



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPPORTUNITIES OF ARTS EDUCATION IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Introduction

The article analyzes the relevance of arts education and teachers' professional development while implementing inclusive education. The aim of this study is to investigate what inclusive education means to arts teachers and evaluate their learning experiences in the international "Aliisa" training program "Inclusive Arts Education".

AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research aim is to evaluate arts teachers' preparation and learning experiences in the training program "Inclusive Arts Education" after a 5-day intensive training course (workshops).

The main research questions are as follows:

- What experience and knowledge about inclusive arts education do the research participants have, what does inclusive education mean to arts teachers?
- How do participants evaluate the content of international training workshops, what opportunities of arts education for inclusion did they experience?
- What are the most significant insights of participants about the quality of the workshops and their learning experience while cooperating in the international group?

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research was carried out, using the focus group method with participants from three different countries:

- Three focus groups were conducted in each country: one group in Finland, one in Austria, and one in Lithuania immediately after the workshops of the international training program.
- The international study involved 25 teachers: 7 Finnish, 7 Austrian, and 11 Lithuanian participants (2 men and 23 women).



RESULTS

Based on the findings of the study, the implemented training program "Inclusive Arts Education" revealed the following positive aspects:

- the program meets the essential requirements for the development of inclusive education competencies;
- the workshops included a variety of practical arts activities, methods suitable for inclusive arts education and integration of different arts forms;
- the training program was conducted by a competent international team of lecturers;
- the training course was based on the dialogue and participants' reflections;
- an engaging, emotionally safe and collaborative environment was created.

Conclusions

- During the implementation of the learning program "Inclusive Arts Education" in different countries (Austria, Lithuania, and Finland), it became clear that in each country arts teachers worked in different educational contexts and faced quite similar challenges of inclusive education.
- The participants of all countries found that the content of the "Inclusive Art Education" training was valuable, interesting and meaningful to them and will help them to implement the ideas of inclusive education in their practice in arts education.
- Arts teachers generally understood basic principles of inclusion but not all of them felt sufficiently prepared to work with children with special needs and intercultural diversity. There is a need to create continuing and / or long-term professional development programs for arts teachers, ensuring consolidation of their competencies while working in inclusive environments.
- The success of inclusive arts education is largely related to the teacher's knowledge, professional abilities, attitude to inclusion as well as to creation of a favorable educational atmosphere, positive relations with students in the educational process.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation of international program based on participants reflections also highlighted certain problematic aspects that should be taken into account for future program development:

- participants has very different preparation, experiences and needs. The diversity of participants and their expectations must be taken into account;
- the same curriculum was applied in different countries with different educational systems and contexts of inclusive education, which may result in different perceptions and interpretations of certain aspects of inclusive education;
- one-time training does not cover all areas of the arts and all possibilities of music, art, drama, dance separately in sufficient detail and evenly in the context of inclusive education; it is relevant to organize continuous training courses focused on the specificity of individual fields of arts and their integration, applied to implementation of inclusive education.