

## **Preparing pre-service teachers towards inclusive education**

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## **Preparing pre-service teachers towards inclusive education**

In this article the authors focus on the importance to prepare teachers in training to work in an inclusive educational setting. Through in-depth interviews with teachers in inclusive education, 5 basic competences for teachers could be withdrawn. These include: a) to increase the well-being of each child in the class; b) to differentiate without exclusion; c) to broaden the cooperation with parents; d) to cooperate with external people and colleagues within the classroom; e) to be flexible and responsible for the whole class. All the competences are relevant and obtained at the end of the training. But especially the frame of reference to look at these competences is important. The authors focus on the framework of diversity thinking and propose that teachers in training should be trained to become reflective practitioners.

Keywords: Inclusive education, teacher training, reflective practitioner, diversity thinking

### **Introduction**

Throughout the past decade, we see a shift in paradigm in looking at education broadly and specifically in education towards children with disabilities. No longer the children must fit in the classroom, but the school and the class must fit the children. Diversity becomes more the norm, children are very divers and go together to the same school. The shift is a shift from integration of children towards inclusion (Avramidis & Kayva, 2007, Mortier, 2010). With the ratification of the UN convention on the Rights of Persons with a disability (2006) Belgium agreed to develop a more inclusive educational system. Every child had the right to go to a regular school (article 24). Furthermore, in march 2014, the Flemish government agreed on a decree to include more children with special needs into the regular classroom. However in practice, we still see a large tendency to exclusion, because of our two-track system in the education of children with a disability. We have a very broad special education and a rather

limited range of possibilities for support in regular education. The transfer of the ideology of inclusion into practice remains a major challenge.

What is the definition of inclusive education? The authors agree with the following statement related to inclusive education: 'All students are welcomed in general education classes in their local schools. Therefore, the general education classroom in the school that a student would attend if he or she did not have a disability is the first placement option considered. Appropriate supports, regardless of disability type or severity, are available.' (Giangreco, 2002). Inclusive education is not only about putting children in a regular class, it is also about the way and the condition that children can learn (Angelides et al, 2006). Thus the role of the teacher is more than recognizing diversity (Sandoval, 2007, as cited in Forlin, Cedillo, Romero-Contreras, Fletcher, & Hernández, 2010) , it is about the way children can participate in education. The teacher needs to adapt the learning trajectory to make learning meaningful for all children. This means that teachers in their classroom meet and work with a greater diversity of students. Teachers perceive this as a major challenge (Lebeer, 2006). Next to that, the chances of success of inclusive education strongly depend on the skills and the way in which inclusion is put it into practice (Hodkinson, 2006). Loreman (2005) concluded that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to meet the needs for some children with special educational needs. Within the teacher training department at the University College we feel the strong responsibility to train pre-service teachers to be competent to work in an inclusive setting. After all, the attitudes of a teacher towards his students is a critical factor in the way they teach and play an important role in how inclusion can succeed. (Avramadis & Kalyva, 2007, Forlin, Keen & Barrett, 2008, Van Hove et al, 2012). To focus on competences in a teacher training is important, but also the frame of reference to work with these competence is very important. If teachers feel competent

to handle in an inclusive setting and if they are convinced of ‘diversity thinking’ , where every learner can learn in his or hers own way, inclusion will succeed. Diversity thinking is the framework we use in our department to state that all children are welcome in class, where diversity is a reality and the norm. Education must be adapted to children’s needs, instead of children who should adapt to the curriculum. In this diversity thinking parents play an important role and are seen as equal partners with useful experiences according to the support of their children. Additionally in this thinking, professionals are able to cooperate with other relevant partners in class and are more in need of support ‘on the spot’ , in the classroom, then specific training needs on different kind of ‘problems’ children can have.

## **Methodology**

The aim of the research was to look into a preliminary theoretical framework on basic competences on inclusion the teacher training department has developed, based on professional experiences of the headmasters at the University College and supported by literature (Flem et al, 2004, Booth et al, 2003). This preliminary framework included:

- a) Improving the quality of life of every child in the classroom;
- b) To differentiate without exclusion;
- c) To broaden the cooperation with parents;
- d) To cooperate with colleagues and external support;
- e) To have specific knowledge on different kind of labels children can have.

In order to validate the preliminary framework the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 teachers within primary school. The teachers were selected on different criteria, including experience in inclusive education, different types of elementary schools and classes, and on the assumption that the researchers wanted to have teachers with an open mind about inclusion. In each class of the participants there

was at least one child with a very visible disability (eg. Downsyndrom) or less visible disabilities, but all the children had a clear individual trajectory. The aim of the research was not to evaluate the inclusion process, but to investigate which competences a teacher needs in inclusive education. Even though much research has been done on inclusive education, the voice of the teachers with experience in an inclusive classroom is often not heard. The data were generated from semi-structured in-depth interviews, including following topics: attitude of the teacher towards inclusive education, the roll of the teacher within inclusive education, the competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) a teacher needs in inclusive education and the consequences for the training of teachers.

Interview transcripts were analysed to identify patterns and regularities, with emerging words used to create categorical themes. Two researchers independently coded the interviews, which augmented the internal reliability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Maso & Smaling, 2004). In total 263 coded statements were put into the ten different categories of basic competences and attitudes a teacher must obtain, as set down by the Flemish government. After the first categorization in this framework, a second series of interviews was conducted with the same teachers and with two additional teachers with experience in inclusive education, to see if all the themes were covered or if elements were still missing. In what follows the authors bring the results and discussions together.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Support the wellbeing of each child in the class***

Within inclusive education, the teacher as an educator is actively responsible for his or her classroom. One of the tasks of the teacher is to create a positive learning environment where all students feel good (Vaidya & Zaslavsky, 2000, Flem et al, 2004) and where the teacher shows a positive attitude and a strong commitment (Giangreco et al, 1997, Van Hove, 2012).

“It demands of the teacher that you are actively investing in how someone can participate in class. For Yani, I am always searching for moments to connect with the other children. For example, when the first bell rings to stop the play at the playground, one classmate goes already with Yani to the class and plays there or reads a book together. I install these possibilities of making connections.” (3rd grade teacher).

This example shows that teachers are actively searching for positive interventions aimed at how children can participate (Soodak, 2003, De Schauwer & Van de Putte, 2013).

The presence of a child (with a disability) in the classroom does not automatically result in inclusion. It should be ensured that the child is a full member of the class and enters into relationships and friendships. The teacher has the task to involve the child in the class and to provide a ‘welcoming’ feeling. The teacher is a role model and therefore believes in the capabilities and potential of every child (Giangreco, 1997, Flem, 2004) and must ensure that a student with a disability, as another student, will have the opportunity to show its talents (Bilken, 2000). We have to create opportunities where children have possibilities to play and work together.

The teacher is also expected to create a safe environment (Soodak, 2003) and to support children in dealing with the ‘otherness’ of others. The teacher should rather

recognize the similarities between children and build further on that (Giangreco et al, 1993).

‘In the beginning I saw Yani and I talk about her as ‘a child that can not talk, can not walk,...’ Now I see her as one of the girls from the class, who is also busy to set up a girls music band...’ (Teacher, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Van de Putte & De Schauwer (2013) concluded that children with and without disabilities learn a lot from each other. They learn that everyone is different and learns in different ways.

### ***To differentiate, without exclusion***

To differentiate in terms of curriculum, support and evaluation, but within the classroom, is also an important competence. The teachers indicate that they see differentiation as the core of what they are doing in inclusive classrooms. The literature emphasizes that teachers should be able to match the level of the different students (Flem et al.,2004, Van Hove et al., 2012) while paying attention not to set children aside (Giangreco, 1993).

"... you cannot set aside the child because then you tell that child that it is an inclusion child, it may sit in the classroom, but only in a corner. To what extent are you then concerned with inclusion? " (1st grade teacher).

Teachers experience that participation and being part of the class is essential for the process of inclusion. To realize this, the teacher must reflect which barriers there are to participate and find solutions for them. Often it is about details that at first sight didn't



seem to be important, but which are in fact very important, if we want to develop inclusive practices (Bilken, 2000; Angelides, 2006).

“Every noon I ask the children who stays to eat at school. In the beginning, I didn’t ask this question to Yani, because she gets drip feed. But then I thought it is not about what she eats, but whether she stays at school or not during noon and now I ask it to her as well. It is important that I involve her with the group.”  
(Teacher, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

To achieve participation of all students creative ways of teaching are required (De Vroey & Mortier, 2002). As a teacher, you are asked to plan ahead and to make adjustments to manage the classroom (O'Donoghue & Chalmers, 2000).

"Yesterday in the math class there were four different activities going on. I had to manage this and also ensure that everyone continued to work" (teacher, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade).

To divide your attention between all children you should look for methods that allow this, such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, independent work, contract work... If the teachers finds those methods, he will feel more competent for his own class and this results in a positive attitude towards inclusion (Giangreco, 1997, Booth et al, 2000, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003, Flem et al, 2004).

The information on the initial situation is easily obtained from the people directly involved with the child. De Schauwer & Van de Putte (2013) refer to it as being open to go into conversation with people who know the child in order to discover unknown territory in moments of uncertainty. The teachers further indicate that expectations might be different towards that one individual child compared with other children in the classroom (Van Hove et al, 2012). One must also adapt class instruction, material and worksheets. A teacher must differentiate a lesson in instruction, content, assignments and evaluation, so that individual goals can be achieved. The interviewed teachers note that in talks about the student and especially in reports it is important to formulate or emphasize the positive things. This is also important related to the way we look at the student with a disability (Giangreco, 1997, Flem et al, 2004). We see chances for every child to learn and grow.

In addition to the guidance of children, a teacher should also have a good knowledge of what he/she is teaching. Flem et al (2004) call this 'good academic insight'. But as a teacher, you need more than possessing subject matter knowledge. To know how the children can participate is equally important. The crucial question within inclusive education revolves around how and when the child is involved (Van de Putte & Deschauwer, 2013). According to the teachers who participated in the research, this is a search process which takes time. It is a continuous reflection on your own actions, where you make adjustments to your own teaching:

"... every child is different and sometimes you have to keep trying until you have found the best solution. Not everything works for everyone equally. Then you go further and further and build on that." (4th grade teacher).

### ***To broaden the cooperation with parents***

Cooperation between the teacher and the parents is a critical factor for inclusive education to succeed. The teacher must be able to accept that parents are very much present at school (Soodak, 2003, Van Acker & Van Buynder, 2005) and that they are partners in an open discussion on objectives, adaptations, evaluation, approach and future prospects (De Vroey & Mortier, 2002).

"If you hear where parents dream about for their child, to have a happy life with the right to make choices, than you can build on that as a teacher. They do not expect from me that I learn her to count till 1000. For me it was very important to hear the perspective of the parents. It gives meaning to which teacher I can be for her." (3rd grade teacher).

"Parents should be accepted as full partners" (1st grade teacher).

We notice the importance to get to know THIS child with these parents (Isarin, 2005). This requires teachers to have social skills to perform an open and honest communication. As a teacher you must show your interest to parents, not using jargon and adopting an open and authentic attitude. Next to that, the teacher must be able to discuss the learning process and the developments of the child, in relation to the individual process of the child, not in comparison to other children (Giangreco, 1997). It is important that the child, and broader, that each child can be who it wants to be, with its capabilities and its disabilities.

### ***Co-operation with external people and colleagues within the classroom***

Cooperation is essential for inclusive education. The teacher must have cooperation skills. Within inclusive education, it is important to form a team around the child with a disability and to come across what the child with a disability must learn in the classroom and who takes the responsibility within the educational process (Giangreco, 1997, Van Hove et al, 2012). The teacher is expected to reflect on priorities to be set and where support is needed. For teachers, working together with other adults in their classroom, is rather new. It becomes more and more a reality in inclusive education that teachers need to co-work with other professionals within one classroom. The teachers in the research indicated that they find it important that an internal support figure takes up the coordination of the support.

"No, that is not up to me. That is mainly the assistive teacher who organizes support." (teacher 1st grade).

Teachers are concerned that as a regular teacher they will not be able to support the child enough (Giangreco, 1997, Sobel, et al, 2003). This shows that teachers feel responsible for the children in their class, also for the child with a disability. The teachers in the research affirm the importance of responsibility. Bilken (2000) states that the teacher is responsible for the participation of children with disabilities. He must ensure that the gap between being separated from the others and being with others is reduced. The teachers experienced in inclusion "... a heavier responsibility. If you do not include the child in the classroom, there are not immediately thousand and one options left " (teacher 6th grade). Teachers feel this 'responsibility' especially when they have to decide for example whether a student may go to the next year or even if the student can stay at the school or should go to another school.

The teachers indicate "collegiality is important". O'Donoghue & Chalmers (2000) state that teachers should exchange experiences for sharing knowledge and skills (De Vroey & Mortier, 2002). Teachers also consider it important to integrate feedback from colleagues in order to adapt their own actions.

"I think reflection is important. To look back and see how you can approach something differently. You should therefore also be able to be open that others might also have some monopoly on truth" (6th grade teacher).

Next to that, the teacher is also partner of external people because colleagues are not limited only to the people of the school, but also include for example home counselling...Both in the literature (Giangreco, 1997, Lebeer, 2006) and in the information from the interviewed teachers, co-working with external partners seems very important in inclusive education. The teacher must be willing to welcome them in the classroom situation (Giangreco, 1997, Keefe & Moore, 2004), where open communication and space to discuss things is very important (Keefe & Moore, 2004, Flem et al 2004, Trent et al, 2008).

"The support teacher is only there for 2 hours, so we have to plan it where to use it efficiently. The plan is to use the support teacher in times where the child or class can use additional support." (2nd grade teacher).

A teacher must be assertive enough and must be able to indicate the needs of children so that the person in the class who gives extra support can do this in an efficient way (Giangreco, 1993). The teacher must be able to examine and make explicit which

support he needs in his class. For example, he must ask himself "Do I need an extra pair of hands or someone who can think about it?" In this way the teacher makes sure the support he gets is also effective support (Giangreco, 1997). In collaboration, people must be able to give each other positive feedback. The essence of cooperation is not so much what people do but how people collaborate (Flem et al, 2004). This also happens in the class practice, where collaboration of children with support from the teacher. Support can imply to support the child so he or she can reach the norms of the class again. Within this approach, support means that the child is removed from the class group and gets some education, on an individual basis. The next step is giving support within the classroom, but focused on the child and not on the class. The pitfall of this type of support is that the person who supports sometimes forms a barrier to the integration and participation of the child in the group. Glazer and Hannafin (2006) state that support is often given one-to-one, where interactions are not reciprocal and where the teacher is not actively participating in search for a solution. When both the regular teacher and support staff take responsibility for all children, we can come to 'collaborative teaming'. This way of working means a shared responsibility (Flem et al, 2004).

### ***Flexibility and responsibility***

The teachers with experience within inclusive education emphasized the importance of openness towards inclusion and towards diversity. This confirms other research on attitudes of teachers towards inclusion (Hodkinson, 2006, Sharma et al, 2008, Hill, 2009, Leyser, Zeiger & Romi, 20011, Boyle et al, 2013).

In addition, the teachers stated that they are not so much in need of knowledge of each disorder as that he or she must have the attitude to search for connections with the child and with people who know more the 'little stories' of the child, for example the parents. It is important to learn to know the child, to get to know an answer to the question who this child is. Isarin (2005) makes a distinction between the 'what' of the child and the 'who' of a child. The 'what' refers often to a label, to what is different about a child. This 'what' is objective, comparable and recognisable for everyone. The 'who' of the child is in relation to the 'what', but refers to the uniqueness of the child as THIS child, irreplaceable and unrepeatable. The 'who' and the 'what' are in dynamic relation to each other. However, there is some danger when the 'what' overshadows the who, for example when the diagnosis or the label of the child becomes equal to who the child is. The role of the teacher in inclusive education is to search actively for the 'who' of the child.

“ Because of his impairment he is very small. In the beginning, you can only see that, but now I see a tough boy who sometimes goes against what I say. In that, he is not different from his classmates” (Teacher, 4th grade)

The interviewed teachers stated that to get to know the child, to learn the little stories of how a child communicates for example, is very important. The teacher learns how to adapt his teaching towards this child in his classroom. The teacher must have the attitude to reflect on his own experience, in dialogue also with other relevant partners like the parents and care coordinator, to find out what is effective or not. It is clear that the preliminary proposed quality that the teacher should have sufficient knowledge of each disorder has to be altered in the quality of being a reflective practitioner. Teachers emphasized the importance of an attitude of flexibility, responsibility and lifelong

learning. Teachers should abandon traditional ways of thinking and need the flexibility to respond to the educational practice. The teacher is responsible for the well-being and the learning framework of all students and must be flexible and critical in his ways to obtain this goal.

Inclusion is a search process (Van Hove, 2012), which means you have to reflect on your own actions and teaching practice (Giangreco, 1993, O'Donoghue & Chalmers, 2000, Hunt) and starting from there, you as a teacher make your adjustments (Booth et al, 2000). Teachers have to handle the unknown and the uncertainties. They have to leave their safe and familiar situation and make place for what they don't know (Van de Putte, De Schauwer, 2013). Traditional attitudes and prejudices about children with disabilities should be taken into account critically. The teacher should be able to look at his own values and to develop an educational vision (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). Not only in literature, but also the participants at the research found being able to be critical very important. You can reflect on the classroom situation if you develop a critical look at your own class room, but also on you as a person (Giangreco, 1997).

"I think reflection is important. You have to be able to look back to know how to deal with it". (6th grade teacher)

"Within inclusion you have to be able to let go and therefore you should not be rigid about things. You need to leave certain things to another and give things out of your own hands" (3rd grade teacher).



A flexible attitude is also necessary to adapt goals and expectations to the individual learner. It is a process where one always seeks which approach they should adopt: indeed inclusion asks that familiar ways of thinking and traditional ways of working are detached (Van Hove et al, 2012).

There must be an attitude of ‘lifelong learning’ to be able to search for solutions. Some authors (Vaidya & Zaslavsky, 2000) speak of specific knowledge regarding to students with special needs. More than knowledge of special educational needs, the teacher needs skills in dealing with differences. The teacher in the inclusive classroom must be willing to learn from other stakeholders, for example from parents who have already acquired a lot of expertise, but also from peers, in relation to each other (Giangreco, 1993).

Within the literature there is no consensus whether or not teachers must have more knowledge on specific problems. Turner (2003) notices that more knowledge of the various disorders is expected. Keefe & Moore (2004) would add that students in teacher training need to know more in terms of adaptations of curricula. In contrast, other authors as Giangreco (1993) and Booth et al (2000) propose that teachers in training and in the workplace need to deal with diversity and how diversity can get inside the classroom. There is no need to emphasize on the knowledge of various disorders or to train this. De Schauwer & Van de Putte (2013) found that teachers emphasize that they learn through the encounters and working with the child, rather than asking for additional training.

## **Conclusion**

The framework with the five basic competences inclusion,

- a) to increase the well-being of each child in the class;
- b) to differentiate without exclusion;
- c) to broaden the cooperation with parents;
- d) to cooperate with external people and colleagues within the classroom;
- e) to be critical, flexible, to focus on lifelong learning and to be responsible for the whole class

give the students at the Teacher Training Department a framework to meet the situation of inclusive education. But there is more than just 'implementing and using the competences'. The frame of reference used with these competences, is very important. The teacher training department uses the framework of 'diversity thinking', where students, parents and others are seen as important stakeholders in their own learning process and where diversity is seen as an added value in the classroom. The teacher department chooses to start with this frame of reference from the start of the training, so to give time and space to reflect on the own practice, to give students opportunities to become a reflective practitioner. Next to that, the department also invests in involving the work field into this frame of reference. Students are challenged to think within this frame of reference of diversity thinking and to take this also to the work field.

We can conclude that teachers in training already learn many of the required skills, but they get a special implementation when practiced in situations of inclusive education. It is important that these accents are included in the initial teacher training and are not postponed in a post gradual special module on inclusive education. Working on the competences that support inclusion as a part of the necessary competences any teacher should master at the end of its initial training, is working towards teachers who will be better prepared to engage their task when they are in service.

Teachers often use the words 'qualitative education' and 'good teaching for all'. This means that the teacher's work on inclusive education is equal to work towards qualitative education. Giangreco (1997) also emphasizes the similarity between inclusive education and qualitative education. The view on disability shifts more and more to a social and cultural model in which reasons for exclusion are no longer merely linked to the students. Teachers should adopt an investigative approach, the teacher as 'reflective practitioner' to recognize possible barriers they install towards participation of students with disabilities, through reflection on their teaching. Boyer and Gillespie (in Sobel 2003) call for training and continuing education which supports reflection on teaching practice and the impact of the teacher on his students. Next to that, teachers should be given opportunities to gain experiences. Attention to the teaching of children with disabilities in teacher education has proved to be important for the attitudes of the teachers. This allows the teachers to feel confident in their heterogeneous, inclusive classroom and this makes for greater success in the implementation (Hodkinson, 2006). Other research (Giangreco, 1993) reveals that the earlier the active introduction towards disability and diversity, the more this influences attitudes. It is more effective than a specific training. This would allow teachers to develop a more positive attitude. Forlin (1997) points out that introducing an additional module can give more discomfort than introducing it from the beginning in the training. Researchers (Turner, 2003) and the authors of this article agree however that theory of inclusion and practice on inclusive education should be integrated in the initial teacher training.

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