

Critical Reflection and Inclusive Education: A Semester-Long Implementation of Brookfield's Four Lenses in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Inclusive education requires teachers who are able not only to apply inclusive pedagogical strategies but also to critically examine the beliefs and assumptions that shape their professional practice. However, teacher education has devoted considerably more attention to developing pedagogical knowledge than to systematically fostering critical reflection on the implicit assumptions underlying inclusive teaching. In response to this gap, the present pilot study reports the implementation of a semester-long reflective intervention based on Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection within an experiential, workshop-based undergraduate course for pre-service special education teachers. Forty undergraduate students from the Department of Special Education at the University of Thessaly participated in the intervention. Throughout the semester, students engaged in a sequence of individual and collaborative reflective activities organised around Brookfield's four complementary perspectives: autobiographical experience, learners' perspectives, colleagues' perspectives, and theoretical literature. Qualitative data derived from reflective writings, lesson plans, collaborative activities and group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that participants progressively questioned previously taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching and inclusion, developed broader understandings of inclusive pedagogy, and increasingly connected critical reflection with their future professional practice. Reflective activities appeared to support participants in recognising inconsistencies between declared beliefs and pedagogical thinking while encouraging more inclusive and critically informed interpretations of educational practice. Although exploratory in nature, this pilot implementation suggests that Brookfield's Four Lenses provide a promising pedagogical framework for embedding systematic critical reflection within initial teacher education. The study contributes practical insights into the design of reflective learning environments that may support the preparation of future teachers for inclusive educational practice.

Keywords: critical reflection, Brookfield's four lenses, inclusive education, teacher education, pre-service teachers, thematic analysis

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Introduction

Inclusive education has become one of the central priorities of contemporary educational policy and teacher education worldwide. International organisations, including UNESCO (2020) and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, consistently emphasise that developing inclusive schools requires not only structural reforms but also teachers who are able to respond critically, ethically, and flexibly to increasingly diverse classrooms. Consequently, teacher education is expected to prepare future educators who are capable of making pedagogical decisions that promote participation, equity, and meaningful learning for all students.

Although substantial progress has been made in identifying the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with inclusive teaching, research increasingly suggests that these competencies alone may not be sufficient. Numerous studies indicate that teachers' pedagogical decisions are strongly influenced by deeply held beliefs, implicit assumptions, and previous educational experiences, many of which remain unexamined during initial teacher education (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Walton & Rusznyak, 2020). As a result, future teachers may express positive attitudes towards inclusion while simultaneously reproducing instructional practices that unintentionally restrict participation or reinforce exclusion.

This challenge has directed increasing scholarly attention towards critical reflection as a central component of teacher education. Rather than being understood simply as a reflective skill or a professional competence, critical reflection enables teachers to identify, question, and reconstruct the assumptions that shape their pedagogical reasoning and professional judgement (Brookfield, 2017; Mezirow, 2000). From this perspective, reflective practice becomes not merely an individual cognitive activity but a transformative pedagogical process through which teachers critically reinterpret experience, integrate multiple perspectives, and develop more inclusive ways of understanding teaching and learning.

Among the various approaches to critical reflection, Stephen Brookfield's Four Lenses provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for examining teaching from multiple perspectives. By integrating autobiographical experience, learners' perspectives, colleagues' feedback, and theoretical knowledge, the model encourages educators to make implicit assumptions visible and open them to critical examination (Brookfield, 2017). Although Brookfield's framework has been widely recognised within adult and higher education, relatively limited empirical research has explored its systematic implementation as a semester-long pedagogical approach in pre-service teacher education, particularly within the context of inclusive education.

The present study is grounded in the assumption that critical reflection is not simply an educational competence but the pedagogical mechanism through which inclusive professional thinking develops. Rather than examining reflection as an isolated educational activity, the study investigates the implementation of Brookfield's Four Lenses as the organising principle of an experiential university course designed to support critically reflective learning. Through a qualitative analysis of students' reflective writings, lesson plans, collaborative activities, and group discussions, the study explores how systematic engagement with multiple reflective perspectives contributes to the reconstruction of pre-service teachers' pedagogical thinking about inclusive education.

More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How does systematic engagement with Brookfield's Four Lenses support pre-service teachers in recognising and questioning implicit assumptions about inclusive education?

RQ2. How do participants' understandings of inclusive education evolve throughout the semester-long reflective intervention?

RQ3. In what ways do participants connect critical reflection with their emerging professional practice?

Theoretical Framework

Inclusive Education and Teachers' Beliefs

Inclusive education is increasingly understood as a process of creating educational environments in which all learners can participate meaningfully, experience a sense of belonging, and develop according to their individual strengths and needs (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Contemporary perspectives move beyond the traditional emphasis on disability or placement and instead conceptualise inclusion as a continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow, 2020). Consequently, learner diversity is regarded not as an obstacle but as an educational resource that enriches teaching and learning (Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Within this perspective, inclusive pedagogy extends beyond the implementation of differentiated instructional techniques. It requires teachers to exercise informed professional judgement in designing learning environments that maximise participation for all learners while avoiding practices that unintentionally reinforce exclusion (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Messiou, 2017). As Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue, inclusive teaching is characterised by extending learning opportunities to everybody rather than creating separate opportunities for particular groups of students.

However, research consistently demonstrates that the successful implementation of inclusive pedagogy depends not only on teachers' professional knowledge but also on the beliefs through which they interpret learner diversity and make pedagogical decisions (Dignath et al., 2022; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Pajares, 1992). Teachers' beliefs influence how they understand students' abilities, evaluate classroom situations, and respond to diversity in everyday educational practice. Consequently, two teachers with similar professional preparation may enact substantially different forms of inclusive teaching because they interpret educational situations through different belief systems.

An important challenge, however, is that many of these beliefs operate implicitly. Teachers frequently remain unaware of the assumptions developed through their own educational experiences and professional socialisation, despite the considerable influence these assumptions exert on classroom practice (Brookfield, 2016, 2017). This observation is consistent with Argyris and Schön's (1974) distinction between *espoused theories* and *theories-in-use*, according to which educators' declared professional beliefs do not always correspond to the assumptions that actually guide their pedagogical decisions. Consequently, supporting inclusive education requires more than promoting positive attitudes or providing pedagogical knowledge; it also requires creating opportunities for future teachers to identify, question, and reconstruct the assumptions underlying their professional judgement.

Critical Reflection as the Pedagogical Mechanism of Inclusive Teacher Education

If teachers' beliefs frequently remain implicit, an important question emerges: how can future teachers become aware of the assumptions that shape their professional judgement? Contemporary research increasingly identifies critical reflection as one of the most powerful pedagogical processes for addressing this challenge. Rather than focusing solely on the acquisition of knowledge or technical teaching skills, critical reflection encourages educators to examine the beliefs, values, experiences, and social influences that underpin their pedagogical decisions (Brookfield, 2017; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Gioti, 2019).

Within teacher education, critical reflection extends beyond descriptive accounts of experience. It involves questioning what is often taken for granted, recognising the influence of personal biographies and institutional cultures, and examining how dominant assumptions shape understandings of learners, teaching, and participation (Brookfield, 2016, 2017; Gioti, 2019; Gioti & Toka, 2025). Such reflection enables future teachers to move from asking “What happened?” towards asking “*Why do I interpret educational situations in this particular way?*” and “*Which assumptions guide my pedagogical decisions?*”

This understanding aligns closely with transformative learning theory, according to which meaningful professional learning occurs when individuals critically reassess previously unquestioned frames of reference and reconstruct them through dialogue, experience, and critical examination (Mezirow, 2000). Transformation therefore represents neither the acquisition of new information nor the simple modification of attitudes. Rather, it involves a gradual reconstruction of the perspectives through which professional situations are interpreted. Previous research has similarly demonstrated that sustained opportunities for critical reflection support greater self-awareness, empathy, and professional growth in teacher education (Raikou, 2016, 2019; Ryan, 2015).

However, critical reflection rarely develops spontaneously. Deeply rooted assumptions are seldom challenged through isolated reflective assignments or occasional classroom discussions. Instead, reflective learning requires structured pedagogical environments that provide repeated opportunities for dialogue, feedback, perspective-taking, and the continuous revisiting of assumptions over time (Brookfield, 2017; Gioti, 2024; Ryan, 2015). Consequently, the quality of teacher education depends not only on what future teachers learn but also on how reflective learning is pedagogically organised.

Among the available approaches to critically reflective teaching, Stephen Brookfield's Four Lenses offers one of the most comprehensive frameworks for systematically examining professional assumptions. Brookfield proposes that educators critically analyse their practice through four complementary perspectives: their own autobiographical experiences, learners' perspectives, colleagues' feedback, and theoretical literature (Brookfield, 2017). Each lens contributes differently to the reflective process, while their combined use increases the likelihood of identifying assumptions that would otherwise remain invisible.

A central contribution of Brookfield's framework lies in the interaction among these four perspectives. Personal experience alone is inevitably subjective; learners provide valuable but partial perspectives; colleagues challenge professional routines through dialogue; and theory offers conceptual distance that enables educators to reinterpret experience within broader educational and social contexts. Reflection therefore becomes increasingly rigorous when these

perspectives are brought into dialogue rather than considered independently (Brookfield, 2017; Gioti, 2024).

This multi-perspective approach aligns closely with contemporary understandings of inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive education requires teachers to examine assumptions concerning ability, participation, difference, and educational success while remaining responsive to learners' diverse experiences and identities (Florian, 2014; Walton & Rusznyak, 2020). Brookfield's framework provides the pedagogical process through which such assumptions may become visible, questioned, and gradually reconstructed. In this sense, critical reflection functions not simply as a professional competence but as the pedagogical mechanism connecting inclusive educational values with professional judgement and classroom decision-making.

Accordingly, the present study examines the systematic implementation of Brookfield's Four Lenses throughout an entire academic semester, investigating how sustained engagement with multiple reflective perspectives contributes to the development of critically reflective and inclusive pedagogical thinking among pre-service teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive design to explore how systematic engagement with critical reflection contributes to the development of inclusive pedagogical thinking among pre-service teachers. Rather than measuring changes in predetermined variables, the study sought to understand how participants gradually reconstructed their assumptions, interpretations, and professional reasoning throughout a semester-long educational intervention. This interpretive orientation was considered particularly appropriate because the research focused on the developmental processes through which critically reflective learning unfolds in teacher education.

The intervention was designed as a semester-long reflective learning environment structured around Stephen Brookfield's Four Lenses. Instead of treating critical reflection as an isolated educational activity or a final reflective assignment, the Four Lenses constituted the organising pedagogical framework of the entire course. The intention was to provide participants with repeated opportunities to examine educational experiences through multiple perspectives, revisit previously held assumptions and progressively reconstruct their understanding of inclusive education.

Participants and Educational Context

The study was conducted during the winter semester of the academic year 2025–2026 at the Department of Special Education of the University of Thessaly. Forty undergraduate pre-service teachers voluntarily participated in the intervention as part of a compulsory laboratory-based course within their teacher education programme. The course combined theoretical input, experiential activities, collaborative learning, reflective writing, lesson planning, and structured dialogue, allowing students to engage continuously with Brookfield's autobiographical, learners', colleagues', and theoretical lenses throughout the semester.

Rather than following a linear sequence of independent teaching sessions, the intervention was intentionally organised as a recursive reflective process in which participants repeatedly

revisited previous experiences and interpretations from different perspectives. This iterative design aimed to support increasingly sophisticated forms of critical reflection and inclusive pedagogical reasoning.

Educational Intervention

The intervention was developed around four complementary reflective perspectives derived from Brookfield's Four Lenses. Initially, participants critically engaged with theoretical literature concerning inclusive education, transformative learning, and critical reflection, providing the conceptual foundations for subsequent reflective work. They were then invited to revisit significant autobiographical educational experiences, encouraging awareness of the influence of previous schooling on present pedagogical beliefs. Experiential learning activities and simulations subsequently enabled students to explore educational situations from learners' perspectives, while collaborative dialogue and peer feedback encouraged critical examination of alternative interpretations. Finally, participants designed inclusive lesson plans, implemented teaching activities, and reflected individually and collectively on their pedagogical decisions. Importantly, these learning experiences should not be understood as separate instructional stages. Throughout the semester students continuously revisited previous assumptions, integrating new perspectives into an ongoing process of reflective reconstruction.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative sources were collected in order to capture participants' reflective development from complementary perspectives. The dataset included:

- reflective journals,
- written reflective assignments,
- inclusive lesson plans,
- collaborative classroom activities,
- group discussions.

Collecting different forms of evidence enabled comparison between students' reflective narratives, pedagogical planning, collaborative interactions, and evolving interpretations throughout the intervention.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Rather than focusing on the frequency of particular responses, the analysis sought to identify recurring patterns that reflected changes in participants' ways of thinking about inclusive education.

Particular attention was paid to evidence indicating:

- increasing awareness of implicit assumptions;
- movement from descriptive towards critical reflection;
- reconstruction of pedagogical reasoning;
- development of empathy and perspective-taking;
- emerging understandings of inclusive pedagogy.

The iterative analysis involved repeated reading of the data, initial coding, development of candidate themes, refinement of thematic categories, and continuous comparison across

different qualitative sources. Because evidence was collected throughout the semester and across different learning activities, the analysis aimed not only to identify the content of students' reflections but also to trace patterns of reflective development across the semester.

The methodological contribution of the study lies not only in implementing Brookfield's Four Lenses but in embedding them within the pedagogical architecture of an entire university course. This design enabled the investigation of reflective development as an ongoing educational process rather than as the outcome of isolated reflective activities.

Findings

The thematic analysis identified three interrelated findings that describe participants' reflective development throughout the semester-long intervention. Rather than representing isolated outcomes, these findings suggest a gradual shift in how pre-service teachers understood inclusive education and their future professional role. Across the different stages of the intervention, participants moved beyond describing educational experiences towards questioning previously taken-for-granted assumptions, reconstructing their understanding of inclusion, and reflecting more critically on their own pedagogical responsibilities. The following sections present each finding together with representative excerpts from participants' reflective writings.

Questioning Previously Taken-for-Granted Assumptions

One of the clearest findings concerned participants' growing awareness of previously unexamined assumptions about teaching and inclusion. At the beginning of the intervention, many students described inclusive education primarily in normative terms, emphasising equality, acceptance and support for learners with disabilities. However, engagement with autobiographical reflection, critical incidents and theoretical perspectives encouraged them to reconsider how their own educational experiences had shaped their beliefs about learners, participation and classroom practice.

Rather than simply recalling past experiences, participants increasingly analysed them critically, recognising how seemingly ordinary classroom routines could unintentionally reinforce exclusion or limit participation. Reflection therefore became less descriptive and increasingly interpretive, enabling students to question assumptions they had previously considered self-evident.

As one participant explained: "I realised that many teaching practices I had always considered normal had actually made me feel anxious as a learner. This made me reflect on how easily I could reproduce similar practices without even realising it."¹

These reflections suggest that critical reflection functioned not simply as a process of recalling experience but as a means of making implicit assumptions visible and open to critical examination.

¹ All participant excerpts were translated from Greek into English by the authors.

Reconstructing Understandings of Inclusive Education

A second important finding concerned the gradual reconstruction of participants' understanding of inclusion. Initially, inclusion was often associated with adapting instruction for specific groups of learners or providing additional support to students with disabilities. Throughout the intervention, however, students increasingly described inclusion as a broader pedagogical orientation characterised by participation, belonging, learner voice and equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Experiential activities, perspective-taking tasks and the learners' lens appeared particularly influential in this process. Rather than focusing exclusively on instructional adaptations, participants increasingly emphasised the emotional, relational and social dimensions of inclusive teaching.

One participant reflected: "The activity helped me understand that learning difficulties are not only academic. They also affect students' emotions, confidence and participation in the classroom."

Similarly, another participant concluded: "Inclusion is not about making different activities for a few students. It is about creating a classroom where everyone feels respected, safe and able to participate."

These reflections indicate a gradual movement from technical interpretations of inclusion towards a more holistic understanding centred on participation, relationships and educational equity.

Reflection as a Foundation for Future Professional Practice

The third finding concerns the way participants increasingly connected reflection with their emerging professional identity. By the end of the intervention, reflective writing moved beyond evaluating individual activities and focused more explicitly on participants' future role as teachers. Students frequently described critical reflection as an essential component of professional learning, emphasising the importance of continuously questioning their own pedagogical decisions, listening to learners' perspectives and engaging in dialogue with colleagues.

Collaborative reflection was consistently described as particularly valuable because it exposed participants to alternative interpretations of educational situations and challenged the certainty of their own viewpoints.

As one participant noted: "Through discussions with my classmates I realised that some practices I considered supportive could actually exclude students from active participation."

Another participant concluded: "This course changed the way I think about my future role as a teacher. I now understand that being an inclusive teacher means constantly reflecting on my own practice and being willing to reconsider my assumptions."

Overall, these findings suggest that participants increasingly perceived critical reflection not as an isolated academic exercise but as an ongoing professional responsibility closely connected with participants' future professional practice.

Taken together, these preliminary findings suggest that sustained engagement with multiple reflective perspectives may support pre-service teachers in moving from descriptive accounts of teaching towards more critically informed understandings of inclusive pedagogy. While the present paper reports the principal findings of this pilot implementation, further analysis of the complete dataset is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental processes underlying participants' reflective learning.

Discussion

The present pilot study explored the implementation of a structured reflective intervention based on Brookfield's (2017) Four Lenses within an undergraduate teacher education course. Overall, the findings suggest that the intervention created meaningful opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage in progressively deeper forms of critical reflection while simultaneously broadening their understanding of inclusive education.

The first finding indicates that participants increasingly questioned assumptions that had previously remained implicit in their thinking about teaching and learning. Rather than merely describing educational experiences, students began to examine how their own beliefs, prior experiences and taken-for-granted understandings influenced their interpretations of classroom situations. This finding is consistent with Brookfield's (2017) argument that critical reflection begins with identifying assumptions that shape professional practice. It also resonates with Mezirow's (2000) view that examining previously unquestioned assumptions constitutes an essential condition for perspective transformation.

A second important outcome concerns participants' evolving understanding of inclusive education. Throughout the intervention, inclusion gradually shifted from being viewed primarily as instructional support for particular groups of learners towards a broader understanding centred on participation, belonging, learner voice and equitable learning opportunities. This development aligns with contemporary approaches to inclusive pedagogy, which emphasise creating learning environments that support the participation of all learners rather than focusing exclusively on individual differences (Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Mansouri et al., 2024). The findings therefore suggest that reflective pedagogies may help future teachers move beyond procedural interpretations of inclusion towards more relational and democratic understandings of classroom practice. This interpretation is also consistent with recent evidence showing that teachers' understandings of inclusion significantly influence the quality of inclusive classroom practice (Woodcock & Anderson, 2025).

The third finding highlights the educational value of engaging with multiple perspectives throughout the reflective process. Reflection was strengthened not only through individual self-examination but also through dialogue with peers, engagement with educational theory and consideration of learners' perspectives. These findings support Brookfield's (2017) proposition that critical reflection is enhanced when teachers deliberately examine practice through multiple lenses rather than relying solely on personal experience. Participants frequently described peer dialogue and learner feedback as opportunities to reconsider their own interpretations, suggesting that collaborative reflection may represent an important component of teacher education.

Although the present study was designed as a pilot implementation, the findings indicate that structured reflective interventions can contribute to the development of reflective dispositions

that are closely connected with inclusive teaching, complementing recent evidence highlighting the importance of socio-emotional competencies for inclusive professional learning (Stavropoulou et al., 2026). Rather than presenting reflection as an isolated academic exercise, the intervention encouraged participants to view reflective inquiry as an ongoing aspect of professional learning and future teaching practice. This observation is consistent with previous research emphasising the importance of systematic reflection for supporting professional judgement, continuous professional learning, and inclusive pedagogical decision-making (Brookfield, 2017; Raikou, 2019; Ryan, 2015).

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a single cohort of pre-service teachers within one university context, and the findings are based exclusively on qualitative reflective artefacts produced during the intervention. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalisable. Future research could examine similar interventions across different teacher education contexts and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to investigate changes in reflective competence and inclusive professional learning over time. In addition, further analysis of the complete corpus of reflective data is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different reflective perspectives interact throughout teacher education and how they contribute to the development of inclusive professional learning.

Conclusions and Implications

The present pilot study provides preliminary evidence that a structured reflective intervention based on Brookfield's Four Lenses can support critical reflection and promote more inclusive understandings of teaching among pre-service teachers. Across the intervention, participants demonstrated increasing willingness to question previously unexamined assumptions, consider multiple perspectives and reflect more critically on their future professional practice. These findings suggest that reflective activities grounded in authentic educational experiences can enrich teacher education by creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue, perspective-taking and professional self-examination.

The study also highlights the pedagogical value of combining autobiographical reflection, critical incidents, collaborative dialogue, learner feedback and theoretical perspectives within a coherent learning sequence. Rather than treating reflection as an isolated instructional technique, the intervention positioned reflective inquiry as a continuous process closely connected with inclusive pedagogy and professional learning. This finding supports current calls for teacher education programmes to embed structured opportunities for sustained reflection throughout both coursework and practicum experiences. More broadly, the findings underline the importance of designing teacher education not only as a process of acquiring pedagogical knowledge, but also as a process of critically examining assumptions, engaging with multiple perspectives and gradually developing reflective dispositions that support inclusive educational practice.

Given the exploratory nature of this pilot implementation, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, they indicate that Brookfield's Four Lenses constitute a promising framework for designing reflective learning environments that encourage pre-service teachers to critically examine educational practice from multiple perspectives. Future research should further investigate the long-term impact of such interventions across different teacher education contexts and examine more closely the developmental processes through which reflective practice contributes to inclusive professional learning.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The authors further declare that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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