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Becoming an inclusive teacher at the interface of school and teacher education

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess how the pedagogical solutions of the inclusive teaching practice in class teachers' adult education programme support the development to become an inclusive teacher. What kind of interpretations do the students make of inclusion and inclusive school? How does the participation in school community with reflective support by teacher education community enhance inclusive professional orientation? The research material consists of qualitative network material written by 22 adult students: teaching practice plans, reflective practice stories and teaching practice feedback. The analytical approach was thematic text analysis. Inclusion was interpreted as pupils' right to study with their peers but also as a professional challenge or ideal. The social exclusion was elicited only in a few stories. The meta-consciousness of developing an inclusive school was sparse. The experiences gained from the school's communities of practice combined with the theoretical and reflective tools offered by teacher education community formed meaningful learning.

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1. Introduction

The ideologies and politics of inclusive education have been more visibly present during the last few years than before in the international teacher education literature (Engelbrecht 2013; Rouse 2008; Waitoller & Artiles 2013). However, there is not a great deal of research on how the teachers are supported to develop to become inclusive teachers (Rouse 2008). European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education has explored the contents in the teacher education regarding inclusion in the 25 member countries of the European Union. It has produced "the profile of inclusive teachers" which presents the objectives for professional competences regarding inclusive education in the initial teacher education. (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2012, 20–21.) Reinforcing professional competence in inclusion requires experiences in authentic

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learning environments, in other words at schools, and reflecting on these experiences as well as connecting the information to the theoretical starting points of inclusive education (Heikkinen & al. 2007; Waitoller & Kozleski 2013).

In Finland there are still only a few schools where all the pupils study in the same groups. During the last few years the practices have been moved towards inclusion with the direction of the national education policy by reducing the number of special needs units and schools. The law which came into force in 2010 concerning the support for school attendance and learning requires that the pupils get support early enough for their learning and receive it flexibly in the general education groups. In practice, the teaching groups for pupils with special educational needs are mainly in the same school buildings with the groups of so-called general education. The differences between the municipalities in the implementation of the law are still great. The curricula of all the teacher education programmes contain pedagogical studies in special needs education but the competences of an inclusive teacher have not been defined in Finnish education policy (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2012, 20 –21).

In this article we will examine the teacher's professional development in the teacher education in connection with the inclusive teaching practice period. The target group of the study is the students of the class teachers' adult education programme who have worked as unqualified teachers before the teacher education. In this teacher education programme, a practical training period which differs from a traditional teaching practice has been developed. During the teaching practice, the starting points and practices for developing an inclusive school are examined and studied in the interaction of the school and of the teacher education.

The inclusive teaching practice

In the inclusive teaching practice the students moved and studied the vision of an inclusive school at the interfaces of two communities; the teacher education and the school. The pedagogical manuscript of the inclusive teaching practice had been created to support participation in the school community, evaluation of inclusive school culture, reflecting on significant learning experiences and cooperative building of knowledge. The teaching practice process in inclusive education lasted about nine weeks. The actual field stage, lasting one week, was carried out in different parts of Finland in the practice environments chosen by the students. The process was started before the actual practice week with a common orientation period. A theoretical study module (figure 1) which deepens the practical knowledge was also part of the practice.

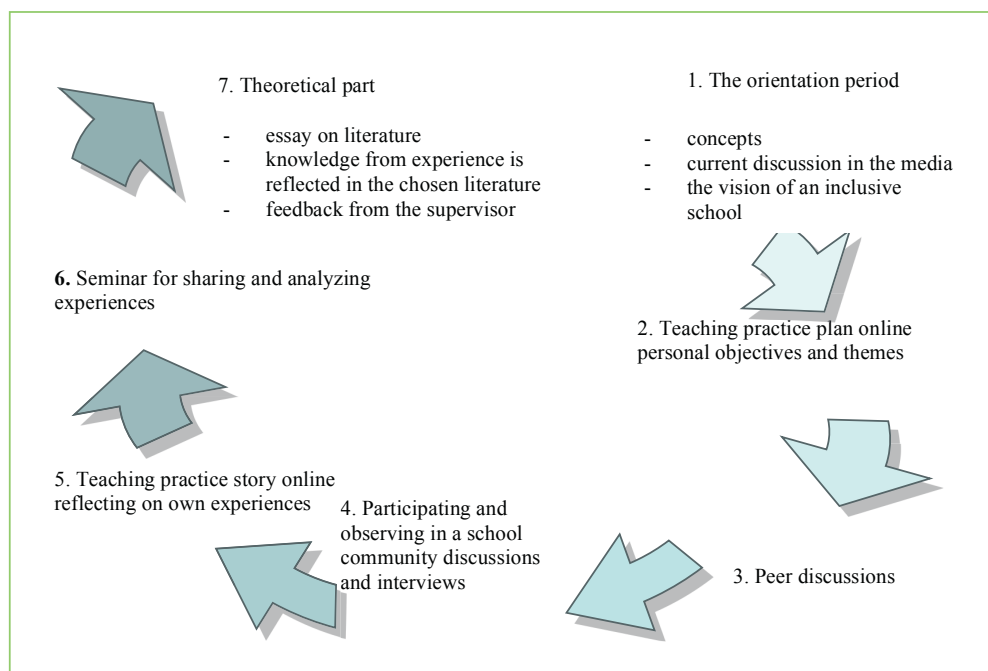


Figure 1. The development of the teaching practice process in inclusive education

The schools were at different stages in developing inclusive culture. The vision of an inclusive school offered a reflective surface for analysing the experiences acquired in different environments. The students observed the operation of a teacher and pupils as well as of the school and discussed with the staff and pupils. As the subjects chosen by the students were a small group

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