

# The meaning of inclusive education and factors for effective implementation in the Estonian context: a view of specialists who train or advise teachers

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## Summary

### Introduction

Significant and effective implementation of inclusive education has been a major challenge both internationally and in Estonia in recent decades. The principle of inclusive education has been established at the legislative level in Estonia since 2010 (Põhikooli- ja ..., 2010). According to statistics, the number of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools has increased since the Act came into force, however, with that the number of students enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools has also increased (Räis, Kallaste, & Sandre, 2016). A study conducted in Estonia showed that the meaning of inclusive education is understood differently by teachers and leaders of educational institutions (Häidkind & Oras, 2016). Ainscow and Miles (2008) consider a common and clear understanding of what inclusive education really means as essential for the development of inclusive education systems. However, its development has proved to be difficult. On the one hand, the development of education systems is a very complex process that depends on the geographical, political and cultural contexts of countries, which in turn leads to different values and beliefs (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). On the other hand, successful inclusion is a very complex process where one of the most important key components is identified by teachers who are trained to apply different methods to include all children (Schuelka, 2018). While the positive effects of inclusion are well known and proven (Symeondou, 2018)), there are problems in providing quality teaching that in practice could result in these positive outcomes (Bešić, Balczec, Krammer & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2016). It is therefore particularly important to pay attention to developing quality teacher training that is based on the real needs of teachers (Donnelly &

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Watkins, 2011). This requires a common understanding of inclusive education and the implementation of effective strategies by both teacher educators and other professionals who advise teachers or practice inclusive education (Allan, 2011; European Agency ..., 2015). As the aforementioned aspects have not been studied in the Estonian context and the development of pre-service and in-service teacher education in inclusive education is a relatively new challenge, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do specialists who train or advise teachers understand inclusive education in the Estonian context?
2. Which factors are identified by specialists who train or advise teachers as important in order to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education in the classroom?

## **Methods**

The qualitative study sample consisted of 15 SEN professionals who had to meet at least two of the following criteria in the field of inclusive education:

- 1) Experience in training teachers (e.g. professional development courses);
- 2) external advising experience (e.g. counsellor at state or municipality level);
- 3) internal advising experience at school level.

Data were collected with semi-structured interviews, which were fully transcribed. The data were analysed with qualitative inductive content analysis method based on the research questions.

## **Major results and discussion**

### **Interpreting the meaning of inclusive education**

The results of the survey showed that similarly to the study conducted by Häidkind and Oras (2016) among Estonian teachers and leaders of educational institutions, the meaning of inclusive education was interpreted differently by the professionals participating in this study. The possibility of a pupil with special educational needs to study in an ordinary school of residence was generally understood as inclusive education, but different ways of organising the learning was seen. For example, teaching both in a special class and in a regular class was brought up. However, some interviewees understood the meaning of inclusive education as simply access to education, including studying in special schools. There is a widespread 'multi-track' approach to inclusive education in the Estonian context, which implements inclusive education

and accepts special provision in special schools. The results of the interview point out the need to harmonise the meaning of inclusive education among the specialists who train or advise teachers.

### **Factors of effective implementation of inclusive education**

The effective implementation of inclusive education in the classroom in Estonian context was seen as similar to Schuelka's (2018) approach: a complex issue that depends on the interaction of many different factors, such as school management, available resources and allocation, and trained teachers. Based on the results of the interview, one of the crucial components was the need for more training for teachers and other specialists who support teachers. Although teachers' knowledge about inclusive education and its contemporary trends was highlighted, special pedagogical competences of teachers is still a priority. Even though several studies emphasise the need for teachers to be able to apply a variety of proven strategies in inclusive classrooms, such as peer-assisted learning (Saloviita, 2018; European Agency, 2003), the interviewees in this study referred less to inclusive classroom strategies. In addition to the training needs, similarly to the study by Engelbrecht et al. (2017), the importance of the necessary resources was emphasised, including the availability of human resources. Concerning the resources for the learning environment, the availability of necessary facilities, smaller number of students in the classroom and the availability of teaching and learning materials were highlighted. Reference was also made to the teachers' time resources and the need to reduce the workload on teachers who teach in inclusive classrooms. Other prerequisites for effective implementation of inclusive education were the need for supporting and motivating teachers which is also mentioned in Kaur et al. (2015), and the importance of cooperation between different stakeholders which has been highlighted by Engelbrecht et al. (2017).

In conclusion, in order to improve inclusive teacher education in the Estonian context, first and foremost it is necessary to focus on a common understanding of the meaning of inclusive education and effective practices among teacher educators and other professionals who advise teachers, which in turn requires greater research-based collaboration between educators and universities. Another major challenge is the development of pre-service and in-service teacher training courses based on the needs of teachers and science-based research.

*Keywords:* inclusive education, meaning, factors for implementation, effective teaching methods