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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 237 (2017) 144 – 149

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

7th International Conference on Intercultural Education "Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World", EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

Teacher training in the use of ICT for inclusion: differences between Early Childhood and Primary Education

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Abstract

The Spanish education system considers the principle of educational equity and inclusion as a way of ensuring equal opportunities for students, serving as a compensatory approach that addresses personal, cultural, economic and social inequalities. Moreover, the impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has led to changes in the teaching-learning process, taking into account the principles of universal design and accessibility; this plays a key role in moving towards methodologies that enable improvements in educational quality. Thus, this study aimed to analyze the perceptions that prospective Early Childhood and primary teachers have about using ICT for inclusion in the ordinary classroom. An ad-hoc questionnaire was administered to a sample of fourth-year students reading undergraduate degrees in Early Childhood and Primary Education at the Catholic University of Murcia (n=231). Results demonstrated positive attitudes by university students towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs using these types of learning resources. However, significant differences were observed in the "Professional teacher development in ICT" dimension depending on the degree programme (Early Childhood or Primary), with more favourable assessments reported by the first group. This has helped identify the teachers' attitudes and teaching needs in the field of ICT in order to improve training by making curriculum changes and by adapting the teaching-learning process to higher education students.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

Keywords: teacher training, ICT, inclusive education, early childhood education, primary education

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.055

1. Introduction

The OECD study entitled *"Learning to Change: ICT in Schools"* (2001) clearly demonstrates how ICT is changing the face of education and the students' learning experiences, seen as a priority when it comes to the education of pupils with specific support needs (Lozano, Alcaraz & Bernabeu, 2012). Thus, we are dealing with *"tools that enable personal development, successful activity completion and enjoyment of situations that call on one's own individuality, as well as fully and actively participating in activities in one's environment"* (Chacón, 2007, p. 261). What is more, devices of this type facilitate the development of varying forms of expression and knowledge enhancement, allowing different processes to be developed in order to discover information and internalize concepts (Moss, Hay, Deppeler, Astley & Pattison, 2007; Parker & Chao, 2007; Prensky, 2011).

ICT tools are enablers in the learning dynamic, in terms of not only content appropriation when developing students' key competences, but also when creating appealing spaces that invite interaction and information exchange (Albion, 2008; Carvalhoy & Morais, 2011; Livingstone, 2012). These technology-based resources make it possible to tailor the teaching-learning process to the characteristics, interests and needs to the student (Arnaiz, 2003; Luque, Rodríguez & Romero, 2005), promoting their active participation to help reach the academic goals and achievement targets previously established by the teaching professional (Mehlinger & Powers, 2002; Rose, Meyer & Hitchcock, 2005; Vázquez & Sevillano, 2011), while facilitating individual, cooperative and interactive work in class (McFarlane, Triggs & Ching, 2009), In turn, the space-time barriers are removed, thus enabling teacher-student communication (Cabero & Llorente, 2008).

Understanding and analyzing how ICT has impacted on the school setting is an area of study that has garnered considerable interest (Paredes, Guitert & Rubia, 2015). The teacher's positive attitude towards the use of these devices, as well as being suitably trained in their use and pedagogical possibilities, are the main factors behind the correct use of ICT in educational settings (Ballesta & Céspedes, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' commitment towards inclusive education generates self-motivation, and it helps them to consolidate the application of varied methods, techniques and strategies based on the use of ICT tools (Fernández, Reyes, Piñero & Japón, 2013).

Various research (Bozdogan & Özen, 2014; Roblizo & Cózar, 2015) has highlighted the favourable perceptions held by student teachers concerning the frequent use of ICT in the classroom. In general terms, teachers show to be suitably willing to take the necessary measures that allow for ICT to be properly implemented in the school setting, although they regularly find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer number of responsibilities that come with developing other improvements across the system, not to mention the lack of external reinforcements that support its use in this environment (Marín & Romero, 2009). It is therefore not enough to simply include this technology in the classroom; this must also be reflected in the curriculum and when developing new teaching approaches (Amar, 2008).

To achieve this, student teachers must receive robust training equipping them with the skills to pedagogically use these tools to the best of their abilities (Davis, Preston & Sahin, 2009); this process should focus on the presentation and exploration of software and devices as well as on promoting positive attitudes and teacher efficacy to successfully transfer information to students (Gegenfurtner, 2011). From this perspective, and analyzing the established approach in higher education, Pérez & Vílchez (2012) draw attention to the curriculum's failure to include technology-based subjects in initial teacher training; this should be addressed cross-curricular so that it encompasses digital competences in different subjects and prompts the student to shift from a "digital user" to being "digitally competent" in the didactic use of ICT tools in the inclusive classroom. As such, and as stated by Mir (2010), digital competence entails a combination of knowledge, skills and abilities, together with values and attitudes, to effectively and efficiently meet objectives using digital tools in digital contexts. Furthermore, Ortiz, Almazán, Peñaherrera & Cachón (2014) refer to teacher training centred around the creative integration of ICT in the classroom, whereas Domingo & Marqués (2011) deem the contextualization of teaching training to be essential in accordance with real needs, the exchange of experiences and best practices, as well as developing cooperative and expert-led work.

2. Method

Taking into consideration the aforementioned studies and research, this study aimed to analyze the perceptions of prospective teachers at early childhood and primary education stages regarding the use of ICT for inclusion in the ordinary classroom. A further objective was to identify the presence of statistically significant differences in the

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