



Perceived Challenges and Support Strategies for Migrant Students with Special Educational Needs: Insights from Future Teachers

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Abstract

This study explores how pre-service special education teachers in Italy perceive the challenges faced by students from migrant backgrounds and the strategies they consider effective in fostering inclusive education. Framed within the national legal framework recognizing linguistic and socio-cultural disadvantage as a Special Educational Need (SEN), the research aims to contribute to the understanding of how future teachers approach diversity in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. Data were collected through a qualitative survey administered to 261 pre-service support teachers enrolled in university-level inclusive education programs. Participants responded to three open-ended questions designed to elicit their perceptions regarding: (1) the main barriers encountered by students with a migrant background; (2) inclusive teaching practices they deem useful to address such barriers; and (3) the types of professional training and tools they consider necessary to enhance their readiness for multilingual, multicultural classrooms. Responses were analyzed inductively using thematic content analysis supported by ATLAS.ti software. Findings indicate that participants overwhelmingly identified language as the primary obstacle to academic achievement and social integration. However, emotional vulnerability and socio-relational difficulties were also emphasized. Suggested strategies included the use of cooperative learning, visual aids, and intercultural dialogue. Participants strongly advocated for targeted teacher training in second-language acquisition, emotional-relational competence, and culturally responsive pedagogies. The study underscores the importance of preparing inclusive teachers to respond to layered educational challenges, not only through pedagogical tools but also through the development of reflective, relational, and intercultural competencies.

Keywords: L2 acquisition in education, inclusive pedagogy, classroom diversity, pre-service teachers, intercultural competence.

1. Introduction

The as classrooms across Italy become increasingly linguistically diverse, with a notable rise in students from migrant backgrounds who are non-native speakers of Italian—including both recently arrived pupils and second-generation learners—educational systems are being called to adopt inclusive, linguistically responsive approaches that promote equitable participation and learning outcomes. According to the most recent national report, published in August 2024 by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito, Italy; hereafter MIM), students with non-Italian citizenship accounted for 11.2% of the overall student population during the 2022–2023 academic year, amounting to a total of 914,860 individuals. Despite a nationwide decrease in overall student enrollment, this represents a 4.9% rise from the previous academic year. In terms of geographical distribution, most of these students are concentrated in Northern Italy, with Lombardy alone accounting for over a quarter of the total. Children and adolescents who have been exposed to extreme experiences often lack the same capacity as adults to manage stressful situations. Upon arriving in a new country, they not only carry the psychological impact of their migration journey—which can be profoundly traumatic—but must also navigate and adjust to an unfamiliar social and cultural environment (Biasutti et al., 2020, p. 114).

Equally important is the changing demographic profile of this student population. Over 65% are second-generation students—foreign citizens born in Italy—yet there has been a significant rise in new arrivals, particularly at the secondary level. The growing heterogeneity of the student population pose significant challenges to the education system, especially in terms of linguistic accessibility, classroom integration, and inclusive teaching practices. As language proficiency remains a central determinant of both academic success and social inclusion, schools are increasingly required to adopt pedagogical strategies that address the specific needs of students for whom Italian is not a first language.

In this context, the role of teachers—particularly those in training for inclusive and special needs education—is critical. Understanding their perceptions, preparedness, and the strategies they consider effective is essential to inform future directions in teacher education and support the development of equitable and culturally responsive schools (MIM, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how pre-service teachers in special needs education perceive the linguistic and educational challenges faced by non-native Italian-speaking students, and the pedagogical strategies they consider most effective to address these needs.

The article progresses from a review of the theoretical and empirical background to an analysis of future teachers’ perspectives, followed by the presentation of qualitative results and their implications for inclusive practice.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Intercultural Competence and Inclusive Pedagogy

The increasing linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in Italian schools has redefined the role of teachers in fostering inclusive education. Educators are now expected to act as mediators of intercultural understanding, language acquisition, and social integration. This shift requires a transformation from transmissive to reflective, and from monocultural to intercultural pedagogical approaches (Campanale, 2020; Santagati, 2016).

Central to this transformation is the development of intercultural competence, defined as the capacity to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations (Sani, 2024). This competence involves not only knowledge of other cultures but also empathetic communication and reflective practice. Scholars such as Portera (2020) and Zinant & Zolletto (2018) emphasize that intercultural competence is crucial for valuing diversity as a pedagogical resource, rather than perceiving it as a challenge to be overcome.

Teacher attitudes also play a pivotal role. Educators with positive dispositions towards cultural diversity tend to implement inclusive strategies, such as cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching (Szelei, Tinoca, & Pinho, 2020). These methodologies have been shown to improve student participation and reduce educational disparities among students with migrant backgrounds.

In contexts where linguistic needs overlap with special educational needs (SENs), the risk of misidentifying language-related difficulties as cognitive impairments remains significant (Cecalupo & Gabrielli, 2022; Pizzi, 2024). This underscores the necessity of enhancing linguistic awareness across all teaching roles, not only those specialized in support education (Pugnaghi, 2020).

The importance of self-regulated learning has also gained prominence. Students from lower socioeconomic and migrant backgrounds often display limited metacognitive strategies and self-efficacy beliefs (De Vincenzo, 2024; Alivernini et al., 2017; Alivernini et al., 2011). Interventions aimed at fostering self-regulation—such as metacognitive training or guided reflection—are shown to support greater academic autonomy and resilience (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004).

1.1.2 Teacher Preparation for Inclusive and Multilingual Classrooms

Preparing pre-service teachers to navigate classroom diversity effectively is a central concern in contemporary teacher education. Teachers entering the profession must develop not only strong pedagogical skills but also the attitudinal and affective dispositions necessary to work in inclusive, multilingual, and culturally complex settings (Paetsch et al., 2023).

Prospective teachers are not only expected to master instructional strategies but also to develop the attitudinal, emotional, and intercultural competences necessary to respond sensitively and effectively to multilingual and multicultural classrooms (OECD, 2018). The OECD PISA Global Competence Framework defines global competence as the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues; to understand and appreciate others' perspectives and worldviews; to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions across

cultures; and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development (OECD, 2018, p. 7). Teacher preparation must therefore cultivate dispositions such as empathy, openness to diversity, and a commitment to human dignity and equity in education.

The OECD framework also emphasizes that global competence involves not only knowledge and skills but also values and attitudes. It highlights the importance of nurturing respect, intercultural curiosity, cultural humility, and global-mindedness throughout teacher education (OECD, 2018, pp. 15–19). For this reason, the framework calls for curricular integration of intercultural and global issues across subjects, teacher reflection on bias and discrimination, and the development of learning environments that promote human rights, diversity, and sustainability.

A key component is teacher self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to manage instructional challenges (Bandura, 1994). High self-efficacy influences classroom management, engagement strategies, and openness to inclusive practices. Recent studies indicate that teachers with elevated self-efficacy are more inclined to implement inclusive education strategies effectively, whereas those with lower self-efficacy may struggle despite understanding inclusive principles (Woodcock et al., 2022).

Additionally, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) further elucidates how meeting basic psychological needs enhances the development of an inclusive, student-centered professional identity. When teacher education programs address these needs, pre-service teachers are more likely to internalize inclusive values and practices.

In essence, preparing teachers for inclusive and multilingual classrooms requires a holistic approach that integrates psychological readiness (self-efficacy and motivation), intercultural understanding, and ethical global engagement. As education systems strive to prepare students for an interconnected world, teacher preparation must equip future educators to lead with sensitivity, competence, and vision.

1.1.3 International and National Perspectives on Teacher Perceptions of Migrant Students with Special Educational Needs

Although the Italian context presents distinctive challenges—particularly regarding language acquisition and teacher preparedness—international literature demonstrates that similar issues arise globally, albeit shaped by differing policy landscapes and sociocultural factors.

Lucas and Villegas (2020) emphasize the imperative of preparing linguistically responsive teachers through robust, research-informed preservice education programs. Their work underscores how equipping educators with the necessary competencies to address linguistic diversity is foundational to fostering inclusive classrooms and mitigating educational disparities. These insights closely align with the concerns expressed by Italian pre-service teachers in this study, who reported limited training opportunities and significant emotional strain when working in highly heterogeneous educational settings.

In the Australian context, Sidhu and Taylor (2007) explored the provision of education for refugee youth, revealing that support systems were often inconsistent and poorly coordinated. Teachers frequently reported feeling underprepared and professionally isolated when addressing the multifaceted needs of students from migratory backgrounds. These findings

mirror the experiences of Italian educators who similarly contend with linguistic, social, and institutional challenges in the absence of comprehensive systemic support.

Johansson et al. (2021) examined the evolving roles of special needs educators working with recently arrived students in Sweden. Their study highlighted uncertainties surrounding professional role boundaries and the lack of clear institutional guidelines for addressing linguistic and socio-emotional complexities. These findings echo Italian concerns regarding the risk of misidentifying special educational needs in linguistically diverse classrooms (Cecalupo & Gabrielli, 2022).

Within the Italian context, Biasutti and Concina (2021) analyzed how primary school principals facilitate the inclusion of migrant students. They identified six critical dimensions: school organization, instructional methods, partnerships with families and external agencies, assessment practices, and intercultural initiatives. A key finding was the reliance on student-centered and context-sensitive approaches, often developed in the absence of explicit national directives. This underscores the pivotal role of school leadership in fostering inclusive educational environments—a point indirectly affirmed by pre-service teachers in this study through their emphasis on positive school climates and support networks.

The influence of socioeconomic status (SES) in shaping both academic outcomes and teachers' perceptions has been extensively discussed in Italian literature. Bonifacci et al. (2021) highlighted that students from migrant backgrounds often experience a “double disadvantage,” whereby limited language proficiency is compounded by socioeconomic barriers and restricted cultural capital. This intersectionality has a profound effect on teacher expectations and the diagnostic process for special educational needs. These observations align with international findings suggesting that inclusive education must account for the broader structural inequities affecting students' educational trajectories.

Further advancing this discussion, Smythe and Malet (2024) examined teacher training for inclusion in the French context, where egalitarian policy rhetoric often contrasts with the reality of classroom practice. Their findings suggest that, despite well-intentioned reforms, inclusive strategies are frequently improvised by teachers who lack both adequate training and resources. This tension between policy ideals and pedagogical implementation offers a useful comparative framework for understanding the Italian case, in which teachers similarly adopt informal and individualized approaches due to limited institutional guidance.

Finally, Schleicher (2012), in a comprehensive OECD review, synthesizes global insights into effective teacher preparation and leadership development. His report emphasizes that the success of inclusive education systems depends not only on teacher motivation but also on sustained professional learning, coherent policy frameworks, and institutional capacity to accommodate diversity.

Collectively, these studies converge on a critical insight: the successful inclusion of migrant students with special educational needs hinges not merely on policy design or individual educator commitment, but on systemic, sustained efforts to equip teachers with the professional, emotional, and pedagogical tools required to manage complex classroom

realities. Cross-national evidence reaffirms the urgency of embedding intercultural education and inclusive pedagogies across all stages of teacher development.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design aimed at understanding the perceptions of future special education teachers regarding the challenges faced by students from migrant backgrounds, particularly those who are not proficient in Italian as a second language (L2). The qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' beliefs, attitudes, and proposed strategies, offering insight into both their conceptual frameworks and perceived pedagogical needs.

2.1 Participants

The study involved a total of 261 pre-service teachers enrolled in special needs education programs across Italian universities. These participants were attending a national postgraduate teacher training program that provides pedagogical and practical preparation for teaching in mainstream classrooms as special education teachers. Although all participants were training to become qualified special education teachers, many reported fragmented or informal prior teaching experience—often on temporary contracts and seldom involving certified support roles. The average age of participants was 40 years. Just over half of the respondents (53.6%) reported prior teaching experience, and 30.3% had already worked in special education.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through an online open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The instrument was divided into three main parts: the first one comprised socio demographic information, prior education, prior working experience. The second one comprised validated scales measuring teacher efficacy for inclusive practice (Sharma et al. 2012), self-efficacy (Biasi et al., 2014), sentiments, attitudes and concerns about inclusion (Forlin et al., 2011), a questionnaire on teachers' attitudes towards Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) (Cornoldi et al., 2018). The third part – the section relevant to this study - enclosed three questions designed to elicit reflective and spontaneous responses concerning: (1) the main difficulties encountered by students with migrant background and Italian as an L2, (2) the strategies teachers might adopt to support such students, and (3) the type of training or tools deemed essential to effectively work with students from migrant backgrounds. The open-ended format allowed respondents to elaborate freely and express personal views and experiences. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously through an online questionnaire. No personal identifying information was gathered, and respondents were informed about the research purpose and ethical safeguards before completing the form.

2.3 Data Coding Process

Participants provided written responses to three open-ended questions. These qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive, data-driven approach informed by thematic content

analysis. The goal was to identify recurring patterns without imposing predefined theoretical frameworks.

ATLAS.ti software was employed to support the manual coding process, aiding in the organization and retrieval of codes and memos. The analysis followed a two-phase approach. In the first phase, responses were read multiple times to ensure deep familiarization and to identify emergent semantic patterns. In the second phase, open codes were manually assigned to meaningful units of text. These codes were then iteratively refined and grouped into broader thematic categories based on semantic similarity and relevance to the research questions.

The qualitative coding was carried out by a single researcher, who followed a systematic process of categorization, initially informed by pre-defined criteria and progressively refined through inductive analysis. While this ensured internal consistency and depth of engagement with the data, the lack of multiple coders constitutes a recognized methodological limitation, as it prevents the formal assessment of intercoder reliability. This limitation may affect the reproducibility of thematic interpretations. Coding decisions were discussed periodically with the co-author to enhance conceptual alignment and minimize interpretive bias. In future studies, the involvement of multiple coders is planned to allow for critical comparison and cross-validation of themes, thereby improving the reliability and rigor of the analysis.

Examples of initial codes included “language as barrier,” “peer exclusion,” and “use of visual aids.” These were progressively refined into broader categories through a reflexive, iterative process. Thematic saturation was considered achieved when no substantially new themes emerged. Ultimately, three thematic categories were identified for Question 1 (perceived challenges), six for Question 2 (support strategies), and six for Question 3 (training needs and tools), reflecting a balance between conceptual clarity and thematic depth.

3. Results

The analysis of the open-ended responses provided by 261 pre-service special education teachers revealed a rich array of perceptions regarding the challenges faced by students from migrant backgrounds with limited proficiency in Italian, as well as proposed support strategies and training needs for teachers. Three main thematic areas emerged, corresponding to the three questions of the questionnaire.

3.1 Perceived Difficulties faced by migrant students (Q1)

Three key categories emerged in relation to the perceived challenges: (a) linguistic difficulties; (b) socio-emotional barriers; and (c) cultural and integration challenges.

(a) Linguistic difficulties.

Participants overwhelmingly identified linguistic comprehension as the most pressing barrier for students with Italian as a second language (L2). Grammar, oral communication, and vocabulary were all areas cited as limiting academic participation. The distinction between everyday conversational Italian and academic language was particularly emphasized,

reflecting a concern for how language mediates both curriculum access and social belonging. As one participant stated: *“The Italian spoken in everyday life is different from the one used at school, which is characterized by formal and disciplinary language.”*

This perception aligns with Cummins’ (2001) well-known differentiation between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

(b) Socio-emotional barriers.

Beyond language, several respondents stressed that cultural displacement and emotional isolation posed equally substantial challenges. Feelings of exclusion, low self-esteem, and a lack of social connection were frequently mentioned, often described as compounding the effects of limited L2 proficiency.

(c) Cultural and integration challenges.

Some teachers also recognized that students’ cultural backgrounds were not fully acknowledged within mainstream classroom settings, leading to invisibility and disengagement. A few highlighted the need to actively address intercultural tensions and microaggressions.

3.2 Suggested Teaching Strategies (Q2)

Participants identified six main areas of pedagogical action: (a) inclusive classroom environments; (b) use of visual and digital tools; (c) differentiated instruction; (d) mediation and language scaffolding; (e) cooperative learning; and (f) emotional and relational support.

(a) Inclusive classroom environments.

Many participants emphasized the importance of fostering emotionally safe, welcoming spaces that support student participation and peer relationships. Teachers saw inclusivity not just as an academic goal but as an emotional condition for learning.

(b) Digital and visual scaffolds.

Visual aids and digital tools were frequently recommended to reinforce comprehension and to support students at various language levels. This also included the use of multilingual materials and multimedia resources.

(c) Differentiated instruction.

Participants recognized the need for varied instruction tailored to linguistic readiness, suggesting adaptations in pace, vocabulary load, and task complexity.

(d) Mediation and language support.

Language mediators and paraprofessionals were seen as vital resources, along with explicit language teaching embedded into content instruction.

(e) Cooperative learning.

Several participants advocated for small group work and peer-assisted learning as mechanisms to support language development and socio-emotional integration.

(f) Empathy and emotional support.

Some responses highlighted the importance of encouraging empathy and social-emotional learning within the group, to foster a climate of solidarity.

According to one respondent: *"Teachers can play a crucial role in supporting students, for example by: facilitating language comprehension through classroom language adaptation, the use of visual aids and images, keywords, repetition, and paraphrasing; enhancing language production through structured exercises, writing workshops, valuing oral expression, and viewing errors as learning opportunities; reducing cognitive load by using simplified materials, concept maps, and summaries; fostering cultural integration and promoting social inclusion; implementing adaptive assessments and setting realistic learning goals; and encouraging collaboration with families and specialists, as well as engaging in ongoing professional development."*

3.3 Perceived Training and Tools for Teachers (Q3)

Analysis revealed six key domains: (a) training in L2 methodology; (b) intercultural education; (c) educational technology; (d) inclusive didactics; (e) knowledge of migrant contexts; and (f) emotional-relational competencies.

(a) L2 didactics.

Respondents called for more systematic preparation in second language acquisition methodologies. This was the most cited need, revealing a gap in current pre-service training programs.

(b) Intercultural competence.

Participants also emphasized the need for training that enhances their ability to understand diverse cultural backgrounds and avoid deficit-based perspectives.

(c) Use of educational technology.

Future teachers saw digital resources as crucial—not merely add-ons, but essential supports for both communication and content delivery.

(d) Inclusive teaching strategies.

Many advocated for more coursework on inclusion and differentiation to address complex classroom needs and to leverage Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

(e) Knowledge of migrant contexts.

There was a strong interest in understanding the broader sociopolitical and educational realities faced by migrant families.

(f) Emotional and relational intelligence.

Teachers consistently identified the need for greater emotional literacy, empathy, and relational skills.

One participant wrote: *“The preparation of a teacher working with students from migrant backgrounds requires ongoing professional development, an open and inclusive mindset, and the use of diverse tools and resources to make learning more effective and engaging.”*

Such reflections align with recent scholarship that frames the 21st-century teacher as a multifaceted professional—simultaneously an educator, cultural mediator, and socio-emotional guide (Liu et al., 2020). The emphasis on relational sensitivity and blended professionalism (i.e., the integration of technical teaching skills with emotional, relational, and intercultural competencies) resonates with emerging models of inclusive education that integrate cognitive, technological, and affective dimensions of teaching.

4. Conclusion

The answers of the respondents highlight the complex and multifaceted challenges that students from migrant backgrounds face when entering the Italian school system without proficiency in the language of instruction. As reported by the majority of pre-service special education teachers, linguistic difficulties—particularly related to comprehension, grammar, and oral communication—emerge as the primary barriers to participation and learning. These statements are consistent with existing literature on second language acquisition in educational contexts, where language skills are often the gateway to both academic achievement and social integration.

Notably, participants emphasized that such linguistic barriers are often compounded by additional layers of difficulty, including emotional insecurity, cultural dissonance, and limited peer relationships. These overlapping dimensions suggest that many of these students fall within the broader definition of special educational needs, as their learning is significantly hindered by a combination of cognitive, relational, and sociocultural factors.

Some participants also demonstrated awareness of the specific challenges posed by academic language, distinguishing it from everyday conversational Italian. This distinction reflects Cummins’ (2001) well-established differentiation between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). However, the relative rarity of such reflections across the dataset suggests that theoretical models of language acquisition are not yet fully integrated into the conceptual frameworks of future teachers.

The strategies proposed by respondents reflect a growing awareness of the importance of inclusive and flexible pedagogical practices. Many advocated for the use of multimodal tools, differentiated instruction, and cooperative learning, aligning with international best practices for teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. The emphasis on empathy, classroom climate, and relational dynamics further underscores the need for a holistic approach that values not only cognitive outcomes, but also emotional well-being and a sense of belonging.

Importantly, the humanistic dimension of the responses—evident in references to empathy, peer support, and classroom atmosphere—suggests that participants conceptualize inclusion not only as a didactic responsibility but also as a relational and affective commitment. This

resonates with findings from other contexts, such as China and Sweden, where inclusive education for migrant students is shaped by teachers' emotional engagement and perceptions of vulnerability (Johansson, 2021; Liu et al., 2020).

Regarding teacher training, the responses reveal a clear demand for targeted preparation in L2 teaching methodologies, intercultural education, and digital literacy. These priorities point to a perceived gap between teacher education curricula and the actual needs of today's plural classrooms. The frequent mention of technological tools—such as translation apps or video-based resources—suggests that future teachers see educational technology as a practical and scalable ally in supporting linguistic accessibility and inclusion.

The inclusion of emotional and relational competence among essential teacher attributes further suggests a vision of teaching as a socially and ethically grounded profession. Participants appear to aspire to a teacher identity that is multicultural, empathetic, and adaptive—an orientation that supports the notion of “blended professionalism” in inclusive education (Beijaard et al., 2004). However, these expectations also raise important questions about feasibility: are current training programs sufficiently equipped to develop this composite profile of teacher-as-linguist, counselor, and cultural mediator?

Across all three domains—challenges, strategies, and training needs—participants converged on the idea that language is not simply a means of communication but a critical variable in shaping educational trajectories. Their responses demonstrate incipient but promising inclusive dispositions, which may be reinforced through structured reflection, exposure to diversity in practicum settings, and interdisciplinary coursework.

This study offers valuable insight into how pre-service teachers perceive their role in supporting migrant-origin students with language-related needs. Their voices highlight the urgency of aligning teacher education frameworks with the realities of linguistic diversity, reaffirming the importance of professional preparation that is both pedagogically rigorous and ethically grounded. Lastly, while language undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusive education—particularly in increasingly heterogeneous classroom settings—it should not be viewed as the sole dimension of inclusion. Non-verbal forms of communication, such as visual, gestural, and emotional cues, also serve as powerful tools that teachers can leverage to foster engagement, belonging, and mutual understanding. A holistic approach to inclusion must therefore consider both linguistic and non-linguistic strategies to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Despite its contributions, the present research also has some limitations. The qualitative coding was conducted by a single author. Although interpretive bias was mitigated through ongoing discussions with the co-author, the absence of multiple coders limits the ability to assess intercoder reliability. Additionally, the findings are based on a specific cohort of pre-service special education teachers in Italy and may not fully reflect the perspectives of in-service educators or those in other national contexts. Future research should expand the sample and involve multiple coders to enhance validity and allow for cross-contextual comparisons.

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