

Supporting positive attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education in initial teacher education

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Summary

It is the aim of inclusive education that equal opportunities of learning and development should be provided for all learners, not just those with special educational needs (UNESCO, 2009). In Estonia, inclusive education has been considered a part of local policies for a few decades, but for many learners it has yet to become an everyday practice (HTM, 2015, p. 50).

Research has shown the teachers' role to be critical in influencing efficient learning (e.g. Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005) especially for students who need additional support (Forlin, Cedillo, Romera-Contreras, Fletcher & Hernandez, 2010; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). Quality teaching is directly related to the quality of teacher training. As in implementing any educational change, teachers, their attitudes and competences play a key role. The student body is becoming more heterogenous and multicultural throughout the world. Overall solutions must be sought to develop quality teacher training to provide academic and practical relevance, as well as support the implementation of inclusive education at different educational levels.

In 2016, initial teacher training in Tallinn University was reformed, uniting three previously separate courses into a single 6 ECTS "Differentiation of learning" course, with the aim of forming supportive attitudes towards working with children with special educational needs, fostering knowledge of inclusive practices, as well as a willingness to modify the learning environment according to diverse learners' needs. The course was designed to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as to offer pre-service teachers an opportunity to put their knowledge into practice through action research, carried out in conjunction with teaching practice module II and in cooperation with the supervising teacher. The practical task entailed differentiating between learning for a single student, a group or the whole class. At the end of the course students

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would submit a graded exam paper, an evidence-based case study about their experience.

As the course was designed to support the development of readiness and positive attitudes towards inclusion, the aim of the current paper was firstly to map the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards inclusive education before and after the course. The relevant aspects of the course that helped shape those attitudes were also studied.

The online survey was carried out during the 2018/2019 school year among the first year Master's level subject teachers participating in the course "Differentiation of learning". Participants filled out the *Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusion Scale* (Cullen, Gregory & Noto, 2010), described their feelings about including SEN-students in lessons and their previous experience with people with special needs; offered their case by case opinion about including specific SEN-students in the general classroom; as well as pointed out aspects from the course (topics, texts, tasks) that helped them gain understanding and improve their skills, and what effect it had on their attitudes towards inclusive education.

Pre-service teachers' self-reported confidence in including SEN-students in lessons was statistically significantly higher at the end of the course. Students with previous contacts with special educational needs reported a significantly higher confidence towards inclusive practices at the end of the course, as compared to the beginning. At the end of the course, pre-service teachers expressed a significantly higher willingness to include special needs students with learning, behavioural, hearing, seeing and speech difficulties in the ordinary classroom. Also, teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were reported to be more positive towards inclusion and inclusion efficacy beliefs subscales, all in all reporting a clear trend of more positive attitudes towards inclusive education and its effectiveness.

Students' open-ended evaluations of the course aspects (topics, texts, tasks) that improved their knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding inclusive education were handled qualitatively, using thematic coding, and divided into descriptive categories based on their similarity, which were later combined into four main meta-categories using pattern coding (Saldana, 2009): 1) aspects of the course design; 2) knowledge and tools gained from the course; 3) general supportive ways of thinking about inclusive education and its practice; and 4) any other statements. Although students were asked to point out concrete aspects of the course, the category that mostly appeared among students' answers was the third: making supportive statements about the possibilities and benefits of inclusion. This helps to shed light on the motives behind the trend towards positive attitudes observed in quantitative data. The students

were very vocal in their opinions on different means of support, potential and the possibilities provided by inclusive education and the role of teacher pedagogic qualities. One third of all students questioned mentioned that a learning design with the possibility to support students through action research and analyse its impact, helped them improve their skills of noticing, supporting, self-reflection, as well as influenced their attitudes about the effectiveness of inclusive education.

Our studies show that pre-service teachers' attitudes, knowledge and skills in implementing inclusive education are subject to positive change through teacher training. However, more emphasis should be directed to the conditions of inclusion at the systemic level of education, for as teacher qualities significantly impact, these alone will not suffice for successful inclusive education policies.

Keywords: inclusive education, initial teacher education, teacher attitudes