

PREPARING TEACHERS FOR INCLUSION IN LITHUANIA: TEACHER EDUCATORS' APPROACHES TO DIVERSITY AND EXISTING CHALLENGES

Lingyi Chu

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Nano Khetsuriani

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Abstract. *Inclusive education is a universal pedagogical trend, covering a broad range of research areas such as race, ethnicity, gender, culture, language, religion, and ability. An inclusive system concerns the rights, social justice, and equity within education for all, especially the marginalised groups (UNICEF, 2022). Lithuania has officially rolled out new legislation (in 2011) and structural changes (in 2024) to its educational system, moving it from a multi-track system to an inclusive one. However, teachers have reported implementation difficulties such as differentiating teaching methods, fostering student socialisation, and lacking multiprofessional collaboration and dialogue with parents (Lakkala et al., 2019). Contextual urgency lies in the changing demographics of the student body and impacts the reconsideration of diversity and inclusion in Lithuanian classrooms. This study focuses on teacher educators' (TEs) perspectives at a major teacher training university in Lithuania. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members to understand how diversity and inclusion are understood, interpreted, and implemented within the faculty. This research revealed current practices within teacher training regarding diversity, highlighting strengths, challenges, and potential enhancements. Critical implications for preparing future educators for inclusive classrooms are discussed.*

Keywords: *Inclusive education, personalised learning, differentiated learning, teacher training.*

Introduction

Inclusive education in Lithuania only came into effect as law in 2011, intending to replace a history of segregated education. While both experts and the public are concerned about how schools and teachers are not ready for this change from a multi-track to an inclusive one, teacher education institutions took on the role of ensuring that trainee teachers are ready for the practical demands of inclusion in their future classrooms.

Meanwhile, contextual changes urge change in schools to cater better to their increasingly diverse student body. With the enforcement of structural change into

all-inclusive starting January 2024, the topic is current in practice and research. This research aims to analyse how a major teacher-training university in Lithuania addresses the topic through the views of faculty members by identifying how inclusive education is being perceived, understood, addressed and implemented in their currently taught Degree courses. While the curriculum is being touched upon, the focus is on how faculty members perceive it rather than being an investigation of the curriculum itself. The main research question is: How is inclusive education being understood, addressed and approached in teacher training programmes in Lithuania?

Literature Review

Inclusive education traces back to its initial inception in the nineteenth century when attempts to assimilate within compulsory schooling are being gradually transformed today into a postmodern interpretation rooted in social justice and cultural pluralism. UNICEF stated, "Inclusive education allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, to the benefit of all" (UNICEF, 2022). Inclusive education remains a broad topic of research and values today, including discussion on race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and (dis)ability. An inclusive system concerns the rights, social justice, and equity within education for all, especially the marginalised groups: "An important element of inclusive education involves ensuring that all teachers are prepared to teach all students. Inclusion cannot be realized unless teachers are empowered agents of change, with values, knowledge and attitudes that permit every student to succeed. Despite their differences in teacher standards and qualifications, education systems are increasingly moving away from identifying problems with learners and towards identifying barriers to learning. To complete this shift, education systems must design teacher education and professional learning opportunities that dispel entrenched views that some students are deficient, unable to learn or incapable" (UNESCO, 2020). Advancing professional learning opportunities for inclusive education is at the core of this paper.

Contextualising the study requires looking at Lithuania and the historical development of inclusive education. Similar to other post-Soviet nations, Lithuania had a well-established system of special education, whereas the development of inclusive education was initiated after the nation regained its independence in 1991. Hence, the idea of inclusive education in Lithuania is fairly new with its current focus being the official structural shift from a multi-track system to an inclusive one officially starting in January of 2024. As special schools are being closed, the number of children enrolled in mainstream schools is increasing with its function being expanded to promote inclusion. This implies moving away from the language of learners with developmental disorders to learners with special educational needs (SEN). With changing demographics such

as a vastly increasing number of returned immigrant and refugee pupils, inclusion in learning settings requires more versatile skills and expertise based on a profound understanding of the ideology of inclusion (Määttä, Äärelä & Uusiautti, 2018). Current goals of inclusive education aim to remove barriers (physical, emotional, and social), and to provide quality education and necessary support for every learner- at their nearest educational institution (Bethere, Kasiliauskiene, Pavitola & Usca, 2023). Current discussions focus on the need to strengthen the support systems in schools, including increasing the number of educational support specialists and teaching assistants in schools, adapting the schools' physical environment for inclusive education, increasing the qualifications and competencies of all current and prospective teachers to prepare schooling practices that cater for pupils with diverse educational needs (*ibid*). Inclusion of diversity currently seems to focus on the diversity of abilities and learning support required amongst learners.

However, teachers have previously reported ongoing support of segregationist ideas (Ališauskas & Šimkienė, 2013) and continue to experience implementation difficulties in differentiating teaching methods, feeling a lack of readiness to foster student socialisation and dialogue with parents, and experiencing a gap in multiprofessional collaboration (Lakkala, Juškevičienė, Česnavičienė, Poteliūnienė, Ustilaitė & Uusiautti, 2019). Contextual urgency lies in the changing demographics of the student body. It impacts resulting in the urgency to reconsider diversity and inclusion beyond SEN in Lithuanian schools and how current teacher training prepares future teachers for this. Here, the practical theory of inclusive teachers requires the ability to recognise and reflect on the factors that support or hinder the inclusion of all students (*cf.* Shani & Hebel, 2016)- both the obvious and the hidden. This is especially true in the context of educational reforms in Lithuania since its re-independence in 1990- which has heavily impacted (initial) teacher training curriculum, especially while moving towards competencies-based education (Rutkienė & Ponomarenko, 2019). Specific to inclusive education, current teacher training in Lithuania requires every teacher who works in preschool, primary school, or as a subject, vocational, supplementary informal education teacher must complete at least 60 hours of training in Special Needs Education and Psychology (according to the Requirements for the Qualification of Teachers, 2014-08-29 No. V-774, par. 9) (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020).

As the new teachers' competence frameworks look to refocus on teachers' didactical competencies (individual learning needs, differentiation of teaching instruction, and teachers' self-reflection) and general competencies (*i.e.* professional communication skills, cultural competence)- beyond merely subject-focused competencies. How teacher educators (TEs) comprehend inclusion and diversity in education- within the new requirements- significantly influences their teaching and modelling of these principles to the prospective teachers.

Methodology

Employing a qualitative case study methodology, this research zeroes in on a major teacher training university in Lithuania. This institution is selected for its leadership in teacher education, particularly its involvement in innovative pedagogical methods and international educational collaborations. The case study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of how TEs integrate personalised and differentiated learning approaches in their curriculum and teaching.

Table 1 Respondent demographics (made by authors)

Teacher Educator	Gender	Teaching experience Novice (under 5 years) / Expert (over 5 years)	Interdisciplinary/ multidisciplinary background	Personal experience with inclusivity	Role in Inclusive Education within Teacher training
TE1	F	Novice	Natural Sciences Education	Study exchange	Indirect
TE2	F	Expert	Interculturality	International student	Indirect
TE3	F	Novice	SEN	Internship abroad	Direct
TE4	F	Expert	Educational leadership and management	International projects	Indirect
TE5	F	Novice	Curriculum design and integration	International projects	Indirect
TE6	F	Expert	Mathematics Education	Teaching exchange	Indirect

Data is collected from six TEs at a major teacher training university in Lithuania, chosen through opportunity sampling to ensure a representation of varied expertise, including those actively engaged in developing and applying innovative, personalised educational strategies. The participants represent different facets of teacher training, such as primary, secondary, subject, and special education, offering insights into a broad spectrum of teaching and learning contexts. For clarity and anonymity in our analysis, we will refer to these respondents as “Teacher Educator 1” (TE 1), “Teacher Educator 2” (TE 2), and

so forth. The demographic distribution of the respondents is shown in Table 1. For the purpose of later stages of the project which may allow for comparison and identifying trends, teacher experiences, professional and personal backgrounds, and own perspectives on their roles in delivering inclusive education in their own teaching.

All of the TEs in the discussion are female. Their teaching experience varies from five to twenty years, from novice to expert to university-level teaching. The subjects they teach encompass a range of topics, including natural sciences, primary education, STEM education, pedagogical theories, curriculum and more. Additionally, the discussion touches upon various degree programs within the field of education. The conversation did not specifically include colleagues from the field of Inclusive Education itself. Instead, the focus was on TE involved in initial teacher education programs. This highlights the diverse experiences and perspectives of TEs in the broader context of education.

The semi-structured interviews consist of 30 questions designed to explore educators' perceptions and practices regarding personalised learning and differentiation in the classroom. The interviews begin by gathering demographic information about respondents, including their role as faculty members, educational background, and language proficiency. Subsequently, the questions cover various aspects, such as the structure of the Teacher Education Program, the university's stance on inclusion and diversity, faculty members' experiences, including personal experiences with diversity, opinions on inclusive education in Lithuania, and awareness of relevant documents. Additionally, there are inquiries about tools and strategies for differentiated learning, assessment methods, technology integration, collaboration, challenges and reflections on national and institutional policies. The interviews had an average duration of around 1 hour and 20 minutes each and were simultaneously recorded and transcribed through the Microsoft Teams program. Recordings are stored in the university cloud space and are only accessible by the researchers.

These interviews are analysed through thematic analysis, a method that facilitates identifying patterns and themes related to the implementation of personalised and differentiated teaching methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis aims to elucidate the educators' perspectives on these pedagogical approaches and how they are operationalised in teacher training, particularly in light of Lithuania's commitment to inclusive education.

For accurate data collection validity was ensured through carefully designed interview questions that align with research objectives and a standardised interview process to minimise biases. Multiple interviews with diverse participants were conducted to enhance reliability, ensuring consistency and robust findings. Ethical considerations were central, with informed consent and confidentiality measures in place.

Research Results

When asked how inclusive education is implemented, most TEs refer to how they cater to their students, who are either prospective or current school teachers: “We have some students who have special needs related to their disabilities. For example, I have a few students with hearing impairments. So, when I prepare for lessons for subjects, I keep in mind that some material needs to be adapted a little. We don't, unfortunately, have enough literature in Lithuania, so I sometimes need to translate literature or videos from English to Lithuanian or think of other ways to adapt” (TE 3).

On the other hand, a few TEs pointed out how they incorporate discussions of inclusive values through their teaching through interacting with students: “I have two different groups [of students]: with very young students who do not have any teaching experience I can shape them and create the right attitude and reflect on their understanding on the concept of inclusion. With the other group [-current teachers who are requalifying], I sometimes comment [on their current practices], but not always- depending on where the discussion takes us” (TE 1).

When invited to discuss their own implementation methods for inclusive education, TEs acknowledged being supported by the university's extensive experience and expertise in terms of teaching and researching personalized and differentiated learning practices. They reported adjusting their own teachings in all cycles of teaching, especially after receiving practical training courses such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), ICT applicational tools and methods, active learning in the field, guest expert lectures, creative assessment designs that invite students' personal interests and strengths. TEs also suggested that having the opportunity for ongoing professional development and learning with colleagues through taking part in international projects allows them to further advance their own practices, before sharing them onwards with their own students.

A few TEs mentioned that their personal experiences of contact and co-work with the physically impaired or SEN allowed them to be more open as people, teachers, and sometimes frontiers when rolling out inclusive schooling and relative teacher training. Almost all TEs suggested that contextual specification implies a lack of the general public's contact with matters around diversity and hence, inclusion. TEs also take on the role of being one starting point to changing the nation's narrative on diversity and inclusion: “We have to first think about how to work with adults' attitudes, when some [people's attitude] seem close-minded, it can be that they just don't understand how to approach the topic or the right language to apply, and this fear turns into rejection. But when you have some experience of contact and thoughts on the topic, you are more open for diversity” (TE 5). The role that TEs play in implementing inclusive education has also been pointed out: “In some ways, we are working with (prospective) school teachers,

but we also need to think about preparing them to discuss inclusion matters with their future school administrators, colleagues, and their pupils' parents" (TE 2).

In terms of how its teacher training programmes prepare future teachers for inclusive practices, some suggested the need to expand on diversity within classrooms limits to attempt to inclusion on SEN, but rarely goes beyond such to touch on matters of race/ethnicity, gender, culture, language, religion, and more: "People are becoming more comfortable to talk about SEN such as the ability to talk about disabilities... but, uh, I'm not sure about minorities... because Lithuanians are conservative, and still we have political conflicts with [name of country]. Regions with specific minority groups still very much live within separate communities, attend minority schools that teach in other languages and do not participate in the Lithuanian educational system at all. Similarly, there is a lack of opportunity for contact, understanding, and so, openness" (TE 4). Some, on the other hand, relate inclusion beyond SEN, as "... not only about health issues but also gender issues- such as gender stereotypes in our textbooks, and now we also have a growing number of immigrant and refugee students- and so it also relates to diversity. In this sense, we can talk about inclusion in much broader ways" (TE 3).

When asked about factors hindering the implementation of inclusive teaching in both university-level teaching and preparing students for future classrooms, TEs suggested that support and resources are mostly sufficient, with space to discuss and request additional material or international collaboration. However, a current challenge includes when newly qualified teachers enter schools for their teaching practices and find that what the university has done to prepare them for inclusivity is not understood the same way as current in-field teachers who may act as mentors to the new teachers: "We see our university study programmes as a place that prepare future educators or educational support specialists. We explain theoretical aspects but also allow our teachers to reflect on their teaching placement experiences, for example, by implementing personalised learning approaches. [The problem is that] ... when our students start working in schools, they come back with like an argument for a while because what they observed in real life practices is that not all schools understand the idea of inclusive education- some can also be openly against it" (TE 6).

There is also a sentiment of inclusive education depending on personal willingness affected by personal beliefs: "I don't think that it's obligatory for *all* teachers to know more about inclusive education because there is enough information in the training programmes and around us... But I think all teachers need much more practice with cases of inclusion. Generally, they are educated. Theoretically, they have the knowledge; practically, they lack opportunity. Still, this depends on the person if he/ she wishes to advance or stick to just the basics" (TE 2).

When invited to make suggestions to improve the implementation on the university level, TEs mentioned that despite the university's commitment and official declaration to inclusive education, the university's own implementation lacks standardisation. This, however, provides flexibility when catering for individual students' needs: "Formally, we have a special department where university teachers can approach to get advice on how to provide SEN for specific students. Informally, for example, my colleagues ask me [as a lecturer on educational psychology] what to do when they have students with SEN- for example, autistic students and so on, and I will give advice. You just need to find the right people to talk to. We solve problems as a team, and we are looking for solutions through discussions, case by case" (TE 1). On the other hand, when invited to make suggestions to improve implementation on the school level, TEs suggested methodological support that approaches the school in their contexts, aiding the school's evaluation based on contextual specificities when prescribing solutions for change together with the schools and current staff members.

An overview of the analysis is included in Table 2, where two to five themes emerged through each of the five lines of inquiry. Under each theme, implementation specifications have been included. In short, TEs emphasize catering to students with special needs, adapting materials, and fostering inclusive values through discussions. They draw on the university's support, incorporating personalized and differentiated learning practices, and engaging in ongoing professional development. TEs highlight personal experiences with diversity and advocate for changing societal attitudes toward inclusion. The role of TEs in preparing future teachers for inclusive practices is discussed, with an emphasis on addressing a broader range of diversity issues. Challenges include discrepancies between university preparation and in-field teaching practices and the impact of personal willingness and beliefs on inclusive education. TEs suggest improving standardization at the university level and providing methodological support tailored to schools' contextual specificities for effective implementation.

Table 2 Emerging themes and reflection on implementation (made by authors)

Inquiry	Emerging Theme	Implementation
1. Implementation of Inclusive Education	1.1. Approach to Special Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adapting materials for students with disabilities. - Translation of literature or videos. - Innovative adaptation strategies.
	1.2. Incorporating Inclusive Values through Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shaping attitudes of young students. - Reflecting on inclusion with requalifying teachers.

	1.3. Support from the University and Ongoing Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adjusting teaching based on training courses (e.g., UDL, ICT). - Participating in international projects for continuous learning.
	1.4. Personal Experiences Influencing Openness and Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contact with physically impaired or SEN individuals fostering openness. - Role in changing the nation's narrative on diversity and inclusion.
	1.5. Role of TEs in Implementing Inclusive Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparing future teachers for discussions on inclusion with various stakeholders.
2. Teacher Training Programmes	2.1. Scope of Diversity in Training Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited inclusion of diversity beyond SEN (e.g., race, gender, culture, language). - Challenges related to political conflicts and minority communities.
	2.1. Expanding on the Notion of Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognizing inclusion beyond health issues to include gender, immigrant, and refugee issues.
3. Factors Hindering Inclusive Teaching Implementation	3.1. Challenges in School Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Newly qualified teachers facing discrepancies between university preparation and in-field practices. - Varied understanding of inclusive education among in-field teachers.
	3.2. Personal Willingness and Beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inclusive education dependent on personal willingness. - Personal beliefs influencing the desire to advance in inclusive practices.
4. Suggestions for Improvement at University Level	4.1. Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of standardization in university's implementation. - Flexibility in catering to individual students' needs.
	4.2. Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal collaboration among colleagues.
5. Suggestions for Improvement at School Level	5.1. Methodological Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Methodological support tailored to schools' contexts.
	5.2. Contextual Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Context-specific evaluation and solutions for change.

Discussion

This case study demonstrated that inclusion is understood differently by TEs although the core message of catering for student diversity is present. They take on the interpretation role that translates between policy, schools, current and future teachers (who are also university students), and school pupils- while attempting to prepare their students to be able to do the same. This aligns with the proposal for global knowledge bases required for inclusive teachers (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti & Hudson, 2013). It is core for the teacher to be able to understand their role and position as a teacher of diverse students and to possess basic knowledge of special educational needs and the process by which the support is planned and constructed. While reflecting upon the challenges to prepare inclusive teachers who are ready for practice under major education reform, TEs expressed hopefulness towards prospective teachers: “They enter [the study programme] willing to change the situations to support each student even when they are new to the field. And because they [tend to feel like they] lack knowledge, they look to the university to be able to acquire new skills or become better at what they do. Maybe some teachers still don't understand, but they need time and practice- and actually, they have already put down their first steps for changing... and we are here with them” (TE 3). Echoing previous studies' calling for action to aid new teachers in coping with struggles while working with and effectively including children with diverse needs in the class (Anthony, Hunter, & Hunter, 2015), TEs showed awareness towards students' reported reality shock (McCormack & Thomas, 2003) during their teaching practices. Being aware, responding to, and using it as a reflexive opportunity for all students aids novice teachers' perceptions such as self-efficacy (Mintz, Hick, Solomon, Matziari, Ó'Murchú, Hall, Cahill, Curtin, Anders & Margariti, 2020), and has lasting effects on their professional identities- in this case, being an inclusive teacher. Nonetheless, within the context of this case study, the implementation of inclusive education, encompassing tools, methods, and resources employed by TEs, emerges as a process that is neither novel nor abrupt, contrary to the prevailing societal narrative. Discussions with TEs revealed a continuous discourse on the vision and strategies of inclusive education, consistent with C. Barnes' findings on the ongoing nature of discussions surrounding inclusive education practices (Barnes, 2011). Amidst these ongoing discussions, the immediate adoption of practices addressing diverse learning needs within current classrooms has gained prominence.

The interviews offered significant insights into the dynamic landscape of personalised and differentiated learning practices in Lithuania. As TEs highlighted, personalised learning plays a crucial role in facilitating inclusive learning environments, which aligns with the findings of J. Richards, who emphasised the role of student choice in enhancing engagement as an inclusive

strategy (Richards, 2008). For instance, providing students with an opportunity to present their learning outcomes using their preferred means or tools. This convergence underscores the importance of student autonomy in fostering meaningful learning experiences. Furthermore, the emphasis on students' interests echoes C. Tomlinson's argument that personalised learning should cater to individual preferences and motivations (Tomlinson, 1999). For example, to direct student learning in accordance to students' personal interests and strengths. While personalised learning is prioritised, discussions also brought to light the significance of contextualised learning, wherein personal experiences and backgrounds significantly influence the educational process (Clark, 2013). TEs demonstrated critical awareness and willingness to encompass real-world debates, dilemmas, social stigmas into their learning dialogues with their students. Some for example, chooses to invite field experts and connect to external resources, allowing students to experiment with questioning current norms, standards, and practices in a safe learning environment. With increasing internationalisation intention from higher education institutions in Lithuania, the staff and student body is changing accordingly. The who, what, when, where, how and why of the curricula are reflected upon by the TEs.

TEs emphasised that while personalised approaches are crucial in promoting inclusion, it is also very important to address teacher preparedness and flexibility when initiating and implementing such practices effectively. R. Johnson's noted that a personalised approach to education requires educators to be well-prepared and adaptable in their instructional approaches (Johnson, 2005). TEs spoke about preparedness as the readiness and capability of educators to effectively plan, deliver and adjust their instructions while they also meet the diverse needs of the students. Flexibility is seen by TEs as the ability to make real-time adjustments to ensure that all learners are included and have opportunities to succeed in their learning. They reflected upon it as a practical challenge in teacher training as it is not thought to be something which can be taught and learnt, but can only be obtained through practice.

Despite these alignments, the emphasis on diverse teaching methods within personalised learning strategies is similar to what was being highlighted by other authors as well who suggest a broader perspective on instructional diversity (Fleming & Mills, 1992). While the focus on personalised learning and contextualised experiences is supported by previous research, the integration of diverse teaching methods adds depth to the approach, ensuring that personalised education accounts for a variety of learning styles and preferences. TEs drew special attention to a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training that was provided by the university as part of university staff's professional training in inclusion. Having the opportunity for teachers reflect upon their current practice- such as specifically course descriptions, recommended reading materials for the

students, and assessment options has been reported as an enlightening one that strikes immediate change.

On the other hand, unlike some studies (Arnaiz-Sánchez, De Haro-Rodríguez, Caballero & Martínez-Abellán's, 2023) suggested barriers to educational inclusion in initial teacher training as having limiting competencies acquisition, lacking attention to diversity, and theoretical learning having limited relevance to practical intervention- inclusive education is yet to be immersed into all teacher training subjects in Lithuania, and still heavily relies solely on the mandatory Special Needs Education and Psychology- a 60-hour course to cover the basics. There still lacks an overall inclusion lens across teacher training programmes. Catering for diverse learning needs seems to still rely on individual effort and willingness- evident both at university and school levels. TEs have reported major concerns that inclusive teaching methods still tend to be seen as something left to the individuals to decide when they are ready to implement, whereas these changes in fact do not tend to happen organically as teachers turn from novice to expert teachers. While novice teachers battle with implementing pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge and getting familiarised with both institutional demands and students' personal needs- inclusion is not to be seen as a matter to be dealt with later. Teaching and learning should always be inclusive.

Moreover, teachers' educators see policy and structural changes in Lithuania as a societal process that requires time and community effort and takes into consideration the contextual specifications: "Education is shaped by each country's culture, history, social and political situation and so on. It's a process and each country has to find specific ways to be inclusive, and changes take time. As Lithuania is going to follow the path of inclusive educational settings, we need to ensure that we are reflecting on our educational system and looking for opportunities to advance" (TE 1). This is similar to D. Mitchell's reminder of the importance for each country to develop its own model of inclusive education that links national traditions, values, ideologies and experiences regarding inclusion (Mitchell's, 2014). TEs too, suggested that implementing a progressive, inclusive policy into established tradition requires collective work- mutual interaction with the transformation processes of educational institutions and education system changes, while depending on competent teachers who have the willingness to improve and have a positive attitude towards inclusion and change (Sharma & Nuttal 2016). This also aligns with stressing on the ability to collaborate as one of the crucial skills for inclusive teachers. This collaboration is both horizontal and vertical, both cross-disciplinary and generational. Interestingly, contextual specifications of the nation play a huge role in how TEs understand and evaluate their own current practices, factors hindering current practices, and challenges encountered. The narrative emphasizes the complex aspects of inclusion, influenced by regional, cultural, and personal factors. It highlights education's role in fostering inclusivity, stressing the need for empathy and open-mindedness. It

also points out the significance of addressing stigmas and stereotypes to adapt to societal changes, suggesting that the effectiveness of inclusion relies on both collective societal values and individual actions.

Similarly, there are sentiments on seeing inclusion in education as a first step toward a more tolerant and empathetic society: “It's very important to have this sense of unity when it comes to looking for solutions for SEN or inclusion. When teachers see it as their role, they can move away from their own stereotypes, with both experienced and newly qualified teachers viewing it as just an advancement in education to meet societal needs, and *not* additional work and only a challenge. Parents should be involved more, with openness and professionalism without feeling stigmatised” (TE 4). TEs in this study, too, see their roles not only as preparing future teachers with knowledge and practical methods but also as negotiators and advocates of ethical ideals and everyday practices (Bradley-Levine, 2021) for inclusive education.

Conclusions

To sum up, the case study reveals that TEs have varied interpretations of inclusion- all focusing on meeting diverse student needs. They act as mediators between educational policies and classroom practices, striving to equip future teachers with the skills for inclusive education. TEs emphasise methods for inclusive education, such as the importance of personalised learning and advocating for student choice in topics to enhance engagement and learning. They also highlight the role of contextualised learning, where personal experiences shape teaching strategies, promoting diverse and adaptable methods. These practices, reflecting a shift towards more personalised and inclusive education in Lithuania, underscore the need for teachers to be versatile and responsive to students' individual interests and backgrounds. Without focusing heavily on faced challenges, TEs emphasise on a collaborative approach as crucial for fostering inclusivity. This involves addressing cultural stigmas and promoting open-mindedness, underscoring the collective and individual roles in effecting meaningful change.

However, Inclusive education in Lithuania still has a lot of potential to develop. Firstly, the current heavy dependence on the basic 60-hour course, lacking a comprehensive inclusion focus across all training subjects and programs. Secondly, the approach to meeting diverse learning needs is still largely reliant on individual initiative and willingness at both university and school levels. Thirdly, the need for inclusive education in Lithuania to move beyond SEN and for discussion to include other variety of diversity-related concerns has also been mentioned.

Nevertheless, TEs view the shift towards inclusive education in Lithuania as a gradual and ongoing process which is a complex societal journey that requires

deep contextual understanding, but most importantly time and community effort. In order to overcome it, they emphasize the importance of developing a model of inclusive education that respects national traditions and values, advocating for collaborative efforts across all levels of the educational system. Despite challenges in preparing teachers for inclusive settings, there is optimism towards new educators' willingness to learn and adapt and growing curiosity for the vision and strategies for inclusive education

Furthermore, this case study highlights the role of inclusive education in fostering a more tolerant and empathetic society, emphasizing unity starting from addressing SEN. All educators are encouraged to shift perspectives, viewing inclusion as an educational advancement rather than a burden, with a call for greater parental involvement and professionalism. TEs see themselves as both instructors and advocates for inclusive practices, stressing the importance of ethical ideals in shaping future educators for a diverse educational landscape.

Finally, this investigation serves as the initial phase in a broader inquiry, aiming to explore how TEs are equipping future teachers for inclusive education at a time of educational reform. As a pilot study, responses also shed light on inclusive education in higher education and teacher training in the Lithuanian context. Follow-up inquiries have been planned around the challenges and opportunities of responding to student diversity beyond (special) learning needs, nurturing inclusive and diverse classrooms, and aligning local practices with broader European educational practices.

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