PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING PRACTICE IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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Abstract. *Today's teachers must be ready to address all students, whatever their abilities, needs, and knowledge. Prospective teachers must develop the necessary competencies during their studies to ensure inclusive education for all pupils. Teaching practice remains one critical means of exposing future teachers to actual classroom experiences to equip them with pedagogical skills. The course followed in this study included teaching practice to allow future teachers to put their theoretical knowledge into practice. The research aimed to analyse future teachers' feedback after teaching practice in an inclusive classroom. These data – the prospective teachers' findings after the teaching practice – were analysed using content analysis. The sample of the study consisted of 97 future teachers.*

The results showed that the student teachers faced various challenges, e.g. needing more experience in an inclusive setting, creating activities that included all students, and needing more teaching resources. However, most were optimistic about the opportunity to put the knowledge they gained during the course into practice. Therefore, teacher educators should ensure that students are prepared for entry into the teaching profession and have a positive pedagogical experience in an inclusive classroom. The teacher educators should also have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with all pupils.

Keywords: *inclusive classroom, inclusive education, teacher education, teaching practice.*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been concerns about the gap between practice and theory in teacher education (Dewey, 1904). More and more university courses are introducing teaching practice and school visits. Many teacher education programmes have increased the course credits required to ensure that future teachers receive a comprehensive and well-rounded education. There has been growing recognition that teacher education programmes should prepare teachers with theoretical knowledge and practical, hands-on experience in real-world classroom

settings (Margevica-Grinberga & Odiņa, 2021). This helps them develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Teaching practice is a vital means of creating exposure for prospective teachers to actual classroom experiences to provide them with the necessary pedagogical skills.

By allowing future teachers to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world educational settings, work-based learning helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice and provides opportunities for prospective teachers to develop the competencies they need to be effective educators. Furthermore, work-based learning is viewed as a more holistic approach to teacher education, as it takes into account the multiple factors that influence teacher practice, including the context in which teaching takes place, the needs of students, and the teacher's personal and professional development. As a result, many teacher education programmes worldwide are now incorporating work-based learning into their curricula to provide future teachers with a well-rounded education that prepares them for the profession's challenges (Margevica-Grinberga & Odiņa, 2021). Additionally, work-based learning offers opportunities for prospective teachers to establish professional networks and gain insight into the educational challenges and opportunities that can inform their ongoing professional development.

Literature review

Teaching practice is an essential aspect of teacher preparation programmes. It provides student teachers with hands-on experience in a natural classroom setting, allowing them to apply the theories and concepts they have learned during their education (Mangope et al., 2018). Additionally, as a result of policy and legislative reforms, internationally, regular classroom teachers are increasingly being asked to include students with a range of diversities in their classrooms (UNESCO, 2013). Moriña (2017, p. 9) defines an inclusive classroom as "one designed to effectively accommodate students with special needs, disabilities, or impairments in a general learning environment suitable for their age so that they can learn among peers who may or may not have those needs". Thus, inclusive education aims to create a conducive environment for all kinds of students to ensure they are encouraged by teachers to actively contribute to and participate in the school's activities, including learning/curricula and extra-curricular activities (Alnahdi et al., 2022, p. 3). Since inclusive education must accommodate children from various backgrounds, it requires a well-adapted teaching force to cater efficiently and effectively to the varying needs of different students. Recent research (e.g. Margevica-Grinberga & Sumane, 2021; Margevica-Grinberga & Rektina, 2022) in Latvia revealed that future

teachers do not sufficiently develop their professional competence in working with diverse students.

Student teachers may learn about various theories and approaches to teaching during their education. However, when they start teaching, they may encounter situations and challenges that require them to adapt or modify what they have learned. Bridging this gap between theory and practice is essential to ensure that teachers are equipped to effectively address the needs of all students and create inclusive learning environments. Unfortunately, the gap between theory and practice is a common challenge in teacher education (Sharma, 2018).

It is also vital to equip teachers-in-training with a deep understanding of the subject matter they will be teaching and the pedagogical approaches and methodologies that will most effectively engage and support their students. This will enable them to be confident and effective in the classroom and respond effectively to challenges and opportunities during their teaching practice (Otukile-Mongwaketse & Mukhopadhyay, 2013).

In the Faculty of Education, Psychology, and Art at the University of Latvia, since 2018, many teacher education courses have included teaching practice. In addition, many teacher education study courses now include a component of teaching practice or student teaching, where future teachers can practice what they have learned in their coursework and gain practical experience in an actual classroom setting under the supervision of experienced teachers.

Prospective teachers must develop the necessary competencies during their studies to ensure inclusive education for all pupils. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate how future teachers evaluate their teaching assistants' practice in relation to work with different students in inclusive classrooms. The research objectives were to identify the challenges prospective teachers face while teaching students with diverse needs in an inclusive classroom and to evaluate the significance and shortcomings of current teaching practice for prospective teachers.

The research questions were as follows: How do future teachers evaluate their teaching assistants' practice? What are the challenges prospective teachers face while teaching students with diverse needs? How should teaching practice evolve to facilitate prospective teachers developing the necessary competencies to ensure inclusive education for all pupils?

By examining the responses of future teachers, this research can provide valuable information on how to improve teacher education programmes and support the development of effective, inclusive teachers.

With ever-changing classroom requirements, such as inclusive education, requiring the ingraining of the needed skills, conduct, and professionalism into student teachers, teaching practice needs to be effectively optimised to deliver

according to the novel classroom demands (Moriña, 2017, p. 9). As teaching practice helps identify areas of development depending on the ability of the training programmes to adequately deliver according to the set expectations, the delivery of inclusive education requires a proper analysis of student-teacher teaching experiences (Okongo et al., 2015, p. 133). Thus, the vast diversity of students entering current classrooms demands an effective adaptation of current teaching practices beyond traditionally established limits to expand the understanding and implementation of the curriculum and pedagogy.

Research by Mangope et al. (2018, p. 62) postulates that the lack of teacher training and preparedness concerning inclusive education results in the majority of teachers being frustrated, angry, and pessimistic about inclusive education. Therefore, a key element highlighted to impact the success of inclusive education is the establishment of effective theoretical training to adequately equip prospective teachers coupled with efficient teaching practice to allow future teachers to put their theoretical knowledge into practice during the study course. Consequently, Mugambi (2017, p. 95) outlines several approaches to inclusive education, including human rights-based and multicultural policies. The human rights-based approach stipulates children's right to education based on equality of opportunity for every child and education that cultivates the full development of a child (Mugambi, 2017, p. 94). Furthermore, Mugambi (2017, p. 95) outlines the seven principles supporting the human rights-based approach, including equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and empowerment. Therefore, the government is mandated to protect all children's rights, including the rights of those suffering from disabilities, and children have the rights to support and educational accessibility to ensure their social inclusion.

Concerning the multicultural approach, Mugambi (2017, p. 101) posits that it cultivates the establishment of cultural pluralism and acknowledgment of the variation in cultures, races, and abilities. Thus, it aims to inculcate the understanding and appreciation of existing cultural differences and similarities and the contributions of the various social groups in society. Consequently, multicultural education aims to eliminate prejudices against different social groups and establish better integration (Mugambi, 2017, p. 101). Additionally, Mugambi (2017, p. 103) outlines the several dimensions of multicultural education, including content integration of different cultures and groups and the knowledge construction process, which cultivates the understanding and determination of biases and perspectives within a discipline and their influence on knowledge. It also includes the reduction of prejudice through the cultivation of positive attitudes towards different cultural or social groups, the purveyance of equitable pedagogy, and an empowering school and social structure (Mangope et al., 2018, p. 71). Therefore, it is essential to incorporate

the various inclusive education approaches into teachers' training and its evaluation during teaching practice to ensure the success of inclusive education. Furthermore, teaching practice must encapsulate the numerous elements comprising the two approaches to inclusive education.

Methodology

This research used a social constructivist approach since learning is an active and social process and knowledge is socially constructed from life experiences, as Mcleod (2019) observes. Thus, it helps perfect the teaching practice to adequately address all the elements of inclusive education. The study utilised a sample of 97 prospective primary school and secondary school teachers studying within the framework of the course 'Special and Inclusive Education' to collect qualitative data, using the students' narratives as the data collection method and content analysis as the data analysis technique. The course included practice sessions for teachers' assistants. The students' narratives regarding their perspective on teaching practice in the inclusive classroom were used as the data collection method, as they facilitated the gathering of high-quality data. Using narratives as a tool can contribute to the knowledge of people's experiences and the culture and society in which the narrator lives. The individual story can, when it is contextualised, provide knowledge about the social and cultural environment (Svensson, 2018). The data collection targeted gathering responses regarding the challenges prospective student teachers face in their teaching practice experience in an inclusive education setting. The trainees were informed that the study would be used only for research purposes, that they could terminate their participation whenever they wanted, and that their narratives were anonymised with code names.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used as the primary data analysis method, as it helped identify patterns in the qualitative data in terms of keywords, themes, and concepts (Luo, 2022). Consequently, the data were analysed using qualitative analysis software NVivo12 to develop codes. To ensure the validity of the content analysis, a coding system was developed to guide the process. A coefficient of agreement was used to ensure the reliability of the content analysis. First, the coding process was conducted by two different coders (Author 1 and Author 2), who worked independently according to agreed-upon standards. Second, the Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated and yielded a value of 0.83, demonstrating good agreement between themes and critical factors. Third, both coders reached a final

agreement by discussing and reaching consensus on details such as categorising the content in the comments. The 25 codes (as shown in Table 1) were classified into three themes: limited pedagogical skills and knowledge in inclusive classroom settings, limited teaching resources, and the positive impact of teaching practice in cementing exposure to real-life scenarios. The codes served as an analytical framework for exploring the future teachers' evaluation of their teaching practices.

*Table 1 **Thematic categories and codes** (created by authors)*

Thematic category	Code	Code frequency
Limited pedagogical skills and knowledge in the inclusive classroom setting	*understanding*	81
	prepared	54
	skills	73
	willingness	45
	applying	61
	stereotypes	25
	assessment	58
	ability	48
	include	66
Limitation of teaching resources	*support*	95
	personalisation	68
	staff	38
	assistant	46
	materials	27
	tools	32
Positive impact of teaching practice on cementing exposure to real-life scenarios	*theory*	53
	collaboration (families)	41
	collaboration (staff)	57
	practice	86
	adjustment	19
	flexibility	21
	experience	37
	courage	12
	diversity	22
	activity	23

N = 97

Results

Limited pedagogical skills and knowledge in the inclusive classroom setting
Some of the limiting factors highlighted concerning the management of an inclusive classroom were a lack of training regarding the various ways to handle students with disabilities and the degree of variation of needs of students in an

inclusive classroom. Alnahdi et al. (2022, p. 5) articulate that teaching practices such as differentiation and personalisation are vital when teaching a diverse classroom. Differentiation implies categorising pupils into groups of similar attributes, while personalisation handles each student differently. Consequently, a differentiated or personalised teaching method is suitable for working with a diverse classroom setting, such as that of inclusive education, as it creates a productive learning environment for different pupils. Moreover, it is based on the human rights-based teaching approach, which cultivates inclusive education. Since, as Alnahdi et al. (2022, p. 4) argue, the design of pedagogical training and teaching approaches determines the participation of a diverse classroom, current teaching practice methods need to be adapted effectively in terms of pedagogical training and teaching approaches to deliver inclusive education effectively.

The trainees' conclusions about the teaching practice revealed that this practical experience helped them feel more prepared for their future careers (54%) and more confident in their abilities (48%):

"I believe I have a much better understanding of inclusive learning and will be able to differentiate my lessons when I start working at an educational institution".

"In the future, I hope to recognise problems sooner and react faster because a problem spotted early can be solved more easily than when a student is confused and does not know how to cope".

"I want to develop myself not only professionally but also as a person because, to be honest with myself, I currently feel insecure and unconfident about inclusive education".

"In summary, I feel more knowledgeable about inclusive lessons and competent, not afraid of challenges. I am grateful for this teaching practice and that I had a great collaboration with the teacher. I will benefit from this experience."

"I concluded that to include a successful child, you have to educate continuously because children are different, and their problems are different and manifest themselves in different ways, taking into account all the possible side factors that affect them".

"This internship was just a glimpse; I would like to increase my knowledge in inclusive education".

Limitation of teaching resources

A limitation of resources to help address the various educational needs of different students was implicated in the trainees being overwhelmed in teaching practice. The human rights-based approach stipulates that teaching practice should maintain the child's best interest (Mugambi, 2017, p. 103). For instance, commonly used furniture in schools is unsuitable for students with physical disabilities. At the same time, most teaching materials, such as classroom diagrams, need to be more

suitable for students with visual impairments. Consequently, Alnahdi et al. (2022, p. 4) posits that the success of inclusive education depends on the teacher's understanding of and response to classroom diversity.

Most respondents (68%) found it difficult to effectively implement a personalised approach in the classroom due to the lack of student support materials (which they had to create themselves), large class sizes, and need for classroom assistants (both for the whole class and pupils with learning disabilities).

"I have gained more experience, understanding that all children are not the same; each pupil needs an individual approach. Teachers try to differentiate the work in this class to give students a choice. Nevertheless, one teacher cannot provide enough support for everyone in the classroom. There is often a lack of learning materials and tools that meet the special needs of students".

"This practice made me realise how many children there are who need different approaches and teaching methods".

"After the practice, talking to the teacher, we concluded that a teacher, whether the child has a disability or not, needs a teaching assistant".

"Although schools have support staff who do their job, time is limited".

"A teaching assistant is very much needed in this class, as the pupils' work is prolonged, and their attention span is low".

Furthermore, a teacher's attitude is understood to contribute to establishing the adaptability of the teaching practice and overcoming certain classroom limitations, as the adaptation of their teaching method and practice can help benefit pupils with a range of learning needs (Moriña, 2017, p. 11). Therefore, besides the appropriate skills and attitude being essential to ensure the adaptability of teaching practices, the availability of necessary resources is critical to maximising the learning environment of the classroom with diverse needs.

Positive impact of teaching practice on cementing exposure to real-life scenarios

The exposure to real-life conditions while teaching was another theme determined to positively impact the prospective teachers, as it helped them adapt their knowledge effectively to maximise the output, which was the students' learning results. Overall, the combination of theoretical and practical components in teacher education prepares prospective teachers for the demands of the profession and helps them to be effective and thrive in the classroom (Kaldi & Xafakos, 2017). In addition, the respondents indicated that the teaching practice component is an essential aspect of teacher education programme courses (86%). It provides hands-on experience in a real-world setting, which is crucial to developing their teaching skills and abilities.

"During my teaching practice, I have developed both theoretical knowledge and practical skills".

"Overall, I can say that the teaching practice allowed me to put theory into practice, and the knowledge I gained allowed me to work with a variety of students in the classroom, both with behavioural and learning disabilities. However, after this placement, it became clear that there was a need to study more the information available on different pupils' needs".

"During my teaching practice, I strengthened my existing knowledge on providing more support to a child with mixed disabilities".

"I think the teaching practice was a valuable experience, where I understood first-hand what it means to include and what individual methods and individual work with an inclusive child".

"I appreciate the experience of seeing how a student with learning difficulties and language disabilities learns and is taught daily".

"The teaching practice was an opportunity to put into practice the knowledge acquired during the course. Not only theoretically, but also practically".

"To sum up, this practice 'opened my eyes' to how much an educator can achieve by switching on their creative thinking and giving pupils a choice, and I had not thought before that a pupil can demonstrate their knowledge in so many different ways; reading and writing should not be the only way a pupil is allowed to demonstrate it because there are and will be pupils who simply will not be able to do that".

"I was very excited to go to the school and have a new experience, and during this traineeship, I was convinced that I could belong here because I felt so excited every time I was in this classroom and this school".

Okongo et al. (2015, p. 135) note that teachers have a vital role in establishing an inclusive learning environment. The participants indicated that the exposure to an inclusive classroom accorded in the teaching practice helped establish what Okongo et al. (2015, p. 135) define as the teacher attributes that facilitate successful inclusive education, including "open-mindedness, self-awareness, and commitment to social justice" (Garmon, 2005, p. 277). Collaboration is critical to creating an inclusive classroom environment (Clarke et al., 2012; Paju et al., 2022). By working together, teachers, support staff, families, and other colleagues can ensure that every student can reach their full potential and feel valued and supported in the learning process. The trainees (41%) emphasised that collaboration with families helps to gain a deeper understanding of each student's unique strengths, needs, and background, which can inform the teaching approach and support for that student. Collaboration with support staff, such as special education teachers and related service providers, can also be valuable in ensuring that students with diverse needs receive the appropriate interventions and accommodations to be successful in the classroom (57%).

"A teacher's work would be better if she had an assistant. I concluded that parents should also be more involved".

"Teamwork is essential, including school management, teachers, support staff, and parents. Everyone must have a specific goal to work towards".

"Communication between the support team (teacher, parents, support staff – speech therapist and teaching assistant)".

"Inclusive education can be successful if teachers have all the support they need – from parents, management, and government resources".

"Communication and cooperation between school management, support staff, teachers, pupils, and parents are essential".

"It is important for the teacher to work with the school support staff".

This experience showed that cooperation between teachers and the support team is crucial to successful inclusion in mainstream schools, enabling pupils to be integrated into the classroom and school environment.

During teaching practice, prospective teachers can observe experienced teachers, work with students, and implement lessons under the supervision of a mentor teacher. The students (37%) indicated that practical experience provided them with a deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching and helped them develop their teaching style and approach.

"Working as a teaching assistant has benefited me because I have been able to see how my colleague works, how she formulates the outcomes, what visual and support materials she uses, how she talks to the children, what information materials she uses, how she presents the material".

"I like this school; the teachers are very supportive; they offered help, explained, and told me everything I did not understand, which helped me to fit into the school environment".

"During my traineeship, I received a lot of help and support from the school staff. However, the most important and valuable thing for a new teacher is the support of his 'senior' team members".

"In terms of my practice, I was fortunate to meet a teacher with much experience, who manages to approach every child in her class, who is aware of all the needs of each student, and who contributes to improving the positive qualities of each one individually".

"In my conversations with the teacher, I realised that inclusive education is a great way to ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to learn and achieve, but it takes a lot of work and effort on the part of the teacher to make it happen".

"Thanks to my teaching practice supervisor, I also had the opportunity to participate in a support program and to work and study in depth with a student needing learning support".

Thus, inclusive classroom exposure is crucial for developing teaching personnel, as it promotes personal and professional development. Teaching practice is vital to ensuring successful inclusive education. Therefore, teacher educators must ensure that students are prepared for entry into the teaching profession, have a positive pedagogical experience in an inclusive classroom, and have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with all pupils.

Conclusion

Student teaching practice provides a valuable opportunity for future teachers to gain hands-on experience in the classroom and develop their teaching skills under the guidance of experienced educators. Student teachers can observe and participate in various teaching techniques and strategies during the teaching practice. They also have the opportunity to reflect on their teaching and learn from their experiences. This exposure to real-world teaching can help build their confidence and enthusiasm for the profession and foster a desire to continue learning and growing as teachers. Additionally, student teaching practice can help to establish connections with other teachers and schools, which can be valuable resources as they embark on their careers. Finally, through these experiences, prospective teachers can observe and apply effective teaching practices and receive feedback and support from experienced teachers and university supervisors. This support helps them refine their skills and build confidence in their abilities to lead a classroom.

Teaching practice is vital to ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive education. A novel set of skills and knowledge is also necessary to ensure that prospective student teachers are adequately prepared with the pedagogical skills to cultivate an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, teachers need to develop additional skills to ensure that pupils with diverse education needs are met through training and teaching practice. Consequently, it is essential to address the concerns raised in this study, such as the need for more experience in an inclusive classroom and the availability of adequate resources, knowledge, and skills. The evaluation of teaching practice in inclusive classrooms by future teachers can be essential for improving teaching methods and ensuring that all students, including those with special needs, receive a high-quality education. By regularly evaluating their teaching practices in inclusive classrooms, future teachers can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the diverse needs of all students and create inclusive and equitable learning environments. In addition, this evaluation can help future teachers reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement in developing and delivering inclusive and practical lessons that engage all students.

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