were given a detailed explanation of the purpose and the procedures involved in the research project, as well as any potential implications, before the interviews. Free and informed consent was fully pursued in order to make sure that participation is purely voluntary and that at any time during the process, they could withdraw from it without any negative consequences. Data confidentiality was guaranteed by strict anonymization of all data. Recordings and interview transcripts were kept in a safe place, with due emphasis on the security of data. It was guaranteed that the information collected would be used solely for research purposes and presented in such a way as not to reveal the identity of respondents. The researchers committed to conduct interviews with a respectful and non-judgmental attitude, thus empowering participants to voice their opinions candidly. Importantly, the research was operated under the ethical approval of a relevant ethics review board, ensuring adherence to the highest ethical standards and addressing any potential breaches.

4.6. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the transcribed interviews. The process involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and iterative refinement. Codes were generated inductively and organized into themes reflecting principals' reported practices, perceived barriers, and institutional dynamics influencing inclusive education. Cross-case comparisons between public and community-based institutions were also conducted to identify commonalities and distinctions in inclusive approaches.

5. Results

The results of the interviews with the principals present their professional experiences. All the interview responses are categorized and coded and are divided into tables for each code. The findings related to attitudes and pedagogical approaches to inclusive education in kindergarten are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Attitudes, and pedagogical approaches to inclusive education in kindergarten

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Description</i>
Commitment to inclusion and legal compliance	The institution is inclusive and implements Kosovo's legal framework on inclusive education, ensuring equal rights, access, and support for all children, though specialized staff are still needed.
Inclusive environment and daily practices	Children with special needs are welcomed from enrollment, included in all group activities, and supported through an inclusive environment designed for skill development and participation.
Staff development and pedagogical approaches	Staff are trained regularly to provide tailored support, create stimulating developmental programs, and develop Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in collaboration with parents and management.
Collaboration with specialists and authorities	The institution works closely with education authorities and specialists to adapt curricula and ensure all children's developmental needs are addressed.
Beliefs about the benefits of inclusion	Inclusion is believed to foster socialization, life skills, empathy, collaboration, and leadership for all children, while recognizing that benefits can vary depending on each child's needs.
Societal impact of inclusive education	Inclusive education builds acceptance, support, empathy, and contributes to the development of a healthier, more supportive society.

Regarding Table 2, all six preschool institutions principals clearly stated that inclusive education is the key to meeting the needs of all children, and they are fully committed to equal opportunities for children with special needs. This theme was very consistent in all interviews, showing a strong collective belief in inclusion. For example, the head of the "Lulavera" preschool institution identified the following:

According to the valid legislation which regulates the pre-university education in Kosovo, inclusion is a fundamental principle. All children, regardless of differences in physical or intellectual development, age, gender, race, religion, or socio-economic status, must be provided access, inclusion, a suitable environment, and conditions for their development.

Moreover, the head of the "Gëzimi ynë" preschool institution was quite assertive and positive about inclusion:

As a new head, I have a very positive perception regarding the inclusion of these children in preschool institutions. They have equal rights as any other children and should never be stigmatized.

Another principal of the "Milingona" preschool institutions institution defined inclusion as "...the inclusion of children with special needs is a great opportunity to create equal opportunities for all children".

These strong words correspond very powerfully to the first research question, which aimed to investigate preschool institutions leaders' attitudes toward inclusiveness.

The challenges in implementing inclusive practices for children with special needs in kindergarten are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Challenges in implementing inclusive practices for children with special needs in kindergarten

<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>
Lack of trained staff and professional support	A major challenge is the shortage of trained, regularly employed staff and professional teams. Limited specialized resources and insufficient individualized support spaces hinder full inclusion.
Inadequate facilities and resources	Kindergartens face difficulties creating suitable environments and ensuring access to tailored activities for children with special needs due to a lack of proper infrastructure and materials.
Educator training and capacity building	Insufficient training opportunities for educators limit their ability to implement individualized plans effectively and adapt teaching methods for inclusive practices.
Parental engagement and awareness	A lack of strong parental engagement is noted, although awareness among parents and educators regarding inclusion is gradually improving through dialogue and collaboration.
Differences between public and private kindergartens	Public kindergartens are obligated to accept all children and ensure development, benefiting from government funding and broader collaboration, while private kindergartens may be more selective and face their own challenges.
Collaboration among institutions	Challenges are often shared across kindergartens. Although occasional complaints and hesitation arise, they are usually resolved through communication, collaboration, and understanding between staff, parents, and institutions.

In Table 3, despite the strong commitment of the principals toward inclusion, several insurmountable challenges impede the realization of inclusive practices effectively. One of the biggest barriers is that of highly dispersed professional staff, including special educators and assistants, important in trying to meet special needs. As explained by the head of the “Xixëllonjat” preschool institution, the lack of professional staff poses a significant challenge to inclusive education: “We lack professional staff, like special educators or assistants, to take full care of their individual needs.” Respondents support this statement by emphasizing that the lack of professional support remains a major challenge: “...but the lack of professional support remains a major challenge.” This critical shortage of expertise makes the process of providing quality education inaccessible and reinforces the growing demands to invest more in professional development and the recruitment of qualified personnel. Overcoming these challenges is necessary to actualize this vision in inclusive education, where every child gets equal opportunities to thrive.

Table 4 presents strategies, measures, and interventions for supporting the social integration of children with special needs in kindergarten. It shows that despite all these challenges, principals themselves were actively using every available effective strategy to facilitate the social integration of children with special needs. One of the most important tools that can be used to address various learning needs is the Individualized Educational Plan [IEP]. In this respect, principals reported the development and implementation of such plans in cooperation with parents and external specialists, which testifies to a very proactive approach in terms of inclusive education. For instances, one of the principals asserted that:

Steps include identifying children’s needs, involving our special educator, and referring children for pedagogical assessment to the Municipal Directorate of Education MDE professional evaluation team. Based on their reports, individualized educational plans (IEPs) are developed, involving educators, the special educator, and parents”.

This is also supported by the head of “Cicërrimat”, who stated that “IEPs, specialized assistance, and parent involvement ensure tailored support and progress tracking.”

Table 4

Strategies, measures, and interventions for supporting social integration of children with special needs in kindergarten

<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>
Strategies for social integration	Inclusion strategies include legislative alignment, parental engagement, joint activities, adapted programs, special days, collaboration among educators, and psychological support to ensure social integration and development.
Specific steps for inclusion	Key steps involve identifying needs, involving special educators, referring for professional assessments, developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and ensuring individualized accommodations for full inclusion.
Monitoring and assessment measures	Inclusion is assessed through observations, daily feedback, pedagogical assessments at enrollment, standardized checklists, and analysis of peer interactions and educator integration.
Targeted interventions	Measures include smaller group sizes, specialized assistants, individualized support programs, dedicated spaces for tailored activities, intersectoral cooperation, and collaboration with parents to enhance learning outcomes.
Educator training and capacity building	Some educators receive formal training, while others rely on self-learning and peer support. Regular professional development is emphasized to strengthen inclusive practices and provide needed classroom support.
Inclusive classroom preparation	Preparation includes staff-parent-group meetings, creating a rights-based and supportive environment, respecting privacy, adjusting the physical environment, and ensuring psychological support, though resource limitations persist.

6. Discussion

Systemic change is crucial for the advancement of inclusive early childhood education. Recent literature highlights that teacher professional development—particularly through well-structured virtual or hybrid programs—can markedly improve educators' competencies in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), co-teaching, and differentiation, which are essential elements for achieving large-scale inclusion (Montalbano et al., 2024). Additionally, embedded, school-based coaching models have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing UDL competencies and promoting inclusive classrooms (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024). These findings underscore the necessity for continuous and accessible training that provides long-term support for educators.

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are considered a highly effective strategy to support the development and inclusion of children with special needs. The European Commission (2019) strongly endorses this practice, advocating for the necessity of personalized approaches in order to create truly inclusive environments. However, equally important is the creation of a welcoming and emotionally supportive atmosphere beyond IEPs—one that nurtures each child's emotional and social well-being. Investment in infrastructure and resources is also essential. Ackah-Jnr and Fluckiger (2025) identified ongoing barriers—specifically the absence of adaptive tools and professional support—that obstruct inclusive environments in early education, corroborating our findings regarding resource limitations.

Policy support and standardization across preschool types are crucial, as evidenced by quantitative research highlighting significant regional variability. An Italian study utilized inclusivity indices to identify notable disparities between public and private ECEC services, prompting policymakers to advocate for standardized accessibility frameworks (Ferrari et al.,

2024). This aligns with demands for equity-focused public funding and integrated quality assurance frameworks.

Fostering an inclusive community culture necessitates the collective engagement of families and professionals. Murphy et al. (2018) illustrated that parent-focused activities and robust family-professional partnerships foster essential trust and engagement, which are critical alongside structural changes. Recent research emphasizes the importance of inclusive mindsets and shared values as fundamental to achieving sustainable inclusion. Guidance from North America and Australia stresses equity-oriented, culturally responsive programming that eliminates exclusionary practices and incorporates anti-bias frameworks in early learning environments (Caine, 2023).

Our study indicated that principals noted significant enhancements in peer relationships, social skills, and participation among children with special needs due to interactive activities such as games, art, and music. Previous research shows that strategic teacher-child interaction tools enhance practical feasibility, though emotional responsiveness continues to pose a challenge (Charitaki et al., 2024). Recent findings also suggest that extracurricular, arts-based approaches foster creativity, self-regulation, and a sense of belonging—particularly among children with developmental differences (Beka & Rasimi, 2024).

Observation checklists and progress tracking are consistent with evidence-based recommendations; however, varied results from systems such as the U.S. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) indicate a need for caution. QRIS metrics often fail to adequately reflect the relational dimensions essential for quality inclusion and may inadvertently exacerbate inequities (Meek et al., 2023). Our findings emphasize the importance of incorporating community-responsive metrics that assess teacher-child interactions alongside conventional structural measures.

Finally, in alignment with international frameworks such as those recommended by the OECD and UNESCO, smaller class sizes and customized support are essential for creating effective inclusive environments (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018; Slee, 2018). These measures enhance both accessibility and optimal learning conditions for all children.

7. Conclusion

Interviews with preschool institution principals clearly indicate that inclusive education is regarded as one of the most important guiding principles in both public and community-based settings. Principals emphasize that inclusion is not only of paramount importance but also essential for ensuring equal opportunities for every child and for significantly enhancing their social development. They acknowledge that educating children with special needs alongside typically developing peers enriches the educational experience for all students—fostering mutual understanding, social skills, and cooperation.

However, the implementation of inclusive practices remains a considerable challenge. The primary barriers identified include a critical shortage of professional personnel, insufficient training for educators, a lack of psychological support, inadequate access to specialized materials, and underdeveloped infrastructure. These obstacles stand in stark contrast to the goals of inclusive education advocates and hinder its full and effective realization. Despite principals' continuous efforts—such as the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), collaboration with families, and the creation of supportive learning environments—systemic challenges require urgent and coordinated attention from all stakeholders committed to advancing true inclusion.

A comparative analysis of public and community-based preschool institutions reveals that both types face similar persistent issues. While public institutions often benefit from governmental policies and relatively stable budgets, they continue to struggle with high child-to-teacher ratios and limited access to specialized resources. In contrast, community-based institutions tend to be more flexible but frequently depend on private initiatives, which seldom ensure the professional expertise required for high-quality inclusive education. This combination of constraints across

sectors underscores the pressing need for comprehensive, systemic reform in the field of early childhood education.

8. Recommendations

8.1. For Policymakers

Policymakers should prioritize the allocation of dedicated budgets specifically aimed at recruiting and retaining special educators and classroom assistants across all preschool settings. This funding should not be temporary but sustained to ensure continuity and stability in inclusive education efforts. Additionally, it is essential to implement mandatory, high-quality, in-service training programs on inclusive education for all preschool staff. These training modules should be regularly updated to reflect current best practices and be tied to formal certification processes to ensure accountability and ongoing professional growth.

To ensure consistency and equity across the early childhood education system, national standards for inclusive education must be established and enforced. These standards should apply uniformly to both public and private preschools, creating a coherent framework that guides practice and ensures compliance. Furthermore, upgrading preschool infrastructure to meet accessibility standards is imperative. Investment is needed to renovate existing facilities and provide inclusive teaching aids and materials, including those tailored to children with disabilities. Ensuring that every child can access and benefit from their learning environment is a foundational step toward genuine inclusion.

8.2. For Educators and Principals

Educators and principals have a pivotal role in the practical realization of inclusive education. It is crucial for all teaching staff to actively engage in professional development opportunities focused on inclusive pedagogy. Training should cover differentiated instruction, classroom management strategies, and behavior support, equipping educators with tools to meet the diverse needs of their learners. In addition, teachers and school leaders should develop and monitor Individual Support Plans (ISPs) tailored to each child's needs. These plans should be created collaboratively with families and relevant specialists and should be regularly reviewed to adapt strategies based on each child's progress.

Creating an inclusive classroom environment goes beyond instruction; it involves organizing physical spaces and learning activities that enable all children to participate fully. This includes thoughtful attention to classroom layout, the facilitation of positive peer interactions, and the integration of materials that reflect diverse identities and abilities. Strengthening collaboration with families and interagency professionals is equally essential. Regular communication with parents and coordination with psychologists, therapists, and social workers ensure that children receive comprehensive, holistic support. Lastly, educators and principals should take an active role in identifying and advocating for inclusive resources and staffing. By clearly documenting their needs—such as assistive technologies or specialized personnel—they can more effectively communicate with governing bodies and push for the provision of necessary supports.

9. Limitations

While the findings of this study offer valuable insights, they must be interpreted within the context of certain limitations. First, although interviews with six preschool institution principals provided sufficient depth to achieve the qualitative research objectives, the sample size is not representative of all preschool institutions in Prishtina or Kosovo at large. Therefore, the experiences and perspectives captured in this study cannot be generalized to reflect the full landscape of inclusive education in the region.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants' responses could be influenced by social desirability—potentially leading them to portray their practices in a more favorable light than reality may warrant. While semi-structured interviews are a powerful

tool for exploring complex perspectives, this method also inherently limits the breadth of topics compared to other data collection techniques such as observations or focus groups.

A further limitation is the narrow scope of participants: the study focused exclusively on principals, without including the views of other key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and children. These groups are essential to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of both the challenges and successes related to inclusive practices in early childhood settings.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights into the attitudes and strategies employed by preschool principals regarding the inclusion of children with special needs. It underscores the urgent need for collective action to remove persistent barriers to inclusion and highlights the necessity of reviewing current policies and practices to ensure equity in educational access and outcomes for all children.

The imperative to address these issues cannot be overstated. Inclusive education is not merely an aspirational goal—it is a fundamental right that must be realized in the interest of both individual dignity and societal progress.

Author contributions: All authors have equally contributed to the study and agreed with the results and conclusions.

Declaration of interest: The authors declared that there were no potential conflicts of interest.

Data availability: The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical statement: This research was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all data.

Funding: The authors received no financial support for this article's research and/or authorship.

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