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ENHANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF TRAINING PROGRAMS ON TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND SCHOOL VALUES

Îmbunătăţirea educaţiei incluzive: analiza impactului programelor de formare asupra percepţiilor cadrelor didactice şi valorilor şcolare

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ENHANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF TRAINING PROGRAMS ON TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND SCHOOL VALUES

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Abstract

Inclusive education promotes equitable learning for all students (Ainscow et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2009), transitioning from segregated to integrated systems guided by international policies. Effective teacher training is crucial, and training programs enhance educators' skills and attitudes toward inclusion, though ongoing support is needed for sustained impact (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). This shift reflects a broader change in school values, prioritizing diversity, equity, and social justice.

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Schools with inclusive cultures emphasize respect and collaboration, vital for successful implementation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin et al., 2008). Training programs help embed these values into school practices, fostering a collective commitment to inclusion. Sustainable positive outcomes depend on continuous professional development and the integration of inclusive principles into everyday practices (Sharma, 2018). This study explores the impact of a training program focused on promoting inclusive education values among educators. The training was provided within the Erasmus project "Co-Creating inclusive school communities" (Project no. 2021-1-LI01-KA220-SCH-000027667). The primary objective was to assess the effectiveness of this initiative in enhancing teachers' understanding and commitment to inclusion. To achieve this, interviews were conducted with participating educators to gather insights into their experiences and learning outcomes following the training. The interviews aimed to identify key takeaways, including new knowledge and perspectives gained, particularly concerning the integration of children from diverse backgrounds within the school environment. Our findings indicate that participants not only acquired new insights into inclusive practices but also developed a deeper appreciation for the intrinsic value of integrating all students into the school community. This study underscores the importance of continuous professional development in fostering inclusive educational environments and reflects on the changing values within schools that support this ideal.

Keywords: educational values, inclusive education, professional development, school integration, teacher training.

Rezumat

Educaţia incluzivă promovează învăţarea echitabilă pentru toţi elevii (Ainscow et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2009), făcând tranziţia de la sisteme segregate la sisteme integrate ghidate de politicile internaţionale. Formarea eficientă a cadrelor didactice este esenţială, iar programele de formare îmbunătăţesc competenţele şi atitudinile educatorilor faţă de incluziune, deşi este nevoie de sprijin continuu pentru un impact susţinut (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Această schimbare reflectă o schimbare mai amplă a valorilor şcolare, acordând prioritate diversităţii, echităţii şi justiţiei sociale. Şcolile cu culturi incluzive pun accentul pe respect şi colaborare, vitale pentru o implementare cu succes (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin et al., 2008). Programele de formare ajută la încorporarea acestor valori în practicile şcolare, promovând un angajament colectiv faţă de incluziune. Rezultatele pozitive durabile depind de dezvoltarea profesională continuă şi de integrarea principiilor incluzive în practicile zilnice (Sharma, 2018). Acest studiu explorează impactul unui program de formare axat pe promovarea valorilor educaţiei incluzive în rândul educatorilor. Formarea a fost oferită în cadrul

proiectului Erasmus „Co-Creating inclusive school communities" (Proiect nr. 2021-1-LI01-KA220-SCH-000027667). Obiectivul principal este de a evalua eficacitatea acestei inițiative în ceea ce privește îmbunătățirea înțelegerii și angajamentului profesorilor față de incluziune. Pentru a realiza acest lucru, au fost realizate interviuri cu educatorii participanți pentru a colecta informații despre experiențele lor și rezultatele învățării în urma formării. Interviurile au urmărit să identifice principalele concluzii, inclusiv noile cunoștințe și perspective dobândite, în special în ceea ce privește integrarea copiilor din medii diverse în mediul școlar. Constatările noastre indică faptul că participanții nu numai că au dobândit noi perspective cu privire la practicile incluzive, dar au dezvoltat și o apreciere mai profundă a valorii intrinseci a integrării tuturor elevilor în comunitatea școlară. Acest studiu subliniază importanța dezvoltării profesionale continue în promovarea mediilor educaționale incluzive și reflectă asupra valorilor în schimbare din școli care susțin acest ideal.

Cuvinte-cheie: *dezvoltare profesională, educație incluzivă, formarea profesorilor, integrare școlară, valori educaționale.*

1. Introduction

Inclusive education at the school level is a vital approach that aims to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities and special needs. Inclusive education refers to the practice of educating all students together in mainstream classrooms, regardless of their individual differences (Singal, 2005). This approach is grounded in the belief that all children have the right to quality education and that inclusive settings benefit not only students with disabilities and special needs but also their peers by fostering a diverse learning environment (Lindsay, 2003; Nilholm, 2020). Inclusive education is the most effective way to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn and develop the individual substrate of the person and the principle of productive harmony with the environment (Nicolescu, 2012), building, therefore, an inclusive school culture that fosters environments where all students can thrive. Schools play a crucial role in supporting and celebrating the progress and success of every student, regardless of their background or abilities. An inclusive school culture is characterized by a sense of community where every individual feels welcome and valued (Hanko, 2003). A welcoming atmosphere is vital to ensuring that all students feel accepted and included in the school environment, and at the

same time, encouraging students to help and support one another fosters a spirit of collaboration and camaraderie. But, in order to create an inclusive environment, schools must establish clear values that promote respect and high expectations for all students, whilst setting ambitious goals for learning and making sure that the participation of every student is met. Inclusive schools should be committed to welcoming all children, regardless of their abilities or diverse backgrounds, making sure they provide a rich educational experience within general education classrooms, supplemented by appropriate supports (Haug, 2017; Khan & Behlol, 2014). The support can come from various stakeholders, including general education teachers, special education teachers, support staff, school leaders, families, and students.

These initiatives highlight the necessity of continuing the constant work to make sure that educational systems can meet the diverse needs of learners, thereby promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities (Florian, 2014; Materechera, 2020; Mitchell, 2015). There are several key aspects when talking about inclusive education. The first component is the need that all students have access to quality learning experiences, and this includes appropriate curricula, teaching methods, and resources tailored to meet diverse learning needs (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002; Kozibroda et al., 2020). The second aspect is related to providing additional support services, such as counseling and specialized instruction, to assist students with disabilities and special needs in their learning journey because this support is crucial for creating an environment where all students can succeed (Habib, 2011) and can learn and grow together (Florian, 2014; Mitchell, 2015). Not least, effective inclusive education requires teachers to possess specific competencies to address the varied needs of their students. Training programs should focus on equipping teachers with the skills to adapt their teaching strategies and utilize assistive technologies. Teacher training programs are pivotal in this transformation and should not only focus on imparting knowledge and skills related to inclusive practices but also on altering teachers' attitudes and beliefs about disability and diversity. For instance, professional development initiatives often include modules on differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching strategies, and classroom management techniques that accommodate all learners. However, research indicates that initial training must be supplemented with ongoing support and mentorship to achieve lasting change (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Another perspective that tackles ways to equip

teachers to face inclusion in the classroom is through participating in continuous development programs, such as the ones developed through Erasmus initiatives (e.g., courses, workshops, or other types of activities). The Erasmus Program promotes inclusion through clearly defined priorities outlined in the Erasmus Guide 2024[1], emphasizing equal access to education and training for all social groups, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, individuals with disabilities, and people from other vulnerable contexts. Inclusive approaches advocated by Erasmus involve creating educational environments tailored to diverse needs, using accessible digital tools, and fostering international collaboration to share best practices. In respect to the Erasmus programme aims, in Romania, national policies on educational inclusion are governed by strategies such as the *National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2022-2027* and the *National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2022-2027*. These policies promote the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools, the development of an adapted curriculum, teacher training to address diversity, and the elimination of barriers to accessing education. The training program aligns with these policies, equipping educators to implement inclusive practices by national requirements.

2. Do teachers' perspectives impact the effectiveness of inclusive education?

An inclusive school culture is characterized by a strong sense of community, where collaboration among students, teachers, and parents is encouraged and valued. Respect for diversity becomes ingrained in the daily interactions within the school, creating an environment where all students feel valued and supported (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin et al., 2008). Teachers who are well-prepared to implement inclusive practices can create learning environments that are responsive to the needs of all students (Subban & Sharma, 2005). This, in turn, enhances student engagement and achievement, contributing to a more equitable education system.

Sustainable positive outcomes in inclusive education hinge on continuous professional development and the integration of inclusive principles into

everyday practices (Sharma, 2018). This means that teacher training should be an ongoing process, with opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice, to collaborate in multidisciplinary teams with other professionals who provide support to students with disabilities, share experiences, and learn from each other. Schools should also regularly review and adapt their policies and practices to ensure they remain responsive to the needs of their students. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, schools can ensure that inclusive education remains a priority and that all students have the opportunity to succeed. Teacher training programs are pivotal in this context (Marin, 2014). By embedding inclusive values into teacher education and professional development, these programs help to build a collective commitment to inclusion. Educators who are well-prepared to implement inclusive practices are better equipped to create learning environments that are responsive to the needs of all students (Subban & Sharma, 2005).

Teachers' perspectives on inclusive education play a crucial role in determining its effectiveness. When teachers hold unsupportive or negative attitudes toward inclusion, several adverse effects can arise. Teachers who are sceptical about inclusive education may resist adapting their teaching methods or utilizing assistive technologies necessary for supporting diverse student needs. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that teachers with negative attitudes toward inclusion often have lower expectations for students with disabilities and may be less inclined to engage fully with inclusive practices. This resistance can prevent the effective implementation of inclusive strategies and hinder the overall success of inclusion efforts.

Unsupportive perspectives can lead to ineffective implementation of inclusive education practices. Teachers who hold negative views may not apply differentiation strategies consistently or may struggle with classroom management when addressing diverse needs. Forlin, Keen, and Barrett (2008) observed that teachers with negative attitudes towards inclusion were less likely to adopt inclusive practices effectively, which can result in a less supportive learning environment for students with disabilities and special needs.

The negative attitudes of teachers can adversely affect student outcomes. Teachers who do not support inclusive education may fail to engage adequately with students who have disabilities, potentially leading to poorer

academic and social outcomes for these students. Subban and Sharma (2005) highlight that such negative perspectives can impede the creation of a supportive learning environment, thereby affecting the academic progress and social integration of students with disabilities and special needs.

Teachers with an unsupportive perspective may also exhibit lower engagement in professional development programs designed to enhance inclusive practices. Burke and Sutherland (2004) found that teachers who did not view inclusion favourably were less likely to participate in or benefit from these programs, perpetuating their negative attitudes and non-inclusive teaching routines and limiting their effectiveness in implementing inclusive education.

In summary, an unsupportive perspective among teachers can significantly impede the effectiveness of inclusive education by leading to resistance to change, ineffective implementation of inclusive practices, negative impacts on students' outcomes, and reduced engagement with professional development opportunities.

3. Research Methodology

This study targets the evaluation of the perceptions of teachers regarding the effects of a training program focused on promoting inclusive education and their readiness to implement such practices in diverse classroom settings. The training was provided within the Erasmus project "Co-Creating Inclusive School Communities" (Project no. 2021-1-LI01-KA220-SCH-000027667) whose aim is to support schools in strengthening inclusive school communities in which every participant is welcomed, respected, valued and given a voice and that embrace and appreciate diversity in culture, religion, gender, ability or socio-economic background. Many schools in Europe struggle to create equal opportunities for all learners. This requires an inclusive community where each actor (teachers, learners, parents, school leaders, partners outside school) engages in and feels responsible for creating inclusive school cultures, and is supported in individual and collective learning processes. Within this project, a training programme took place in a Romanian school, and it was designed for teachers, aiming at facilitating information regarding the project's

toolbox and conceptual framework, exploring its practical applications, and practicing the use of specific tools to promote the inclusion of students. University teachers involved in this project and also school teachers who previously participated in the national piloting and co-creation sessions shared their experiences, serving as ambassadors for the toolbox and showcasing its potential impact in Romanian schools with an emphasis on inclusive-centred pedagogies. The primary objective is to assess the effectiveness of this initiative in enhancing teachers' understanding and commitment to inclusion. The training program covered various aspects of inclusive education, such as understanding diversity, recognizing and addressing biases, implementing inclusive teaching practices, and fostering an inclusive school culture. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their pre-existing beliefs and practices, engage in collaborative learning activities, and develop action plans for applying inclusive strategies in their classrooms.

3.1. Research aim

To evaluate the benefits of the training programme, a qualitative research approach was employed, wherein in-depth interviews were conducted with five of the participating teachers who willingly expressed their availability to take part in this research. The five teachers come from the same special education school, as follows: two novice teachers with "definitivat" teaching certification, and three experienced teachers, one with the second teaching degree and two with the first teaching degree. This special education school includes only classes with students with severe disabilities or severe intellectual disabilities, profound disabilities, and/or associated disabilities, who are enrolled from the preparatory grade to the 10th grade. These interviews aimed to gather comprehensive insights into their experiences and learning outcomes following the training. The in-depth interview centered on uncovering key insights related to various aspects of the experience. It explored participants' initial impressions and expectations, shedding light on their preconceived notions before engagement. Additionally, the interview delved into the knowledge and learning outcomes gained, providing a deeper understanding of how the experience shaped their understanding. The impact on attitudes and beliefs was also examined, highlighting any shifts or reinforcement of personal viewpoints. Furthermore, the conversation touched on the influence

of school values and culture, assessing how these elements contributed to the overall experience. Lastly, the availability and effectiveness of support and resources were discussed, offering a comprehensive view of the factors that facilitated or hindered success. The respondents were selected from each education level: two teachers who teach first and fourth grade, one teacher who teaches sixth grade, and two teachers who teach therapies and intervention programs. The two teachers responsible for therapies and programs work with students from both primary and lower secondary education levels. They participated in a semi-structured interview conducted online, outside of school hours, using the Google Meet platform under optimal conditions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour per respondent.

4. Results

4.1. Initial Impressions and Expectations

This section explores the initial perceptions and expectations of the teachers who participated in the training program. Understanding these elements is crucial, as they provide a baseline for evaluating the program's impact and effectiveness. The participants' initial impressions reflect their preconceived notions about inclusive education and their expectations for how the program might address their professional needs.

When looking at initial expectations or hopes regarding the training program on inclusive education, teachers' answers focused more on acquiring practical knowledge and skills in inclusive education, as the interviewees clearly expressed their desire to learn methods and strategies that they can apply in practice, in the everyday educational environment:

> My initial expectations in relation to the training program on inclusive education were to acquire practical knowledge and skills that would help me create an accessible and equitable educational environment for all students, regardless of their specific needs. (Interviewee 1)
> To find out new information about inclusive education and at the same time to learn how to apply what I have learned in the classroom. (Interviewee 5)

Another key aspect when looking at their expectations is the need to learn effective strategies to support students with special needs and to integrate them into the educational process, so that they feel included and supported, as interviews have shown:

> I hoped to learn effective strategies for integrating students with various disabilities or learning difficulties, so that they feel supported and included in the learning process. (Interviewee 1)
> I also wanted to find out information about counseling parents with children with disabilities. (Interviewee 5)

Moreover, a common theme teachers pinpointed was the interest in learning from the experiences of other countries that have successfully implemented inclusive education. One teacher wanted to understand how these models can be applied in the local context, as expressed below:

> My hopes for this program were to find out how inclusion is achieved in other countries and to discover successful ways to implement inclusive education. (Interviewee 2)
> I wanted to clarify my vision of other countries, with a tradition in exploring this field, on the stage of implementation of inclusion in their education systems. (Interviewee 4)

Not least, another important aspect of the interviewees' expectations was personal improvement to face professional challenges and to develop their patience and ability to work with different students:

> I wanted to improve myself to be able to face the challenges I face daily, which are different from each other and which put my mind and patience to the test. (Interviewee 3)

Teachers were quite familiar with the concept of inclusive education, even though the level of knowledge was quite different. Even though from a theoretical perspective, aspects about inclusive education were clear, one of the teachers mentioned that "However, I did not have a deep understanding of the practical methods and challenges involved in applying these principles in the classroom." (Interviewee 1). Another teacher mentioned that even though she was very familiar with the concept, studying it since college, she

mentioned that she was "eager to discover new and successful ways to achieve inclusion" (Interviewee 2). The main aspects that teachers mentioned that they gained from this course were the necessary skills to implement their knowledge.

4.2. Knowledge and Learning Outcomes

When talking about the acquisitions gained by teachers from the training program, one of the main takeaways was the shift of perspective from seeing inclusive education as merely the physical integration of students with special needs to understanding it as a comprehensive approach. As one of the teachers mentioned, inclusive education is also about "adapting the curriculum, teaching materials and teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of each student" (Interviewee 1).

Another aspect that teachers mentioned was the community level of inclusive education. Approaching inclusive education from a broader perspective not only addresses the needs of students with disabilities, but also enriches the entire educational community by promoting values such as tolerance, empathy, and solidarity. This perspective suggests a broader view of inclusion as a means to foster a more cohesive society. One of the teachers concluded that: "transforming the education system to become more inclusive is an essential step towards a fairer and more cohesive society" (Interviewee 2).

Taking into consideration the community level of inclusive education, the teachers also stressed the importance of involving all stakeholders and acknowledged the need for a collective effort.

Therefore, by recognizing the role of collaboration between teachers, parents, and professionals, teachers also understand the interconnected nature of support required for successful inclusive education. One of the teachers stated that this is one of the ideas that she is most committed to regarding inclusive education: "I am committed to the idea of involving all stakeholders in education - students, parents, teachers, and the inclusive community" (Interviewee 3).

From a wider perspective, teachers also looked at inclusive education as a stepping stone in defining a vision for a fairer society. The idea that transforming the education system to be more inclusive is a step toward a fairer and more cohesive society shows that they see the broader implications of inclusivity beyond the classroom.

> The fact that inclusive education is an ideal that is healthy to have in mind when we want a healthy society and, implicitly, an educational system that truly promotes human diversity. (Interviewee 4)

Overall, teachers' responses focused on recognizing inclusive education to transform both the school environment and society at large.

Teachers' responses reflect a practical and hands-on approach to implementing the knowledge gained from the training on inclusive education. The first aspect that can be depicted from their answers is the application of inclusive teaching and learning strategies: "A concrete example where I applied the knowledge gained in the training program was adapting teaching materials for a student with dyslexia." (Interviewee 1).

These changes directly enhanced the learning experience of students, but also promoted a more collaborative learning environment, benefiting all students.

All teachers gave examples of their enhanced collaboration with parents, other teachers, and specialists. Teachers organized regular meetings to review student progress and adjust educational plans accordingly. They also emphasized the collective effort of teachers to address classroom challenges through discussions and workshops, regardless of their direct involvement.

> We organized regular meetings to discuss the progress of pupils with special needs and to adapt educational plans according to the feedback we received. (Interviewee 1)
> I worked with other teachers, family, and other specialists to create personalized strategies to support each student. (Interviewee 2)
> I tried to involve everyone in the school's inclusive community in solving it, through discussions and workshops involving students, parents, and classroom teachers. (Interviewee 3)

> At the school level, we came together to solve various classroom problems through discussions with all the teachers, even if they were not directly involved in a connection with that class. (Interviewee 4)

One teacher also mentioned that through workshops, they adapted some of the tools from the training in order to use them in the following academic year.

> … we translated and adapted some of the tools for investigating the level of inclusion in our school community, which we are going to apply at the beginning of the school year 2024-2025. (Interviewee 5)

Therefore, these collaborative efforts have led to a more responsive and inclusive educational environment. By involving a broad range of stakeholders, teachers ensured that diverse perspectives were considered, which enriches the support provided to students.

4.3. Impact on Attitudes and Beliefs

Teachers' responses reflect both a personal and a professional transformation driven by the training program on inclusive education.

One of the key points was the shift of attitudes towards the students with special and diverse educational needs. Teachers mentioned that the training program has changed their perspective, making them more aware of the individuality of each learner. Therefore, they are more able to no longer view special needs as challenges but as opportunities to enrich the learning environment for all students: "I have become much more aware of the uniqueness of each learner and the importance of giving each of them the support they need to develop" (Interviewee 1).

Teachers now put more emphasis on empathy, curiosity, and problem-solving, which highlights a student-centered mindset that prioritizes the well-being and potential of each learner. This approach not only benefits students with special needs but also enhances the learning environment for all students.

> I have learned to approach each situation with empathy and to value the

> potential of each student, regardless of the difficulties they face. (Interviewee 2)
> I have become more empathetic, curious, and determined to find solutions to their needs. (Interviewee 3)

Teachers also expressed a renewed dedication to being close to students, helping them express their personalities, and supporting them throughout their educational journey, by emphasizing the importance of human diversity as a priority across social systems.

> My outlook has changed; I try (...) to help them be themselves, express their personality, and anchor themselves in the present. (Interviewee 4)
> Human diversity must become a priority for all social systems. (Interviewee 5)

Teachers' commitment to inclusivity as a societal priority suggests that they see inclusive education as part of a broader social mission, aligning their educational practices with values of equity and respect. Overall, the responses reflect a deepened sense of responsibility and a positive, inclusive attitude that aims to make a meaningful impact on students' lives.

The training program transformed teachers' perspective, emphasizing that inclusion is not only an ideal, but a necessity for the development of all students. Teachers recognize more and more that an inclusive school environment positively impacts the entire community, fostering empathy, tolerance, cooperation, and a climate of respect and acceptance among students.

> The program showed me that inclusion has a positive impact on the whole school community, creating a climate of respect and acceptance. (Interviewee 1)
> Everyone's voices must be heard to build an effective strategy. (Interviewee 4)
> I try to find out what their real needs are, to find teaching techniques, methods, and materials that are as varied and adapted as possible to the needs of the children, as well as their cognitive and psycho-affective characteristics. (Interviewee 5)

Teachers also became more aware of their role as educators in promoting

inclusion and creating equal opportunities. This shift also led them to involve others, such as friends, families, and the broader school community, in understanding and supporting inclusion, emphasizing the importance of small steps and listening to all stakeholders to build effective strategies.

> I also became more aware of my responsibility as an educator to promote inclusion and create equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their differences. (Interviewee 1)
> If before I was only focused on inclusion, now I try to involve people around me (friends, their families). I try to help them understand things and do things together that support inclusion. (Interviewee 2)

4.4. School Values and Culture

For some of the teachers, the training gave them a new perspective on school culture in terms of inclusion and diversity. One of the points raised when talking about school culture is that an inclusive school culture requires both attitudes and values, but also day-to-day behaviors. And even more so, an inclusive culture demands a conscious and collective effort to embrace diversity in daily interactions: "I realized that an inclusive school culture is not only developed through policies and rules, but through the attitudes, values, and daily behaviors of all school staff" (Interviewee 1).

Even though interviewed teachers come from an inclusive school, the training highlighted the need for open communication and collaboration among all members of the school community—teachers, administration, students, and parents—to promote inclusion as a core value. The need for workshops and activities involving teachers and parents was seen as necessary to further support inclusive practices.

> I realized that an inclusive culture requires a conscious effort from everyone, from teachers and administration to students and parents. (Interviewee 1)
> Our school's culture of academic and social inclusion promotes accessibility, acceptance, and support for all students, regardless of ability, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or other personal characteristics. (Interviewee 2)

Even though we can see that teachers are more aware of what an inclusive school culture is, they also mention difficulties in implementing these visions due to a lack of proper classroom conditions. Teachers mentioned that inclusion should go beyond merely accepting students into the school. It requires adapting the physical and educational environment to meet their needs. This includes changes such as improving classroom conditions, adding accessible facilities like ramps and elevators, and acquiring educational software tailored for students' diverse needs.

> The school needs to make many changes in the classroom conditions (age-appropriate furniture, access ramp, elevator for students with motor disabilities who have their class upstairs). The school should purchase educational software for children with sensory impairments. (Interviewee 5)

When asked if and what changes the teachers noticed in the school environment or among their colleagues following the training, the opinions varied. Some of the teachers highlight a positive shift in the school environment following the training program. They mention that there has been a noticeable increase in awareness and sensitivity towards students with special needs and that colleagues are more open to adapting teaching methods and sharing resources.

> The level of awareness and sensitivity to the needs of students with disabilities or other special needs has increased. (Interviewee 1)
> I have become more aware of the need to discuss and work on inclusive education. (Interviewee 4)

This perspective emphasizes the development of a supportive and inclusive culture, with even school management showing greater interest in promoting diversity initiatives, creating a more welcoming atmosphere.

Other teachers argue that while initial interest was shown during the training program, this enthusiasm did not translate into action. According to this view, teachers reverted to their old habits, isolating themselves in their classrooms and not involving others in inclusive efforts. Attempts at collaboration often faced resistance or rejection, suggesting that while there might be some increased awareness of inclusive education, the actual implementation and teamwork required for meaningful change are still lacking.

> ...but after the program was over, everyone went into the classroom and stayed there as they would say...they didn't involve other people, they didn't collaborate, they closed themselves in the classroom with the students...the moment you try to collaborate, you get a rejection. (Interviewee 3)

4.5. Support and Resources

Although the training program provided teachers with a solid foundation of knowledge and skills, they mentioned that in order to implement inclusive practices more effectively, additional support would be needed.

Teachers mentioned the need for additional resources such as specially designed materials, assistive technologies, and practical guides and tools, such as assessment tools to measure inclusion levels, interactive games, and written materials with engaging activities that help children understand inclusion. Ongoing support from specialists in inclusive education, such as school counselors or psychologists, is also needed, along with regular mentoring sessions or workshops.

> ... either having access to a school counselor or school psychologist to provide personalized advice and strategies, or organizing regular mentoring sessions or in-service training workshops on inclusion. (Interviewee 1)

Even though the training provided them with a context to collaborate, teachers mentioned there is a need for a more structured mechanism for collaboration between teachers, allowing them to share experiences and strategies. Additionally, increased involvement of parents through participation in workshops and collaborative activities with students is seen as crucial for ensuring consistent support both at school and at home.

> …should work with the other teachers: speech therapist, physical therapist, counselor, social worker... and parents should be more involved, participate in workshops with the students. (Interviewee 3)

Some teachers mention that the school administration was supportive, providing essential resources such as adapted teaching materials, assistive

technology, and organizing collaborative meetings and training sessions. These measures helped teachers apply inclusive strategies more effectively and fostered communication between staff and specialists. While support was generally appreciated, the need for a structured system to monitor progress, provide ongoing feedback, and adjust strategies based on observations was noted as an area needing improvement.

Even though the general impression was that the school administration supported some changes, some teachers mentioned that the school's involvement post-training was minimal or ineffective, with little to no change observed in practice.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The in-depth interviews provide valuable insights into the impact of the training program on inclusive education for teachers. Across the different themes explored—initial impressions and expectations, knowledge and learning outcomes, impact on attitudes and beliefs, school values and culture, and support and resources—it is evident that the program had a significant effect on both the professional and personal growth of participants.

In terms of initial expectations, the majority of teachers were primarily focused on acquiring practical knowledge and strategies to support students with special needs, which they hoped to implement in their classrooms. There was also a notable interest in learning from successful international models of inclusive education. Teachers expressed a strong desire for personal improvement to navigate the challenges they face daily in diverse classrooms. This alignment between their expectations and the program's objectives is discussed in Van Driel et al.'s (2001) paper, which highlights the relevance of the training content in addressing teachers' professional needs.

The knowledge gained from the program aimed at providing a more updated perspective on inclusive education, transitioning from perceiving inclusion as simply physical integration to understanding it as a comprehensive approach. This finding is in line with other research (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2014; Smith & Leonard, 2005) that emphasizes the fact

that teachers shifted from viewing inclusion as merely physical integration to seeing it as a holistic approach involving curriculum adaptation, community involvement, and collaboration between all stakeholders. The emphasis on involving the broader educational community, including parents and other professionals, reflects an understanding that successful inclusion requires collective effort. Teachers also recognized that the values of tolerance and empathy promoted by inclusive education have the potential to foster a fairer and more cohesive society as Rajendran (2020) explained in the paper, where he and his team explore teachers' competencies for inclusive education with a strong focus on emotional intelligence.

The program also influenced teachers' attitudes and beliefs. There was a notable shift toward empathy, patience, and a deeper appreciation of the unique needs of each student. Teachers reported a change in their perspective, moving from seeing special needs as challenges to viewing them as opportunities for enhancing the learning environment for all students. As other papers stated (Grenier, 2010; Singal, 2008), this demonstrates a shift towards a student-centered approach that prioritizes the well-being and development of each learner. Moreover, teachers' commitment to inclusion as a societal priority suggests that they are now viewing their role not just as educators but as contributors to broader social change.

Regarding school values and culture, the training provided teachers with a renewed understanding of the importance of an inclusive school culture. It underscored that inclusion requires more than policies and rules - it demands a daily, conscious effort from all school members. This finding is in line with other research papers (Arnesen et al., 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Some teachers reported positive shifts in their school environment, with colleagues becoming more sensitive to the needs of students with special needs and more willing to collaborate, just as in other papers, such as Deal and Peterson's (2010) paper. However, there were also challenges noted, such as resistance from colleagues and the lack of structural changes necessary to fully support inclusive education, such as accessible facilities and adapted classroom resources.

Finally, the interviews revealed the need for additional support and resources. While the training provided a strong foundation, teachers identified gaps in

practical tools, assistive technologies, and ongoing collaboration with specialists. The topic of assistive technologies was largely debated in Klein's (2024) and Masterman's (2023) papers, where they talked about educator preparedness to use assistive technologies in the classroom.

A more structured mechanism for collaboration between teachers, along with increased parental involvement, was also seen as essential for sustaining the inclusive practices learned during the program, and this focus was also debated by Baquedano-López et al. (2013) when they talked about equity issues in parental and community involvement in schools. Some teachers highlighted the supportive role of school administration, but others pointed to minimal post-training involvement, indicating a need for stronger institutional commitment to sustaining the changes initiated by the training.

In conclusion, while the insights gathered from this small, non-representative sample highlight that the training program positively influenced the participating teachers' understanding and approach to inclusive education, its broader applicability requires careful consideration. The teachers reported feeling better equipped and more motivated to promote inclusivity; however, they emphasized the persistence of barriers within schools that hinder the full realization of these changes. To implement inclusive practices effectively, ongoing support, collaborative efforts, and adequate resources are essential. These findings underline the critical role of continuous professional development, institutional backing, and active engagement from the entire school community in fostering meaningful and sustainable inclusive education.

NOTE

[1] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-11/2024-Erasmus%2BProgramme-Guide_EN.pdf

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