Supporting development of more inclusive school - experiences from one teacher in-service training initiative

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Abstract

This paper draws upon a Nordic-Baltic initiative to promote more inclusive education in Lithuania. The project was designed to support vocational education settings to accommodate students with special educational needs (SEN). Especially, the focus was on transitions of students with SEN to join into ordinary vocational schools - the possibility to be admitted to the secondary education stage II or III curricula of basic vocational education they would not have had without this initiative. The paper is exploring the success of these students, and the perceptions of both the students and their teachers within their training as gathered in a follow-up study conducted within and after this piloting project in 2005 -2006.

Key words: Inclusive education, teacher in-service-training, teacher and school development, transition, vocational education

INTRODUCTION

The importance of listening to the voices of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has been clearly articulated in recent years (Jones 2005; Kenny et al 2000, Shevlin and Rose 2003, 2005). In order to understand the policies and procedures implemented within education systems, it is essential that researchers engage with service recipients to gain insights and to measure the impact of interventions. In research and developmental activities such as that reported here which claim to support the promotion of a more equitable education service it is necessary to ensure that the views of ‘actors’ within this service are placed at the forefront of discussions. It is suggested that by listening to the opinions of young people within vocational education, teachers and others can gain insights and understanding which enable them to develop new policies, and practices, which will ultimately support the development of inclusion.

Development of more inclusive school

The idea of inclusive education brings new demands and challenges to all teachers. Schools are expected to accommodate all students with and without special educational needs and accordingly, teachers should have the competence to support every student’s learning. Golder & al. (2005) and Wamae and Kang’ethe-Kamau (2004) highlight positive attitudes towards the students with special educational needs as a core of teachers’ competence by referring to a number of studies which confirm that knowledge is a critical factor in determining teachers’
attitudes towards students with special needs. Experience is also considered to be important factor in promoting positive attitudes and helping teachers to feel more confident and competent. Besides ‘knowledge’ and ‘experience’ there is one major factor that is important in fostering teachers’ positive attitudes towards students with special needs. Namely, the ideological commitment to the principle of inclusion forms the grounds of facilitating the learning of students with special needs.

Booth and Ainscow (2002, cited in Thomas & Vaughan 2004) regard this creation of inclusive culture as the heart of school improvement and crucial for further development of inclusive policies and practices on the path towards inclusion within a school. Similarly, Marshall et al (2002) suggest that commitment to including all students within the mainstream school setting goes first although there is need to increase special educational knowledge as well. Fostering inclusive beliefs are essential (Hutchinson & Martin, 1999). Skidmore (2004) calls this a process moving from discourse of deviance to discourse of inclusion and claims that the development of more inclusive provision raises several dimensions that should be discussed among teachers and being keenly integrated with the idea of developing pedagogical procedures for all students.

Teachers’ competence development towards more inclusive education includes in general an ability to facilitate learning of diverse students and to develop school as well as educational environment so that the individual needs are taken into account. Changes in teachers’ own practices and in the system (school) are concrete results of competence development. In his study, Tangen (2005) found that teachers’ competence development changed teachers’ practice especially in two ways: 1) Teachers paid more attention than before to the situation and the needs of individual students, and 2) teachers had increased their knowledge of learning difficulties and different problems that their students were meeting in the school. Tangen (2005) has specified the areas of change when the special educational competence has developed. The areas are following:

- Staff pay more attention to students with SEN in ordinary classes
- Staff pay more attention to the educational opportunities provided by the school for the students with SEN
- The school’s work with IEPs
- Greater staff sensitivity towards the role of the students in special education
- Organising of teaching
- Teachers’ collaboration with students
- Collaboration with parents
- School heads pay more attention to the special education provision
- Collaboration with pedagogical-psychological counselling team
- Teacher collaboration
- Collaboration with external partners

Tangen (2005) suggests that in order to realise inclusive education development of change competence is crucial. That means both theoretical and practical knowledge of how professional and systemic change and pedagogical improvements can be implemented in schools.

Ferguson (2006) describes the broad changes that systemic school improvement efforts must achieve to continue making progress. She suggests that we need to move first of all from teaching to learning, ie. engaging students to more meaningful, personalised and

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differentiated learning alongside with building communities of learners where learning is shared. This demands moving from offering services to providing supports; ‘one size does not fit all’ but instead we need to ensure learning using a variety of strategies. Educational staff should move from individual practices to collaborative group practices of all staff. Also parent involvement should be moved to family-school linkages. Last but not least, the ‘quickly fixed’ school reform should be understood as ongoing school improvement and renewal focusing on real fundamental changes in social institutions. (Ferguson 2006) From the point of view of vocational education it could also be added that teacher’s competence in meeting the needs of all students within vocational education and training is also empowered by teacher’s societal competence; the ability to interpret changes in society, working-life and demands for continuous identity-building for all involved in wide contexts. (Kaikkonen 2003.)

In this paper we present one teacher in-service traininig initiative to develop more inclusive education within a project called Transition carried out in Lithuania in 2003-2004, and followed with a smale scale study implemented in 2005-2006 to find out some results of the initiative taken.

The teacher in-service training initiative for vocational teachers in Lithuania

The overall aim of the Transition-project was to promote inclusive education in Lithuania so that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) studying in comprehensive schools would be able to participate in ordinary vocational education. The principles of educational equity and equality have nowadays been clearly written into Lithuanian educational regulation. According to the Republic of Lithuania Law on Education (2003) special needs education can be provided by any school that offer compulsory or comprehensive education and other educational providers or alternatively, sometimes also by special schools. However, at the moment of starting the Transition project in this waste not the case. The Lithuanian educational system still had a constraint on the inclusion of students with special educational needs anything but only on the lowest and narrow provision of vocational education (mainly the 1st level, sometimes the 2nd level).

This fact was also one of the starting points of Transition project. It was appointed out that real student transitions should happen from basic school to wider provision of vocational education. Besides that the Lithuanian Ministry of Education emphasised that it wished an implementation of practically oriented teacher in-service training for teachers involved in this project for to support them in meeting needs of all children and particularly in meeting these needs in the phases of transitions from educational level to another. Thus, this aim was taken as one of the major goals for Transition-project. Additionally, it was wished that the teachers would get support in planning and implementing the actual transition phase and individual education plans.

An immediate objective of the project was to ensure a successful transition for 10 selected SEN-students from comprehensive school to vocational 3rd level education in each of the chosen two counties in Lithuania. The project wished to reach towards the goals through two main activities: Firstly, by improving pedagogical skills of teachers in vocational schools so that they would be able to provide individual education plans (IEPs) for their students and allowing them to participate in ordinary study groups with additional support. Teachers were also wished to be able to establish relevant contacts between comprehensive and vocational
schools for individual preparation of the transition. Secondly, the project addressed to implementing successful transitions of SEN pupils from comprehensive school to vocational education. Selected pupils were transferred from comprehensive school to vocational education in order to achieve formal qualifications or diplomas to be able to enter the labour market. Selected students were also wished to be able to finalise during the project’s span the first year of their studies in vocational education in the field they chose with satisfactory evaluations by their teachers.

The Transition project was implemented under the Nordic-Baltic cooperative umbrella-project ‘A Scholl for All’. The guidelines for this umbrella project were discussed in cooperation between Nordic Council of Ministers ad all three Baltic Ministries of Education.

**Supporting teacher development**

In recent years researchers and practitioners in special needs and inclusive education, as well as pre-service and in-service teacher educators have been paying attention to methods of collaborative, experience-based, and case-based learning (Tangen 2005). The in-service teacher training programme in Lithuania was based on the above-mentioned ideas, and in addition, on development orientation. International aspect in the training programme facilitated knowledge building about implementation of inclusive education.

The underlying idea of the teacher training programme was developing pedagogy for all. Although the starting point within Transition project and through the in-service training programme provided was to train teachers to work with learners with diverse learning difficulties and first and foremost with their transitions, it was not considered to be simply training special educational needs. A strong focus of the training was upon providing every teacher with an understanding of more overall questions of learning and teaching in their current practice, as opposed to a concentration upon teaching approaches specifically aimed only at special needs. The training was described as being in pursuit of reflective teachers who would be able to promote the development of pedagogical actions which took full account of both their learner’s needs and their social backgrounds and context as well as the wider contexts of influencing to educational settings and provisions. So being, the focus of the in-service training provided for teachers was strongly pedagogical, but largely understood, and at the same time developmentally oriented. (Kaikkonen 2005.) Elliot et al. (2005) highlight that chancing curriculum and pedagogy without also directly addressing underlying attitudes, beliefs and value systems would results in gains.

*Experiential and contextual learning* were kept in focus throughout the teacher training programme. In so doing there was an acknowledgement that knowledge itself would not solve the problems. Such understanding is needed but more crucial issue is that of how this knowledge is transferred to everyday practice of the teachers and schools and how it would change existing approaches. Accordingly, it was seen as important to use active learning methods and learning tasks. Additionally, it was taken as a starting point that the chosen learning should be strongly connected with ‘real life’ situations to which teachers would easily relate.

Activities and methods used for training teachers were *active, work- and case-based*. The training included seminars and workshops but it also involved teachers into learning tasks which were concretely related to planning and arranging transitions of chosen students, their
individual guidance and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) but, in addition, paid some attention to more overall school development by using chosen students as case examples. Case-based learning was carried out e.g. so that the students with special needs participated in the seminars of the teacher training programme. This was done for two reasons: Firstly, to highlight for teachers the idea that students with SEN are subjects of their own life and can do decisions concerning it. So they should be included in discussions about their own transition and their educational career planning. Secondly, the solution supported the development of communicative and reciprocal relationship between the teachers and students.

The principles of collaborative learning were implemented in various ways and on various levels. International collaboration between Lithuanian, Estonian and Finnish teachers and teacher educators formed an arena of knowledge building, sharing experiences of good practices and mutual reflection. I practice teachers were sent some mentoring letters by Finnish trainers to support their activities between workshops. The teacher training included also a study trip to Finland to visit some Finnish schools and one Estonian school, lectures, discussions with Finnish and Estonian colleagues, observation of teaching as well as own learning tasks. Also, collaboration between comprehensive schools and vocational schools, between the two Lithuanian counties and educational administration as well as the teachers and local pedagogical psychological services (PPS) were supported during the teacher training programme.

Promoting the development of reflective practice all the way, teachers were also asked to make notes on these activities. It was wished that by reporting these activities taken and reflecting on the process during the first school year some more overall models could be found for schools to organise transitions in the future. Also, in the seminars there were organised time for sharing, discussions and developing ideas together. It is important to create an atmosphere, which is supportive, open and safe. The atmosphere in the workshops was positive and enthusiastic and it seemed to diminish the fears that vocational teachers had in the beginning of the project in terms of teaching students with special needs.

THE STUDY

In this study the interest was in the development of teachers’ competences to better meet the needs of students as described having special educational needs. Although the core of the teacher in-service training programme was to develop teacher competences in facilitating the learning of the students with special needs, it was equally important that the teachers gained competencies, which enable them to develop the school as a whole. We wanted to gain information also from the students about their experiences studying at vocational schools and try to interpret how the information reflects the teachers’ competence development.

The data collection was done twice from the students in two counties in Lithuania, referred here simply as the county A and the county B. The first investigation was done in May 2005 at the end of the second year of vocational studies, and inquiries focused mostly on students’ experiences of studying at vocational school. Altogether 14 students participated in this phase. The second interviews were organised in the end of third year in May 2006 after 3 years of studies again investigating students’ experiences on studies but focusing first and foremost on their thoughts of moving from school to working-life. Altogether 8 students were able to
attend these interviews.

The data was collected with a questionnaire supported with interviews. The questionnaire was composed of statements, which the student assessed by using the Likert-scale from 1 to 4 (not agree – fully agree). The questionnaire forms were given to the students, all of the statements were then read aloud and the students were given the possibility to ask if they did not quite understand any of the statements. This was the way to ensure that the students understood what they were being asked to assess and comment on. After the students had given their opinions, they were interviewed and given space to explain their answers. The questionnaire was combined with an interview in order to get a clearer picture about the students’ experiences. The students’ oral answers were written down.

Besides collecting data from students’, also their teachers were simultaneously interviewed both in spring 2005 and spring 2006. Likewise gathering the data from the students with questionnaires and interviews this was also the methods used to collect the opinions of teachers. In spring 2005 the teachers were asked about the opinions of the students’ success within their studies. Teacher or teachers being the tutor(s) of a certain student gave their evaluative opinions of student’s success with Likert scale statement also providing some open answers. In spring 2006 the focus was slightly also on students but reflecting in wider sense teachers’ experiences of the entire 3-year developmental process they had been through with the students and this data was gathered in a group meeting with altogether 12 teachers present (5 from county A and 7 from county B) and additionally two headmasters and 2 administrators. All the data was interpreted through qualitative analysis.

**FINDINGS**

**Students’ experiences on their studies in vocational school**

In general most of the students told to have enjoyed studying at the vocational school and they were happy with their own educational performance. Most students were satisfied with contents of lessons provided for them and found also the atmosphere of the school supportive saying that helping others is usual in their groups. Students felt that felt that they are respected and accepted at school and especially teachers respect their opinions. All students were happy with the professional field they had chosen.

As a contrast to these rather positive opinions students also pointed out some more critical issues to be thought of. Majority of the students did not feel good after exams, some of them saying that the exam results do not prove their real know-how. They also criticised that teaching is not illustrative enough and they are provided with insufficient feedback by their teachers. Quite expectedly some of the students argued that teachers do not understand students of their age. They also claimed their study group not being peaceful to study in. However, when comparing the student groups in the two counties involved there seems to some differences. The students in county A seemed to have quite more negative opinions compared to their peers in county B. (See table 1.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not satisfied with the ways of working</th>
<th>County A</th>
<th>County B</th>
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<td></td>
<td>43%</td>
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Not satisfied with the space and opportunities to express their views 72% 20%
Not attention the students need 43% 0%
Bullying experiences 67% 0%
School as insecure place 71% 20%
Teachers do not inspire students to learn 71% 0%
Worried about going to work 43% 0%

| Findings on differences between the two counties on students’ experiences on studying at vocational school after two years of studies (spring 2005). |
|---|---|
| Based on the interviews in spring 2006 it looked like that students’ experiences, both positive and negative, about studying at vocational school remained quite similar on their nature than a year before; most students seemed to be rather satisfied with studies. After having said this it is needed to remember that the number of the interviewed students were the same in spring 2005 in both counties but all in all quite small (7 in both counties) and the number of students involved was even smaller in spring 2006 ( only 2 students in county A and 6 in county B). |

**Some facts on students’ study results after three years of studies**

The total amount of students who started in their vocational studies with the support provided by the Transition project in autumn 2003 was 21 students. In spring 2006 and based on both students’ self-evaluation as their teachers’ evaluation, 13 students were expected to pass the national vocational subjects exams and of these seven (7) were expected also to pass maturity exams and to get a secondary education certificate, not just a vocational qualification certificate. One student passed only general subject exam. So, it can be said that these students succeeded well in line from the point of view of aims set for the project in the beginning of it as the expectation was them to achieve the vocational qualification.

However, there remained one third of the students who did not pass their studies as expected. What happened to them? At the time of the last interviews we were provided information by the schools as well the regional educational authorities in both counties of these students. According to this information one of the students was absent as he had taken a time off from the studies due to personal reasons, and the school expected him still to return back to his studies. The other six (6) students have dropped out from the system. Two of the girls had got married and had a child, one student had finished his studies and was working and another three (3) had moved abroad, the last reason to be of a growing tendency in Lithuania according to their teachers.

The emphasis on the Transition project was on the transition from comprehensive school to vocational education. However, in this follow-up it was wished also to discover whether the transition from school to adult life would be successful for the students and how they were supported in this phase by their tutors and schools.

Without a doubt all the students (8) declared that they have got skills to act according to the
rules of working life. They considered themselves brave enough to ask for help and felt they are able to take responsibility of their work and work with more experienced workers. 7/8 students fully agreed that they had learnt skills needed to go to work. All agreed that their general knowledge is good, yet only 2 of them were fully confident with their professional-specific skills and 3 students with their professional-specific knowledge. In spite of that only 1 student was not very motivated to go to work.

Students also expressed that during their vocational education they had got acquainted well with their working practice placements. As opposite to their feeling about not getting enough feedback in school environment students told that they had got well enough feedback during their working placements and they also had self-evaluated and discussed their skills with their teachers. They told to have got support in transition to work (after school), but however, this had not been provided by their teachers but instead by their friends, parents or other persons. Nevertheless, most students also felt that their relationship with their teachers was good; all felt that they have been able to discuss with their teachers about moving to working life.

Even though students’ opinions mostly sounded rather positive, however, the facts about their transition out form school cannot be said to be extremely flourishing. Of those eight students who were present at interviews in spring 2006 only 3 told to have found themselves a work placement after school. Three of them had not yet been successful in this and two students had negotiations going on. It is also noteworthy that of these eight students only half were assumable going to work on the field they had studied and the other four most obviously on some other vocational field.

**Pedagogical development within the schools**

When asked about their work in interviews in spring 2006 the teachers claimed in general that there is much more additional work than there used to be earlier in the school administration but also within EU funded projects. Concerning their students they claimed them to have come worse and worse and that they demand more of teachers’ attention. However, the teachers seemed to be quite positive on their attitudes toward students with special needs. They had a belief of attitudes to have changed more positive in general towards students with special needs and many of them considered to have more tolerance themselves. Teachers told that within their school they try to do they best. The described to have revised their own teaching through easier tasks, more attention, discussion, practical advice, group work and by giving more practical work for the students with special needs. This is rather interesting a point compared to the opinions of students who felt that they are not given enough attention within their classes.

Based on the experiences as described by students about studying at vocational school at least the following challenges for teacher competencies can be raised:

- Abilities to personalise teaching
- Skills to illustrate, visualise and use new/diverse methods in teaching
- Skills to assess learning in variety of ways
- Abilities to develop attitudes at the whole school
- Abilities to develop modern learning environments

Concerning their specific experiences of the students on the special issue of transition from
VET school to working life it can be said that teachers still do have challenges in their competencies as follows:

- Skills to build connections to working life
- Skills to see transitions as learning demand for students and accordingly, organise them pedagogically as learning situations/possibilities
- Skills on career guidance and counselling

**Development of the schools as organisations**

On school level teachers gave evidence on changes adapted to curricula in general but also specifically modifications made for students with special needs. One of the teachers described they have a methodological group for teachers where they discuss the problems they face in their teaching and also some seminars had been organised to support teacher development in these matters. One teacher described herself to have worked with other teachers, describing how to support the student best with additional advice and amended tasks. Also some changes made in the physical environment were raised.

Teachers described the amount of students with special needs to have grown in their schools and believing this tendency still to continue. Not all of them were happy with this. They felt that they had been given the task to provide students with special needs with special or individual programmes but there is not so much support for that work. Schools lack personnel with additional training on these issues such as special teachers. Teachers enlightened that the work with students with special needs is more time-consuming and teachers are not paid of the extra work. One of the respondents claimed that the situation is a bit awkward; they do have a legislation allowing additional payment for special teachers but they do not have them in vocational schools and even tough they would, there is no funding available for these payments. On the other hand teachers told that there is a process going on to change the regulations concerning teachers’ working hours, and in best case this was expected to enhance the development of better supporting students with special needs. However, teachers had expectations towards both their own school as well the Ministry of Education to enhance the development of more inclusive education. Teachers were pleased with the amendments done in national legislation and providing students with special needs with more opportunities.

Still one issue was raised several times was that of accreditation of schools. Schools that have low level of student performance will not get the accreditation. Teachers feared that this will turn the attitudes more negative towards students with special needs. On the other hand, one of the headmasters said that within their school the try to build the school ethos supportive for all students saying; ‘It’s not for the outcomes in the end of the 3-year training that counts, but the question whether we are able to provide our students with such skills that they are able to cope for 50 years in real life after completing their studies in our school.’

**CONCLUSIONS**

After having described this all, we assume the readers most apparently have this fundamental question to ask: Did this teacher in-service training initiative lead, by involving students into it, to development of more inclusive education in vocational schools in Lithuania?

Based on the interview data it seems most obvious that many of the students had found this
experiment valuable for them. However, there exists this quite critical amount of students who for several reasons did not attend the interviews and whose opinions we can only guess. However, several of those being present in the project activities as well in the interviews, suggested that this experience had given support on the growth of their self-esteem and to have supported them well. The most radical comment of this kind was one student saying ‘this project has changed my life totally’. But all in all, there remains the fact that one third of the students did not pass their vocational exams and they dropped out the system. In spite of that we have a strong belief based on all students opinion along the process claiming that the process supported e.g. their life-skills and self-esteem and encouraged them onwards. Based on teacher interviews it might be said that involvement of students gave support also for teacher development.

On the teacher development level many of the teachers expressed that this experience had raised their awareness on student diversity and how to cope with them. Additionally, they gave opinions that the attitudes towards students as described having special educational needs have changed to be more positive and also promoted pedagogical improvements of procedures with all students. Teachers told to have improved their own skills and working methods with all students. They also suggested attitudes in schools to have changed to be more positive.

Some more overall changes also took place. The most important of them is the amendment of educational legislation in 2003 enabling nowadays more possibilities for students with special needs after completion of their basic education. By no means was this not only impacted by the Transition project but instead of more overall development. However the project might take some credit of promoting strongly this amendment through the experiences afforded in it.

Additionally, it is worth noticing the success some of the students made in achieving also the targets for general education subjects and passing the national exams in them. This can be said to be for some added value for the project but of course, first and foremost for the students themselves. In so doing they are now able to avoid the dead ends they system had put in front of them before this experiment. It also could be taken as a challenging lesson to learn from when developing further the educational provision also in earlier stages of education system but also the procedures in supporting students as described having special needs in every level.

As a final conclusion it can be said that even there was some positive signs of very encouraging development of more inclusive school the future development for the students is still left open. Will they be able to struggle themselves a real inclusion in their society? This is challenging task for the vocational schools and teachers to face and tackle with.

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