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## Evidence-Based Strategies for Promoting Student Inclusion in Urban and Rural Schools in Kosovo

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Ensuring the inclusion of students from diverse socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, particularly with regard to the differences between urban and rural schools, remains a persistent challenge in Kosovo's education system. Rather than evaluating specific interventions, the present study examines teachers' and students' perceptions of evidence-based strategies that support inclusion. Using a mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative and qualitative data to explore how practices such as differentiated instruction, formative assessment, collaborative planning and family engagement are understood and implemented in contrasting school contexts. The sample consists of 100 teachers and school leaders and 100 students aged 10–12 from both urban and rural areas. Semi-structured interviews with educators provide insights into their experiences with inclusive practices, while survey data from teachers and students capture their perceptions of inclusion, classroom climate, and the frequency and perceived usefulness of specific strategies. Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data, while quantitative analyses, including correlations, regression and ANOVA, were undertaken to compare patterns across school settings. The findings highlight notable differences in how inclusion-supportive practices are implemented across urban and rural contexts, and reveal that professional development, school leadership support and collaborative planning are central factors shaping perceived inclusion. The study offers context-sensitive recommendations for strengthening inclusive education and promoting greater equity across Kosovo's schools.

**Keywords:** educational equity, evidence-based strategies, student inclusion, student outcomes, urban-rural disparities

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## Na dokazih utemeljene strategije za spodbujanje inkluzije učencev v mestnih in podeželskih šolah na Kosovu

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☞ Zagotavljanje inkluzije učencev iz različnih družbenoekonomskih in zemljepisnih okolij, zlasti glede na razlike med mestnimi in podeželskimi šolami, ostaja nenehen izziv v kosovskem vzgojno-izobraževalnem sistemu. Namesto da bi ocenjevala posamezne ukrepe, ta študija preučuje zaznave učiteljev in učencev o na dokazih utemeljenih strategijah, ki podpirajo inkluzijo. Z uporabo mešane metode raziskava združuje kvantitativne in kvalitativne podatke, da bi ugotovila, kako se prakse, kot so: diferencirano poučevanje, formativno ocenjevanje, sodelovalno načrtovanje in vključevanje družine, razumejo in izvajajo v raznolikih šolskih kontekstih. Vzorec sestavlja 100 učiteljev in ravnateljev ter 100 učencev, starih od 10 do 12 let, iz mestnega in podeželskega območja. Polstrukturirani intervjuji z izobraževalci ponujajo vpogled v njihove izkušnje z inkluzivnimi praksami, medtem ko podatki iz ankete med učitelji in učenci zajemajo njihove zaznave o inkluziji, vzdušju v razredu ter o pogostosti in zaznani uporabnosti posameznih strategij. Za kvalitativne podatke je bila uporabljena tematska analiza, medtem ko so bile za primerjavo vzorcev v različnih šolskih okoljih izvedene kvantitativne analize, vključno s korelacijami, z regresijo in analizo variance (ANOVA). Ugotovitve poudarjajo opazne razlike v načinu izvajanja dejavnosti, ki spodbujajo inkluzijo, med mestnim in podeželskim okoljem ter kažejo, da so strokovni razvoj, podpora vodstva šole in sodelovalno načrtovanje ključni dejavniki, ki oblikujejo zaznave o inkluziji. Študija ponuja za kontekst prilagojena priporočila za krepitev inkluzivne vzgoje in izobraževanja ter za spodbujanje večje enakosti v kosovskih šolah.

**Ključne besede:** enakost v izobraževanju, na dokazih utemeljene strategije, inkluzija učencev, učni izidi pri učencih, razlike med mestom in podeželjem

## Introduction

In recent decades, the pursuit of inclusive education has become a central priority in international and national education agendas, particularly as systems work to reduce disparities in student participation, engagement and achievement (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2012). Despite these efforts, many countries continue to experience deep-rooted inequities, especially between urban and rural schools. Kosovo is no exception. National assessments consistently show gaps in achievement: in several municipalities, students in rural schools score between 8–12 percentage points lower on language and mathematics assessments than their urban peers, while reporting lower levels of school engagement and classroom support (MEST, 2020). These disparities illustrate ongoing challenges to ensuring equitable opportunities for all learners.

Inclusive education encompasses not only access to schooling but also meaningful participation, engagement and achievement for every learner, regardless of personal or socioeconomic circumstances (Eurydice, 2019). Achieving this vision requires evidence-informed strategies that address both systemic barriers and everyday classroom practices. While policy reforms have been introduced across the Western Balkans, including Kosovo, research suggests that top-down initiatives alone often produce limited or inconsistent improvements in inclusion (Riera, 2019; Ion & Brown, 2022).

Recent scholarship reinforces these concerns. Zabeli et al. (2021) report that although teachers in Kosovo understand the principles of inclusive education, classroom implementation remains weak due to limited institutional support and insufficient resources. Mazzuki (2025) highlights the fact that pre-service teachers often lack practical competence for inclusive teaching and may have negative attitudes towards students with additional needs, an issue that threatens long-term reform sustainability. Uka et al. (2025) further emphasise the need for professional development that is context-sensitive, particularly in the post-Covid environment, where online training must be aligned with teachers' actual classroom needs. Together, these findings underline the importance of understanding how schools adapt inclusive practices to their local realities.

Given these challenges, there is a clear need to examine how teachers and school leaders actively shape inclusive education through their use of evidence-based strategies such as differentiated instruction, formative assessment, support for students with learning difficulties, and collaboration with families and communities. Understanding how these practices are implemented across diverse settings is essential for advancing equity in Kosovo's schools.

The present study addresses this need by investigating perceptions and reported practices in urban and rural schools, rather than evaluating specific interventions. Using a mixed-methods design, the study explores how inclusive strategies are understood, implemented and supported across contrasting school environments. It draws on quantitative and qualitative data to provide a nuanced picture of the factors that enhance or constrain inclusive practices.

### Conceptualising Inclusive Education and Equity

Inclusive education is widely recognised as a fundamental right and a prerequisite for educational quality and equity. It refers to the process of responding to learner diversity by increasing participation in learning, cultures and school communities, while reducing exclusion (UNESCO, 2017). This view emphasises removing barriers and creating environments where all students can thrive (Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

Equity involves the fair distribution of educational opportunities and resources based on learners' diverse needs (OECD, 2018). Whereas equality implies identical treatment, equity recognises that students require differentiated levels of support to achieve comparable outcomes (Ainscow, 2020). In this sense, equity serves both as a guiding principle and an outcome within inclusive systems.

Global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015) have strengthened commitment to inclusion. However, national application often remains inconsistent. In some contexts, inclusive education is narrowly interpreted as related only to disability, thus overlooking socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language background and gender (Florian & Spratt, 2013). This gap highlights the need for more holistic and intersectional approaches.

Studies in the Western Balkans show that although policies promoting inclusion are often present, they are insufficiently embedded in everyday school practice (Kika-Milanović et al., 2021). In Kosovo, despite alignment with EU frameworks, implementation differs considerably between urban and rural contexts (Ahmetaj & Krasniqi, 2023). Zabeli et al. (2021) similarly note that teachers support inclusive ideals but lack systemic support for practical implementation.

## Evidence-Based Strategies for Inclusion

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) refer to the intentional use of research findings to guide educational decision-making (Slavin, 2002). In inclusive education, EBPs help teachers respond to diverse learning needs, promote engagement and foster participation (Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016). Common EBPs include differentiated instruction, peer-assisted learning, universal design for learning (UDL) and formative assessment.

Differentiated instruction tailors teaching to student needs, increasing engagement and outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017). Peer-assisted learning supports both academic progress and social connectedness (Roskos & Neuman, 2021). UDL frameworks encourage flexible teaching approaches that accommodate varied learning preferences (CAST, 2018). Formative assessment enables teachers to identify learning gaps and adjust instruction, an approach that is particularly effective in diverse classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Professional development aligned with inclusive pedagogy improves teachers' capacity to support diverse learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

In Kosovo, research confirms the effectiveness of inclusive practices when they are contextually grounded. Challenges remain, however, including limited coherence in implementation frameworks (Mehmeti, 2021) and preservice teachers' insufficient practical preparation (Mazzuki, 2025). Additionally, resource constraints in rural schools continue to affect the consistency of implementation (UNICEF Kosovo, 2021).

## Urban-Rural Disparities in Inclusion

Urban-rural disparities are well documented and remain a significant barrier to equitable inclusion. Urban schools typically benefit from stronger infrastructure, access to digital tools and more stable staff profiles (OECD, 2020). Rural schools often face multigrade teaching, limited budgets and fewer specialised services, which complicate the use of inclusive strategies (Eurydice, 2019).

Ion and Brown (2022) argue that top-down reforms often overlook contextual differences, leading to policies that do not match rural realities. Teachers in these settings frequently report challenges in applying EBPs due to insufficient training, inadequate support staff and workload pressures (Timperley et al., 2020). Kosovo reflects these patterns: rural schools face limited access to psychologists, pedagogues and specialised support services (Ahmetaj & Krasniqi, 2023). Socioeconomic disadvantage further compounds inclusion challenges, particularly for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) students (Save the Children, 2021).

Research increasingly suggests decentralised and context-responsive approaches, including participatory planning with communities, targeted funding and investment in rural teacher development (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). International models highlight the potential of blended learning, mobile support units and inclusive extracurricular initiatives to strengthen rural inclusion (OECD, 2023).

### Teachers, School Leadership and Inclusive Cultures

Teachers and school leaders are central to translating policy commitments into classroom practice. Teachers' beliefs, values and pedagogical skills shape how inclusion is enacted (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Evidence shows that teachers who embrace inclusive values and receive appropriate training are more successful in supporting diverse learners (Sokal & Katz, 2021).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have emerged as powerful frameworks for fostering collaborative learning, reflective practice and shared problem-solving. Seminal contributions by Louise Stoll (Stoll, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006) demonstrate that effective PLCs enhance teacher confidence, deepen pedagogical understanding and improve the implementation of inclusive strategies. PLCs enable teachers to jointly analyse student needs, share practices and co-develop instructional approaches (Timperley et al., 2020).

School leadership is likewise crucial. Inclusive leaders promote equity-oriented values, support shared decision-making and allocate resources strategically (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009). Their actions influence teacher motivation, school climate and the sustainability of inclusive practices (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). In Kosovo, leadership-focused professional development remains limited, particularly in rural municipalities. Research stresses that embedding inclusive principles into both teacher education and leadership development is essential for long-term change (Zabeli et al., 2021; Mazzuki, 2025).

Ultimately, inclusive school cultures emerge through coordinated efforts among leaders, teachers, families and communities. Without these interconnected elements, structural reforms alone rarely translate into meaningful practice (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

Research from South-Eastern Europe further reinforces the need to understand inclusion within broader policy and contextual dynamics. Although many countries in the region have formally adopted inclusive education principles, the practical implementation of these commitments remains uneven and is often dependent on local capacities. Analyses show that policies frequently remain at the level of strategic documents without being accompanied by

sustained professional support or adequate infrastructural investment, particularly in disadvantaged areas. These findings mirror challenges identified in Kosovo, where there is a persistent gap between policy and everyday instructional practice (Kovač Cerović et al., 2016)

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes also play an essential role in shaping inclusive practices. Evidence suggests that teachers who value inclusion and feel confident in their pedagogical skills are more likely to employ differentiated and flexible approaches. However, positive attitudes alone are insufficient when institutional support, collaboration opportunities and resources are lacking. A study by Štemberger and Kiswarday (2018) demonstrated that although teachers often endorse inclusive principles, structural constraints – including limited resources and inconsistent professional collaboration – hinder their ability to translate these values into practice. These insights resonate strongly with the Kosovan context.

Collaborative professional cultures are likewise central to the development of sustained inclusive practices. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been shown to enhance reflective dialogue, joint problem-solving and collective responsibility for student learning (Stoll et al., 2006). Research further indicates that sustained professional collaboration strengthens inclusive school cultures and supports teachers in responding more effectively to diverse student needs (Timperley et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of viewing inclusion not as an individual teacher responsibility but as a collaborative and institutionally supported process.

Disparities between rural and urban schools remain a persistent structural challenge across the region. Research has shown that teachers in rural schools frequently report more difficult working conditions, fewer opportunities for professional development and more limited access to pedagogical resources compared to their urban counterparts. Such disparities influence the extent to which inclusive strategies can be implemented consistently and effectively. A study by Javornik Krečič and Grmek (2021) confirmed that geographic isolation, limited support services and infrastructural constraints significantly shape teachers' capacity to enact inclusive practices in rural environments. These patterns reinforce the need for context-responsive policies and targeted support for schools operating in under-resourced settings.

School-family-community partnerships represent an important dimension of inclusive education and educational equity. A framework devised by Epstein (2018) emphasises that effective inclusion is strengthened when schools actively collaborate with families and local communities through shared responsibilities, communication and coordinated support structures. Such

partnerships contribute to improved student engagement and academic outcomes, as well as a stronger sense of belonging, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Within inclusive school systems, collaboration between educators, families and community actors enables a more holistic response to students' academic, social and emotional needs. This perspective aligns with contemporary inclusion models that view equity not solely as a classroom responsibility but as a collective process supported by multiple stakeholders within and beyond the school environment.

### **Research Problem**

Despite national and international commitments to inclusive education, significant disparities persist between urban and rural schools in Kosovo. Although policy reforms and inclusion frameworks have been formally established, their implementation remains uneven and strongly influenced by contextual factors such as institutional support, leadership capacity, access to resources and professional development opportunities. Existing research highlights persistent gaps between inclusive education principles and classroom practice, particularly in rural settings where structural constraints are more pronounced. There is therefore a need to better understand how evidence-based inclusive strategies are perceived and enacted by teachers and school leaders across different school contexts. Examining these perceptions can provide a critical insight into the factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive practices and inform more equitable, context-responsive education policies in Kosovo.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What evidence-based strategies are being implemented to promote student inclusion in urban and rural schools in Kosovo?
2. How do teachers and school leaders perceive the impact of these strategies on inclusion and student experiences?
3. What contextual factors enable or hinder the implementation of inclusive practices across urban and rural settings?

## Method

The study employed a mixed-methods design to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of evidence-based strategies that support inclusive education in urban and rural schools in Kosovo. Rather than evaluating specific interventions, the study aimed to understand how inclusive practices are implemented, experienced and shaped by contextual factors.

### Participants

The study involved a total of 200 participants drawn from four public primary schools, including two urban and two rural institutions. The teacher and school leader sample ( $n = 100$ ) was selected through purposive sampling and included classroom teachers, subject teachers, deputy directors, school leaders and support staff with varying levels of professional experience.

The student sample ( $n = 100$ ) consisted of learners aged 10–12 years and was selected through stratified random sampling based on gender, socioeconomic background and school location in order to ensure demographic diversity. This age group was chosen because students at this developmental stage are capable of reliably reporting their experiences of inclusion, engagement and classroom climate. Moreover, this period corresponds to the upper grades of primary education in Kosovo, where academic demands increase and disparities in participation and support become more visible.

The decision to include equal numbers of teachers/school leaders and students was based on feasibility, proportional representation across the participating schools, and the need to ensure sufficient statistical power for descriptive and comparative analyses. Including both groups enabled the study to capture complementary perspectives on inclusive practices: those who implement them and those who experience them.

Prior to participation, written informed consent was obtained from all of the adult participants, while parental consent and child assent were secured for the student participants. Participation was voluntary, and all of the participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant school-based ethics committee, and formal permission to conduct the research was obtained from the participating schools. Data collection took place between March and May 2025.

## Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using two structured questionnaires developed for the purposes of this study.

The teacher and school leader questionnaire consisted of four scales measuring the implementation of inclusive practices, frequency of strategy use, perceived usefulness of inclusive strategies, and institutional and leadership support. The instrument included 31 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was piloted with 20 teachers, and internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) ranged from .81 to .89. Content validity was established through expert review by two specialists in inclusive education.

The student questionnaire comprised three scales assessing students' sense of inclusion and belonging, academic engagement and classroom climate with perceived teacher support. The instrument included 20 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The questionnaire was reviewed by two experts to ensure clarity and age appropriateness. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .86, and construct validity was supported through consistency of factor structure and expert evaluation.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 teachers and school leaders from the participating schools, evenly distributed across urban and rural contexts. The interview protocol addressed experiences with inclusive education, perceived challenges, institutional support, peer collaboration and recommendations for improving inclusive practice. The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

## Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design was employed. Quantitative data were collected first in order to identify general patterns in perceptions of inclusive practices. Subsequently, qualitative interviews were conducted to explain and contextualise the quantitative findings and to deepen understanding of contextual influences.

The survey was administered during regular school hours, with researchers present to clarify questionnaire items when necessary. The interview participants were selected based on preliminary quantitative results in order to ensure variation in school location, professional role and years of experience.

The interviews were conducted within two weeks of the completion of the quantitative data analysis.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise participant responses. Independent-samples t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine differences between urban and rural school contexts. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of perceived student inclusion outcomes. All of the statistical assumptions were tested and met prior to analysis.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two researchers independently coded the interview transcripts, achieving an intercoder agreement of 86%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and NVivo 14 software was used to support data organisation, coding and theme development.

In order to enhance validity and trustworthiness, the survey instruments were pilot-tested, reviewed by experts and refined for clarity. Triangulation across data sources, member checking through participant review of thematic summaries, and the maintenance of an audit trail were used to strengthen credibility. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participant characteristics, school contexts and implementation conditions.

## **Results**

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative results of the study, followed by their analytical interpretation in relation to the research questions and the broader literature on inclusive education

### **Frequency and Perceived Usefulness of Inclusive Strategies**

Given that effectiveness was not directly measured, the analysis is based on the participating teachers' reported frequency and perceived usefulness of inclusive strategies.

**Table 1**  
*Urban-Rural Use of Inclusive Strategies (Teachers)*

Inclusive strategy	Urban M	Urban SD	Rural M	Rural SD
Differentiated instruction	4.4	0.55	4.0	0.70
Formative assessment	4.2	0.60	3.8	0.75
Peer support structures	4.0	0.80	3.6	0.95
Use of assistive technology	3.5	0.95	2.9	1.05
Family engagement activities	3.7	0.85	3.3	0.90

Note. All scores were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).  
N = 100 teachers (50 urban, 50 rural).

Table 1 shows clear differences between urban and rural schools in the use of evidence-based inclusive strategies. Across all five strategies, teachers in urban schools reported higher levels of implementation than their rural counterparts. The largest gap appears in the use of assistive technology (Urban  $M = 3.5$  vs. Rural  $M = 2.9$ ), reflecting unequal access to digital and support resources, a pattern that is consistent with earlier research on infrastructural disparities in Kosovo.

Differentiated instruction and formative assessment received the highest ratings in both contexts, although urban teachers still reported slightly higher use ( $M = 4.4$  vs.  $4.0$  and  $M = 4.2$  vs.  $3.8$ , respectively). These differences suggest that while both groups recognise the value of these strategies, rural teachers may face additional structural or workload-related barriers that limit their consistent application.

Peer support structures and family engagement activities also show moderate but meaningful gaps between the two settings. This aligns with qualitative reports indicating that rural teachers often work without specialist staff or community-based support networks. Overall, the results indicate that inclusive classroom practices are more consistently implemented in urban schools, whereas rural schools continue to operate under more constrained conditions.

Table 2 compares urban and rural schools on key inclusion indicators, showing significant disparities across contexts.

**Table 2***Urban-Rural Differences in Reported Inclusion Indicators*

Variable	Urban M	Rural M	F	p
Student inclusion score	4.3	3.6	5.67	.019
Institutional support	4.1	3.4	3.12	.002
Access to training	4.0	3.2	2.89	.005

Note. All measures were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

The results show clear urban-rural disparities across key inclusion-related indicators. The students from urban schools reported significantly higher levels of perceived inclusion ( $M = 4.3$ ) than those from rural schools ( $M = 3.6$ ). Among the teachers, those working in urban schools reported higher institutional support ( $M = 4.1$  vs.  $3.4$ ) and better access to professional development ( $M = 4.0$  vs.  $3.2$ ). All of the differences were statistically significant, indicating that rural schools operate with consistently lower structural and professional support.

Table 3 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis predicting students' perceived inclusion outcomes.

**Table 3***Multiple Regression Predicting Perceived Student Inclusion*

Predictor Variable	B	P
Professional development	.34	.001
Administrative support	.29	.003
Collaborative planning	.22	.014

Note. Dependent variable = perceived student inclusion.

The regression model indicates that perceived student inclusion is significantly shaped by teachers' professional development ( $\beta = .34$ ), administrative support ( $\beta = .29$ ) and collaborative planning ( $\beta = .22$ ). All of the predictors reached statistical significance, suggesting that inclusion perceptions are strongly influenced by the institutional and professional environment rather than by individual teacher practices alone. The model explained 41% of the variance in perceived inclusion, indicating a moderate explanatory power.

Table 4 summarises the main themes emerging from the qualitative analysis, with illustrative quotes from participants.

**Table 4**  
*Key Themes from Thematic Analysis with Illustrative Quotes*

Emergent Theme	Illustrative Quote
Contextual constraints in rural schools	"We do our best, but without training and materials, it feels like an uphill battle."
Teacher agency and innovation	"We created informal mentorship groups among students."
Professional development as a catalyst	"Most training programmes stop at the municipal centre – we are forgotten."
Family and community engagement	"NGOs help us, but in villages, the parents don't always understand inclusion."

*Note.* The themes reflect the participants' perceptions based on the interview data.

The thematic analysis identified four central themes shaping inclusive practice across the participating schools. First, rural teachers consistently reported structural constraints, such as limited training opportunities and shortages of instructional materials. Second, several participants described instances of teacher agency, including informal peer-mentorship initiatives created to support struggling students. Third, uneven access to professional development emerged as a recurring concern, particularly for rural educators, who felt marginalised from municipal training programmes. Finally, family and community engagement varied considerably across contexts, with rural schools reporting lower levels of parental understanding and involvement in inclusion-related activities.

## Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that inclusive practices in Kosovo are shaped by uneven structural, professional and contextual conditions. While teachers report frequent use of some evidence-based strategies, their implementation is strongly influenced by the level of institutional support available in the different school contexts. The clear disparities between urban and rural schools suggest that inclusion is not experienced uniformly and depends heavily on material resources, leadership capacity and access to professional learning opportunities. These patterns are consistent with previous studies showing that institutional limitations and inadequate support structures are persistent barriers to inclusion in Kosovo (Zabeli et al., 2021; Mazzuki, 2025; Uka et al., 2025).

### **Evidence-Based Strategies: Between Theory and Feasibility**

The findings of the present study show that teachers report using differentiated instruction and formative assessment more frequently than other approaches. This aligns with international research highlighting their relevance in diverse classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). However, lower reported use of assistive technology and family engagement suggests gaps between recommended best practices and what schools are realistically able to implement, particularly in resource-limited environments. These gaps reflect constraints such as limited digital infrastructure, insufficient training and socio-cultural barriers affecting school-family cooperation. Similar challenges have been reported in Kosovo, where teachers endorse inclusion conceptually but struggle to apply practices consistently due to systemic limitations (Zabeli, et al., 2021). These findings indicate that the successful use of inclusive strategies depends not only on teacher effort but also on supportive institutional structures, including leadership, family engagement and community partnerships.

### **Urban-Rural Disparities: Structural Barriers to Inclusion**

The study identified clear differences between urban and rural schools regarding perceived inclusion, institutional support and access to professional development. These disparities mirror international evidence showing that rural schools often operate under more constrained conditions (OECD, 2020; Ion & Brown, 2022).

In Kosovo, rural municipalities frequently lack access to specialised support services and professional learning opportunities, making it harder for teachers to apply inclusive strategies consistently. This trend reflects earlier findings showing that training opportunities are often centralised in urban areas, limiting participation for rural teachers (Uka et al., 2025). These results underscore the need for policies that address geographic and socio-economic variability instead of assuming uniform implementation conditions.

### **Leadership and Professional Development as Key Enablers**

Regression findings showed that professional development, administrative support and collaborative planning predict teachers' perceptions of inclusion, not actual student outcomes. This distinction is important and aligns with theories highlighting leadership and collaboration as core components of inclusive

school environments (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The qualitative insights of the present study highlight the fact that rural school leaders often feel professionally isolated, limiting their ability to sustain inclusive practices. This reinforces calls for strengthening leadership through training, mentoring and professional networks (Timperley et al., 2020). These findings also align with concerns that new teachers in Kosovo may enter the profession without adequate preparation for inclusive pedagogy (Mazzuki, 2025).

### **Inclusion as an Ongoing Process**

The results support viewing inclusion as a continuous and context-dependent process rather than a fixed achievement. Meaningful inclusion requires coordinated action across multiple levels: classrooms, leadership structures and community partnerships. Inclusive cultures develop gradually when systemic barriers are addressed and diversity is actively valued (Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

The variability observed between schools in this study highlights the importance of context-responsive policies that recognise geographical, socio-economic and institutional differences across Kosovo and the wider Western Balkan region.

### **Conclusions**

The present study examined teachers' and students' perceptions of evidence-based strategies aimed at promoting inclusion in urban and rural schools in Kosovo. The findings indicate that although teachers report frequent use of certain inclusive practices, their implementation is strongly influenced by contextual and institutional factors that vary across school environments.

The results suggest that differentiated instruction and formative assessment are among the most frequently applied strategies, while assistive technology and family engagement remain less consistently implemented, particularly in rural schools. In addition, professional development opportunities, administrative support and collaborative planning emerged as significant predictors of perceived inclusion. Participants from rural schools reported lower levels of institutional support, limited access to resources and fewer opportunities for targeted training.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings outlined above, inclusion initiatives should be designed in ways that reflect the differing conditions of urban and rural schools, rather than assuming uniform implementation contexts. Education policies would benefit from adopting context-sensitive approaches that account for variations in infrastructure, staffing and community resources.

Equitable access to professional development is essential for strengthening inclusive practice. Training opportunities should be decentralised and delivered through blended, digital and community-based formats to ensure participation of teachers working in geographically remote areas.

School leadership plays a critical role in fostering inclusive cultures. Targeted leadership preparation programmes are needed to support principals and school leaders in promoting equity-oriented values, facilitating collaboration and mobilising available resources effectively.

Strengthening collaboration within schools is equally important. The establishment of structured professional learning communities can support shared reflection, collective problem-solving and the exchange of inclusive teaching practices among educators.

Partnerships with families and local communities should be enhanced through culturally responsive engagement strategies, particularly in rural settings where awareness and understanding of inclusive education may be limited. Stronger school-family collaboration can contribute to improved student participation and belonging.

Finally, systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are necessary to support continuous improvement. The collection and analysis of disaggregated data can enable education authorities and schools to track progress, identify emerging gaps and make informed decisions to promote more equitable and inclusive education outcomes.

## Limitations of the Study

While the present study provides valuable insights into inclusive practices in Kosovo, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to four schools, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to the broader national context. Second, the data relied partly on self-reported perceptions from teachers, school leaders and students, which may be subject to social desirability and response bias. Third, the cross-sectional design captured practices and perceptions at a single point in time and did not allow for

the examination of changes or developments in inclusive practices over time.

In addition, the study focused primarily on socioeconomic and geographic disparities between urban and rural schools, while other important dimensions of inclusion – such as disability, ethnicity, language background and gender identity – were not examined in depth. Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal designs, include larger and more diverse samples, and explore intersectional aspects of inclusion in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education in Kosovo.

### **Ethical Statement**

Institutional approval for conducting the study was obtained from the Municipal Directorate of Education of the Republic of Kosovo and the administrations of the participating schools, in accordance with relevant procedures and regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all of the adult participants, while parental or legal guardian consent and child assent were secured for the student participants. Throughout the research process, anonymity, confidentiality and personal data protection were fully ensured.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

### **Disclosure Statement**

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

The manuscript was originally written in Albanian and subsequently translated into English with language-support tools. Generative artificial intelligence, ChatGPT (OpenAI), used on 7 June 2025, was used with the following prompt: “Translate the following academic text from Albanian into English, ensuring clarity, grammatical accuracy, and academic style; also, assist in improving wording and formatting references according to academic standards.” It was used exclusively for translation, grammatical editing, stylistic refinement of the text and assistance in identifying complete bibliographic information for references. AI tools were not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results or generation of research findings. All methodological decisions, analyses and conclusions remain entirely the author’s own responsibility.

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