

Pre-service Primary Teachers' Understandings of Inclusive Practice in Scotland and Finland.

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Abstract

CONTEXT. Teachers' attitudes are prerequisite to the implementation of inclusive practices, and teachers' professional development through their teacher preparation programmes is important for inclusive classroom practice in schools. Developing effective inclusive practice begins in the teachers' professional preparation. This study investigated pre-service teachers' understandings of inclusive practice in Scotland and Finland. The aim was to have an in-depth understanding of some pre-service teachers' views with examples and gain ideas that could count as evidence of inclusive practice, contributing to the dialogue about good inclusive practice.

METHODS. This was a comparative small-scale qualitative study. Data were drawn from focus group interviews with second- and fourth-year pre-service teachers from both countries. The focus groups were conducted online, they lasted around an hour, and they were video and audio recorded. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The Finnish data was analysed in Finnish but during the analysis their meanings and interpretations were confirmed through regular discussions.

FINDINGS. In both contexts, the participants understand inclusive education beyond disabilities and special education. There was a better understanding of inclusive practice, more examples and fewer concerns from fourth-year pre-service teachers compared to second-year pre-service teachers. The replies of pre-service teachers in both countries highlighted the importance of values and pedagogy. Pre-service teachers shared examples of pedagogical approaches that they consider to be inclusive, but links to socially-constructed notions of ability or having the same expectations from all pupils were also evident. The findings indicate that a focus on values and pedagogy in both teacher preparation programs is needed with more explicit links between key ideas and practice. It is suggested that the idea of inclusion is embedded in the programs rather than focusing solely on special education modules. This study offers empirical evidence and contributes to inclusive education research, teachers' professional preparation, policy goals and practice.

KEY MESSAGE. A focus on values and pedagogy in teacher preparation programs is needed with more explicit links between key ideas and practice.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy, teacher education

Points of Interest:

- This study investigated pre-service teachers' understandings of inclusive practice in Scotland and Finland.

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- The study enhances our understanding of some pre-service teachers' views with examples of inclusive practice.
- A focus on values and pedagogy is needed in teacher education.
- This study contributes to inclusive education research, teachers' professional preparation, policy goals and practice.

Introduction

Teachers should be equipped with the appropriate skills to teach diverse students, seeing individual differences as opportunities for enriching learning (Ainscow, 2020). Developing effective inclusive practice begins in the teachers' professional preparation when pre-service teachers reconsider their own beliefs about human differences and develop inclusive practices. For this reason, there has been an emphasis on pre-service teachers' acquired attitudes towards inclusive education and on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs that influence these attitudes (Forlin et al., 2009).

Preservice teachers are positive of the principles of inclusive education (Goddard & Evans, 2018) but they are anxious and unsure of the implementation of inclusive practices and how to support all students in their classes (Black-Hawkins & Amrhein, 2014). Research on pre-service teachers' attitudes related to inclusive education has received great attention internationally. Most of the studies focus on pre-service teachers' attitudes in terms of specific aspects, such as disability or after having attended a specific module on Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Civitillo et al., 2016; Killoran, et al., 2014). Currently, there is a need not only for research focused specifically on the attitudes of primary pre-service teachers (Varcoe & Boyle, 2014) but particularly on studies that explore the understandings of pre-service teachers that do not only focus on their views after having attended a specific module on SEN. Also, internationally, there is a limited number of qualitative studies that explore the views of pre-service teachers towards inclusion, and these are mainly from Australia (Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011; Mergler et al., 2016).

Taking this gap into consideration, this article will focus on the Scottish and Finnish pre-service teachers' ways of thinking about difference within the classroom and their understandings of inclusive practice. Limited research has focused on pre-service teachers' understandings of inclusive practice in these two countries that believe in the principle of inclusive education following the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994). Our research questions were:

- 1) How do pre-service teachers in Scotland and Finland understand inclusive practice?
- 2) What are the qualities of good inclusive practices according to their views?

Inclusive Practice

This article adopts the broad definition of inclusion which does not see inclusion as an issue relating only to children with special educational needs or learning difficulties but as an approach to education linked to inclusive values. It can be understood as a process (Topping, 2012) of developing knowledge and practices within an education system to ensure that all pupils are participating, learning, and valued (Anderson et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it has been argued that a focus on identifying and eliminating exclusionary practices is needed rather than spending time in defining the term inclusion (Slee, 2011). These should be replaced with inclusive practices.

Evidence from research agrees that "what is good for pupils with special educational needs is good for all pupils" (EASNIE, 2003, p. 4). In schools where inclusion thrives, common features such as collaborative teamwork, a shared framework and family involvement have been identified (Giangreco, 1997). Cooperative teaching and learning, collaborative problem-solving, teachers coaching each other, parental involvement, and support from the local community, are important elements for inclusive

practice (Saloviita, 2018). Furthermore, engaging with pupils' voices is central to inclusive education. Pupils' voices can facilitate change in practices and inclusive developments in schools (Messiou, 2019). Contrary to a one-size-fits-all instructional approach used by several teachers, which has been linked to the normative model of difference (Florian, 2007), an alternative learner-centred pedagogical approach that has the potential to reduce educational inequality by enhancing learning opportunities for everyone has been suggested (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The inclusive pedagogy approach (IPA) is contrasted with an additional needs approach. IPA asks that class teachers take responsibility for all pupils. IPA rejects the idea of fixed ability and ability labelling, and it is opposed to practices that focus on offering provision for the majority in the classroom with additional or different experiences for some pupils. The teacher is offering options available to everybody in the class and the pupils choose how, where, when and with whom they learn (Florian & Spratt, 2013). In adopting this approach, it is important to consider both contextual issues and supportive classroom practices in the learning environment, because contextual aspects, such as socioeconomic background are important to implement inclusive education (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Although the concept of inclusive pedagogy has been characterised as problematic (Norwich, 2013) there is agreement that children can learn from the same pedagogical approaches with appropriate adaptations and differentiation (Rix & Sheehy, 2014). Moves towards inclusion should neither involve efforts to integrate specific groups of pupils in schools nor recipes for 'dealing' with certain pupil characteristics. Instead, they should focus on the development of schools (Ainscow, 2007) and on inclusive practice. The term 'inclusive practices' has been associated with practices connected to classrooms, school-wide practices, practices related to school cultures and contexts (Anastasiou & Hajisoteriou, 2022; Malinen et al., 2013) and a variety of teaching approaches and models (Saloviita, 2018). Rouse (2010) argued that effective inclusive practice should be about 'knowing', 'doing', and 'believing'. Finkelstein et al. (2021) identified teacher practices related to high-quality inclusion: (1) collaboration and teamwork which involves the cooperation of teachers with other stakeholders, (2) instructional support which is about the organisation of teaching and learning processes, (3) organisational practices that promote access to the learning environment, (4) social/emotional/behavioural practices and (5) determining progress relating to the way teachers assess and monitor students' outcomes. For the purposes of this study, we do not focus on one of the above aspects. We adopt a broad definition that links to what people do to give meaning to the idea of inclusion (Florian, 2009).

The inclusive turn (Ainscow, 2007), a focus on identifying barriers to learning and participation rather than a focus on deficit views of children, raises questions about what constitutes good inclusive practice and what counts as evidence of quality practice. Although it remains a challenge to use research evidence effectively promoting inclusion at different levels (Ainscow, 2020), employing research evidence in ITE of teaching strategies that help to increase the participation and achievement of all children is significant.

Pre-service Teachers' Views and Teacher Education

Teachers' professional development through their ITE programmes is important for inclusive practice in schools as they learn about key pedagogical approaches, and they reflect on their values and beliefs about human differences (Rouse, 2010). For this reason, there has been an increased interest in the content of ITE for inclusion that influences pre-service teachers' attitudes (Forlin et al., 2009) and develops their knowledge and understanding on teaching and learning. Symeonidou (2017) identified three approaches in ITE courses on inclusion: a) content-infused approaches, where the idea of inclusion is incorporated in the teacher education course content, b) single-unit approaches based on lectures, workshops, and other activities, c) approaches using school placement/experience. Some universities currently make changes to their ITE programmes, as only a single-unit approach is not enough to adequately prepare teachers to implement inclusive practices (Nagata, 2005). In the midst of today's complex and uncertain world there is a need to develop teacher education programmes that engage with issues of diversity, exclusion and inclusion (Florian & Rouse, 2009).

Additionally, there has been an emphasis on pre-service teachers' acquired attitudes. Attitudes refer to "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). They are informed by socio-cultural beliefs, personal experience, values and practices (Scorgie, 2010). Teachers' attitudes are based on personal characteristics such as cultural background, gender, and predispositions (Louden, 2008). It has been argued that attitude formation is a 'learned process' (Goddard & Evans 2018, p. 123) which is influenced by factors such as self-efficacy, contact with students with diverse needs and educational background (Ahsan et al., 2012; Lambe & Bones, 2006). Therefore, attitudes are "context-dependent and responsive to factors within a socio-cultural environment" (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006, p. 564).

Several studies focus on pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms showing that their attitudes are affected by the quality of preparation received (Lambe & Bones, 2006). It is more likely for pre-service teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusive education to implement strategies that promote inclusion in their classrooms (McCray & McHatton, 2011). A study by Goddard and Evans (2018) examined pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in terms of specific aspects: giftedness, disability and second language learning. The researchers used a survey to examine 56 pre-service teachers' attitudes from three metropolitan universities in Australia in their first, second, third or fourth (final) years of study according to child, teacher and environment related variables across the ITE years. The results showed that pre-service teachers' attitudes were particularly positive towards students learning English as an additional language or dialect and according to teacher-related variables, while attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities and gifted and talented students need more attention from pre-service teachers. These findings support the recommendations of other studies (Forlin et al., 2009; Varcoe & Boyle, 2014) for differentiated teacher education taking into consideration pre-service teachers' needs and demographic characteristics.

Some studies focus on comparisons between pre-service teachers who had received training on special education during their undergraduate studies, with those who had not (Varcoe & Boyle, 2014). Other studies focus on pre-service teachers' attitudes before and after having attended a module focusing on disability (Killoran et al., 2014) while others had a SEN focus in pre-service teachers' education (Civitillo et al., 2016; Specht et al., 2016). Studies that make comparisons on attitudes before and after a course (Beacham & Rouse, 2012) highlight the importance of course inputs and learning activities delivered on campus that help pre-service teachers to reflect and discuss aspects of inclusive practice. It has been argued that there is a need for further research on pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education (Varcoe & Boyle, 2014). Additionally, there is a limited number of qualitative studies that explore the views of pre-service teachers towards inclusion (Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011; Mergler et al., 2016). Instead of attitudes (Lambe & Bones, 2006) pre-service teachers' understandings of the idea and given meanings of inclusion (Florian, 2009) is the focus of this research.

Contrary to the studies on pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs, which generally report that they are positive towards inclusive education (Hoskin et al., 2015; Varcoe & Boyle, 2014), studies from the Netherlands and Finland report pre-service teachers' neutral or negative views (Civitillo et al., 2016; Takala & Sirkko, 2022). Indeed, in Finland inclusion is not a popular goal among teachers (Saloviita, 2022) and teachers are critical towards policy on inclusion. However, other countries such as Scotland 'follow' Finland as it has the reputation of having one of the best education systems in the world (Schleicher, 2019). For example, the goals of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) are similar to those in Finland. Both curricula are broadly competence-based, with genesis in thinking by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). This led us to conduct an initial comparative study. In addition, limited research has focused on pre-service teachers' understandings of inclusive practice in Scotland and Finland. Therefore, this study aimed at examining the understandings of pre-service teachers in these two different contexts.

The Scottish and Finnish Contexts: A Brief Overview

In Scotland, the promotion of inclusion of all children in mainstream schools is a key educational policy (Allan, 2010). Several Acts and policy documents promote inclusion within schools. The term ‘special educational needs’ was replaced with the wider term ‘additional support needs’ (ASN) which was introduced in The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (amended in 2009). This Act encouraged the view that there is the possibility for all children and young people to have additional support needs at some stage during their school career, and duties were placed to local authorities, and other agencies for the provision of additional support where needed.

Scottish schools are encouraged to meet the needs of all children including those with ASN. However, approaches differ between local authorities. Some local authorities offer specialist units within mainstream schools, others do not have special schools, and a small number has. Schools have adopted a ‘staged approach’ to assessment and identification of needs which includes three to five stages (Scottish Government, 2017). Generally, teachers aim to address barriers to learning, developing inclusive lessons. In several cases a medical diagnosis can give access to funding and other resources for support.

Teachers in Scotland are expected to be prepared to respond to the diversity in their classrooms. Scottish Universities offer four-year undergraduate programmes in primary and secondary teaching, and a one-year professional graduate diploma in education (PGDE). The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) sets the professional standards. ITE programmes across Scotland are based on these standards, embed inclusion and encourage a response to learner diversity that avoids marking some students as different (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Additionally, the National Framework for Inclusion (SUIG, 2022), has been designed to ensure that all students and teachers are appropriately guided and supported throughout their careers understanding inclusive education.

Nevertheless, questions raised by researchers and teachers and concerns that it is difficult to implement inclusive schooling practices suggest that there is still work to be done. Also, poor understanding and implementation of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, a culture of performativity, curricular practices that can disadvantage some pupils (Shapira et al., 2023), teachers’ workload, and poor resourcing of schools, are amongst the factors that create pressures that may prevent teachers from having autonomy, or might affect attitudes towards inclusion. Similarly, in Finland, teachers are expected to be able to support all students. Finland has been a relatively monocultural country, and now more than ever there is the need for teachers to be able to respond to diversity (Tirri, 2014). However, there is no specific mention of inclusive education in legislation. The absence of a definition shifts the responsibility of defining to the relevant parties and contributes to the emergence of inclusive myths that can differ from reality (Jahnukainen et al., 2023). The culture of trust and autonomy of teachers is important and there are no inspections nor national standard tests in use (Välimaa, 2021).

The Finnish educational system follows the guidelines of three-tiered support in schools (FNBE, 2016; Eklund et al., 2021) but approaches differ between municipalities. Pupils with special needs study in mainstream and special classes, as well as in special schools (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2021). There is no need for medical diagnosis and schools can make relatively autonomous decisions based on pedagogical knowledge (Björn et al., 2016). Collaboration with parents and the multiprofessional team is needed (Thuneberg et al., 2014).

Compulsory education is guided to follow the inclusion principle (FNBE, 2016), so there is a need to improve pre-service teachers’ skills to teach everyone in the classroom (Malinen et al., 2012). Finnish primary teacher education entails a three-year bachelor’s degree and a two-year master’s degree (Tirri, 2014). This five-year master level programme is required for a formal teacher qualification (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1998). The content and methods vary among universities but the approach to inclusion is content-infused.

There is research focused on attitudes of Finnish teachers and pre-service teachers towards inclusion, self-efficacy and perceptions of abilities to teach all students (Paju et al. 2016; Savolainen et al., 2022). Finnish preservice teachers express worries concerning inclusive education and they connect it with fear

of future work challenges and lack of resources, though they have a narrow experience of inclusive schools (Takala et al., 2023). The use of inclusive practices among in-service teachers is more common in primary education than in secondary education (Saloviita, 2018). Other challenges include financial difficulties of municipalities and unclarity in policies and practices (Jahnukainen et al., 2023).

Methods

In this study we explore how pre-service teachers in Scotland and Finland perceive inclusive practices. Our aim is to contribute to the existing research literature about inclusive education by exploring some of pre-service teachers' views with examples and gain ideas that could count as evidence of inclusive practice, contributing to the dialogue about inclusive practice, quality practice, and teacher education. As most studies are quantitative, we designed and conducted a qualitative study because we were interested in exploring pre-service teachers' understandings of inclusive practice in schools through the examples they could share based on their knowledge and experience.

This was a comparative small-scale ($N = 13$) qualitative study. Data were collected through four focus groups with a purposeful sample of pre-service primary teachers in their second and fourth year from two universities, in Scotland and in Finland (see Table 1). To mitigate some limitations of this approach we ensured we had homogeneous groups (same year of studies), and we used moderation techniques to avoid domination by a single person (Smithson, 2000).

Table 1
Focus Groups

Country	Focus Group	Name	Year
Scotland	Focus group 1	Anna Fiona Graeme John	Year 2
	Focus group 2	Sara Mary Andrew	Year 4
Finland	Focus group 1	Hanna Jaana Matti	Year 2
	Focus group 2	Riikka Sanna Minna	Year 4

We interviewed second- and fourth-year students as the second-year students would have a basic understanding about education. Their participation would offer an insight into their beliefs and attitudes towards inclusive teaching before they are exposed to the pedagogical approaches and values expressed throughout their education degree. In contrast, the fourth-year pre-service teachers would have almost completed their education degree, having studied pedagogy and inclusion. We were not involved in teaching 2nd year students in our programmes, and data collection with 4th years took place after the end of their last module. This would ensure less biased responses.

Open-ended questions would allow for individual responses and are seen as a valid way of studying opinions (Cohen et al., 2017). Our questions had three parts. Part A focused on teaching practices, examples of good and bad or not helpful practices. For example, we asked questions such as: How do

you understand good teaching practice? What are the qualities of good teaching practices? Part B focused on inclusive practices. We asked students specifically about inclusive practices that they have observed in schools (for example during school placements) and why they think these were inclusive. Finally, Part C focused on possible barriers to inclusion and their teaching practice.

The focus groups were conducted online, they lasted around an hour, and they were video and audio recorded. All contributions from the participants were treated as confidential and pseudonyms were used. Participation was voluntary, and the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Scottish University. The ethical standards of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019) were followed.

We used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Once the interviews were transcribed, we became familiar with the data through reading and rereading them. We then coded the data focusing particularly on our research questions. We met several times in order to present and discuss our codes. There was not an expectation that codes interpreted by one researcher would be reproduced by the other researcher. We then grouped our codes and generated themes (see Table 2). The Finnish data was analysed in Finnish but during the analysis their meanings and interpretations were confirmed through regular discussions. While we were most interested in examining differences and similarities between the Scottish and the Finnish participants, the data were also explored for differences between the responses of second- and fourth-year pre-service teachers.

Table 2

Examples of codes and themes

Themes	Codes	Quotation
Relationships	Remembering	<i>So it's about remembering the things that they tell you so that you can talk to them personally.</i>
	Be interested in children's lives	<i>[...] about taking a genuine interest in your children because I can't see why you would want to do this job if you don't want to do that.</i>
Routines	Continuity	<i>Continuity is important when routines are used.</i>
	Predictability	<i>...like marking or elaborating homework. It is important to have clear routines, so that children know beforehand how the process goes. It helps at least some of the learners really much.</i>

Findings

This section presents the participants' understandings of inclusive practice and the qualities of inclusive practices based on their views. We have structured this section based on the main themes of our research

questions: ‘understandings of inclusive practice’ and ‘qualities of inclusive practices’. Under each theme, we present the findings from the Scottish and the Finnish focus groups.

Understandings of inclusive practice

Diversity and involvement

In both contexts, the understanding of inclusive education was linked to a broad perspective from learning difficulties, identity, to diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, pre-service teachers in Scotland also mentioned social class while there was no mention about socioeconomic background from Finnish student teachers. For example, Jaana highlighted the role of diverse ethnic backgrounds and the fact that children in Finland can decide to what extent they will bring their culture and first language in the classroom.

It should be possible to read by their [pupils] own mother tongue. It means, different languages can be used in the classroom and they [pupils] can decide how to introduce their own culture in the classroom. (Jaana)

This was the only example of pupils being involved in decision making in second-year data from Finland. Generally, in Finnish data, students suggested that all pupils should be collectively involved in decision making led by the teacher, but pupils’ role was blurry. The pupils’ feedback was one way to participate. The discussion with pupils about practices, planning teaching and evaluation was important.

As teachers we often focus on ourselves, and maybe it could be effective to involve pupils in planning of teaching so that they can also participate [...]. (Minna)

The second-year students who participated in the focus group in Scotland also linked inclusive practice to pupils’ involvement. As Fiona mentioned, it is about students being involved in the learning process and having the opportunity to have options and some input to that.

You can only be inclusive if you include the pupils [...]to make sure that the pupils are fully involved in decisions and in process and things because they may well have ideas that you have not thought of or you might be overthinking [...]. So I think it's just important that they are involved. (Fiona)

Graeme went further by adding that inclusive practice is about seeking the pupils’ views about what they feel, involving the parents, the local community, and then the teachers as well.

Differentiation

Differentiation was a central theme in both contexts. The Scottish pre-service teachers talked about differentiation as an important characteristic of inclusive practice but they had different interpretations of this term. John explained that he understands differentiation as altering the material depending on each child’s needs. His reply was vague when he was asked to offer more details and explain how he would alter the material. He replied:

[...] perhaps the teaching strategies that are used or perhaps the resources that are used. How pupils are in groups or just using a number of different resources and just using the ones that work based for each of the pupils. (John)

Graeme also talked about differentiation as an important characteristic of inclusive practice, but he specifically talked about differentiating the activity or resource or the support available to meet every single learner's needs, abilities and skills. He understands differentiation as giving to different pupils, different or amended tasks, or by the support available to ensure that individual needs are met at all times. For example, giving some pupils teacher support, others different resources such as reading and writing aids, some pupils peer support, some pupils teaching assistant support and others no or very limited support so that they are more independent. Furthermore, Anna sees inclusive practice as more of being flexible and able to tailor the activities. She explained that she would use observation data to make a target approach for each child so that pupils are challenged.

[...] you can maybe have some groups where you give them this challenge and then other group you could give them an extension [...] and then if you've observed the extension was maybe too much at the next lesson you could then alter it [...] then you can tailor it and adjust so that every child is constantly being challenged at the correct level. (Anna)

Similarly, in the Finnish data, the understanding of second-year student teachers was linked to differentiation as teacher-led tailoring. For example, the interviewees mentioned giving different types of homework to individual pupils. On the other hand, Fiona from the Scottish second-year focus group added that when differentiating, teachers should keep in mind that something that may suit one child or some children in the class can benefit all children.

[...] when you're looking at ways to accommodate maybe one or two children in your class is just to consider whether that's something that would benefit everyone. (Fiona)

The Scottish fourth-year students referred to differentiation and highlighted different aspects offering more examples unlike second-year pre-service teachers. For instance, Sara explained that differentiation is about adapting tasks so that they still have the same theme and goal but change depending on children's abilities.

[...] if you're doing addition then you might have some tasks that are doing $10 + 10$. But actually, you're also looking at some tasks or $2 + 2$. And the differentiation is that difference between $10 + 10$ and $2 + 2$ and you're still working on addition. And your main goal of that lesson is still to understand how you can have two different numbers and create a combined total. (Sara)

Similarly, Andrew added that differentiation is about using different strategies depending on 'the ability level of the child'.

[...] it's about using different strategies whether that's a different task or a different more support or group support or peer support, or numicon or bricks or Lego or whatever to bridge the gap between this child's learning and their learning. (Andrew)

This can illustrate the normative model, underpinned by 'bell-curve thinking' (Florian, 2019), as a one-size-fits-all instructional approach is the starting point (Florian, 2007) and different strategies, as Andrew mentioned, can be used with a specific child or group of children. Mary explained that the aim of differentiation is accessibility regardless of children's ability and the teacher offering support using different methods 'to make sure that everyone can join in'.

Interestingly, the data from pre-service teachers in Scotland entailed a contradiction. Although students talked about offering options to all children in a classroom, they also emphasised the need for tailoring the activities based on pupils' needs. Additionally, although fourth-year students supported that working with each child's level is an important characteristic of inclusive practice, their replies implied that they would have the same expectations from all pupils.

Fourth-year students in Finland supported that differentiation is a key element of inclusive education. . Unlike second-year students who had a narrower understanding, they described differentiation as a process, including planning and evaluation. Both focus groups in Finland explicitly described teachers' demanding responsibility to tailor the learning activities based on pupils' individual needs. Differentiation was understood as challenging and time consuming. The fourth-year pre-service teachers explained the importance of knowing children very well in order to be able to modify tasks so that every individual can make progress. However, they suggested implicitly that some pupils could benefit from the same activities or that everyone could have the opportunity to try different materials in a learning environment.

The differentiation is like, well, everybody is taken into account as an individual, and all diverse ways to learn are considered, it is such an important element in inclusive education (Riikka)

In the Finnish school context, teachers often express the direction of differentiation vertically: differentiation can be planned upwards or downwards. This means that more challenging activities are planned for faster learners (upwards) while less challenging activities are planned for the pupils who need more time or support (downwards). Differentiation for faster learners was described as a rare case and is usually forgotten. Therefore, differentiation is linked mostly to pupils who are considered to require additional support.

To really differentiate [...] you can quickly see those really weak [children] and then maybe some at the top end, but there are many children in-between, who have their own best ways to learn and it takes so much time to get to know all those children and what is more challenging for each of them. (Riikka)

Such statements imply that there is a fixed model of ability as words such as 'weak' and 'top' have been used, although students are talking about inclusive practice. This is contradictory. There was a shift from a discussion about inclusive practice and the use of a more inclusive language to a discussion about abilities and a normative approach to diversity. These expressions also convey values. To differentiate 'upwards' or 'downwards' represents the level of learners and the expected learning outcomes compared to what is considered to be 'normal'. Therefore, these views result in the creation of norms which describe some pupils as 'lacking something' and that they cannot learn because of their characteristics (Ainscow, 1999).

These data illustrate different understandings of differentiation and therefore inclusive practice. The Finnish data show clearly a focus on tailoring and ability rather than an emphasis on offering different options to everyone in the classroom.

Relationships and Wellbeing

One of the main themes concerning inclusive practice, based on the fourth-year students from Scotland, was the relationship between the teacher and the pupil. All students emphasised the importance of knowing the pupils. They explained that this means listening to them, being interested in their lives and remembering what they tell you.

[...] it's about remembering the things that they tell you so that you can talk to them personally, [...] so that they feel safe and then they know that you have listened, and so if there's something more serious or less serious, even that they wanted to tell you about, they knew that you would actually listen to them. And remember those things. (Sara)

They also explained that knowing the pupils well helps with informing planning of lessons making links to pedagogy, unlike second-year students.

Pupils' wellbeing was a key theme in the Finnish data. Second-year students focused on wellbeing for school days, and fourth-year students highlighted pupils' wellbeing in general including out-of-school-environments. However, the focus of second-year students was on teacher-pupil relationship and on their own classroom. They did not talk about practices. The wellbeing and relaxed atmosphere was seen as more valuable.

It is about belonging. Somehow, I feel that starting with teaching the subject is too direct. It is so important to hear about pupils' weekend. How things are going at home, because then it is possible to know how they are, so that we are not at school only for studying. We are also learning how to take care of themselves. We need to find out how pupils really are. (Riikka)

Wellbeing was connected to the idea of 'knowing children well'. As mentioned earlier, according to both focus groups, differentiation has to be based on knowing children well. By this, pre-service teachers meant good relationships and good interaction with each child, but also, being aware of the child's individual strengths and needs of support.

When one knows students and knows their skills, I believe, it is much easier to differentiate. But it requires a lot of time and knowing children, knowing pupils quite deeply. (Sanna)

The Finnish pre-service teachers highlighted the importance of having daily routines in their lesson planning to help children stay organised, focused, and give a sense of safety. Explicitly pre-service teachers explained that routines offer a clear structure of the school day as children know beforehand what is going to happen. Routines such as checking the daily schedule, were mentioned by second-year students as examples of inclusive practices. Additionally, fourth-year students described routines as classroom practices chosen on purpose and aiming to support several children to participate, or to improve the classroom atmosphere.

It is good to start in the morning by discussing clearly the structure of the day together with pupils, so they know what is going to happen, because it is really important for some pupils. (Riikka)

Elements of a teacher-centred approach were present in Finnish data. According to the interviewees, teachers take decisions and initiatives. Pupils' peer working was mentioned very briefly and there were no descriptions about peer working by pupils as inclusive practice.

Qualities of inclusive practices

The second-year students who participated in the focus group in Scotland emphasised the importance of getting to know the students through observations and questioning as an important quality of inclusive practice. Fiona highlighted the importance of making everyone feel part of the classroom or part of a team, *'or that pupils feel valued'* (Fiona).

[...] spending time with the pupils and getting to know them really well and building that relationship will play a big role in that I would say. (Graeme)

Anna added that help should be easily available for children. Interestingly, when asked about the qualities of good inclusive practices, fourth-year pre-service teachers focused on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Mary explained that an important quality is to have positive attitudes towards inclusion, be willing as a person to identify practices that will work and being resilient. She also emphasised the importance of being engaged with research and current literature.

[...] being quite resilient [...] It's about being willing to keep trying new things I think to make sure that you know you are providing the best experience for the kids in your class. (Mary)

Finnish second-year students highlighted the meaning of participation and friendly atmosphere in the classroom as a mark of quality. They supported that a mutual feeling of belonging is an important sign of a successful inclusive group and that it allows to value every child as they are. Also, they described the socially safe environment and good communication as signs of an inclusive environment. Children's opportunity to have their own voice and teachers' responsibility to listen to everyone during the school day was important. They offered examples in a classroom context. The role of the teacher as having ownership of their classroom was obvious.

Finnish second-year students highlighted teachers' continuous critical reflection in terms of professional development as an element of inclusive practice. A reflective approach was seen as conscious analysis of the teachers' own work in order to develop their teaching skills.

You are continuously ready to analyse your own performance, so that your own teaching practices are in the modification process. (Sanna)

Fourth-year Finnish pre-service teachers referred to the school community when they were discussing about inclusive practice and not only to the school classroom like the second-year pre-service teachers. They had some critical comments about school cultures with low teacher engagement as inefficient implementation of wide autonomy. They mentioned consistency and shared values as qualities of inclusive practice.

Some teachers can have fluent routines for their own classrooms, but the shared commitment out-of-class is missing. Then the pupil behaviour at the corridor or dining hall is whatever. (Minna)

Fourth year students talked about responsible whole school culture explicitly and they gave detailed examples, such as examples of effective problem solving with multiprofessional collaboration. They highly appreciated colleague collaboration and collaboration with parents. The network was understood as a group of different teachers and learning aids/student assistants. The role of parents was recognized,

but the focus was in helping the child to deal with challenges in school or helping teachers to cope with the child. There were no mentions about how the school could support parents. The most important quality for both on second- and fourth-year Finnish students was trust in the interactions of teachers with the children, colleagues and parents. This again, according to the students' perceptions, created a good atmosphere in the classroom.

Discussion

The participants' understandings of inclusive education beyond disabilities and special education is evident in the data. Pre-service teachers in both contexts had positive attitudes towards inclusion, acknowledging diversity in classrooms. This finding is consistent with the findings of several studies (Beacham & Rouse, 2012) but not Finnish studies (Takala & Sirkko, 2022). There was a better understanding of inclusive practice and fewer concerns from fourth-year pre-service teachers compared to second-year pre-service teachers. In both countries, fourth-year pre-service teachers gave more detailed answers with examples than those in their second year. For example, concrete description of tools and pedagogies was stronger in fourth-year pre-service teachers' replies as they can observe the school life more critically.

The replies of pre-service teachers in both countries highlighted the importance of values. Students discussed about diversity, equity, respect, and pupils' involvement in decision-making. Their replies indicated a clear link between inclusive education and values, which is needed in order to adapt their practices towards a more inclusive approach (Sharma et al., 2008). Additionally, the importance of teacher-pupil relationship was recognised as all groups understood the importance of knowing their pupils not only as learners, but as individuals too. In the Finnish data there was a focus on valuing diversity, participation and having a child-centred approach, but at the same time several comments reveal views of: labelling children as weak or special needs children, tailoring support and 'helping children with challenges'. This links to socially-constructed notions of ability which reinforce deficit perspectives (Swanson et al., 2017) that can lead to exclusion within schools for some (Bishop & Kalogeropoulos, 2015; Florian 2019). This implied deficit way of thinking about difference and diversity does not align with the principle of social justice. This suggests that ITE programmes that would challenge pre-service teachers' assumptions and deterministic beliefs about ability are necessary. In addition, the contradictory findings from Scotland with pre-service teachers referring to key values but also implying that they would have the same expectations from all pupils, suggests that a clearer and more explicit link between these key values and practice should be made during their studies and placement experiences.

The findings highlight the importance of pedagogy too, although pre-service teachers did not explicitly use the word pedagogy. Pre-service teachers shared examples of pedagogical approaches that they consider to be inclusive. The students in this study were aware of the crucial role of differentiation (in agreement with Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Saloviita, 2018) but as expected, there were differences not only between the Scottish and the Finnish groups regarding interpretations of differentiation, but also among pre-service teachers from the same context, reflecting the lack of shared terminology in research on differentiation (Graham et al., 2021). Some examples of good quality inclusive practice shared by pre-service teachers aligned with the concept of inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) but also with practices that are designed for 'most' students indicating a normative approach to diversity (Florian, 2019). Finnish students focused more on evaluation while Scottish pre-service teachers linked differentiation with accessibility and participation in the classroom. Interestingly, students from both contexts referred to 'tailoring' which links to Tomlinson's model of differentiation (Tomlinson, 2003) but they did not offer many specific examples or explanations about this. Scottish pre-service teachers seemed to make more links to a more child-centred approach compared to the Finnish students and to the IPA where the teachers would offer options to all children (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), although they also referred to individual needs, tailoring for some and having the same expectations from pupils.

Consequently, in ITE, further engagement with IPA is recommended, reflection, and examples of good inclusive practice in schools. Also, agreeing with Graham et al. (2021), a range of evidence-based practices that would support the learning of all pupils should be presented and linked to the term of differentiation. This should be located not only in the research area of special needs education. We suggest that the idea of inclusion is embedded in other modules too in the ITE and in placement experiences, focusing on pedagogy and not relying solely on modules on SEN and single-unit approaches.

We acknowledge that this study produced a ‘snapshot’ of the understandings of these different groups of pre-service teachers at a particular point in time in two different contexts and that different findings might have been generated if the research had been conducted at a different period (Cohen et al., 2017). However, the information we gained can develop our understanding and inform practice and dialogue in this field which was also the aim of the study. Therefore, we do not see this as a limitation of the study. Furthermore, the reader should note that Scotland and Finland have their own school cultures and the structure of ITE is different. However, comparing aspects of education of different countries is important. In this case, Scotland could observe the elements of teachers’ autonomy in the Finnish education system with the culture of trust and teamwork, while Finland, could elaborate IPA which is not commonly shared in Finland.

In conclusion, our recommendations for further research would be larger qualitative research in different contexts on pre-service teachers’ understandings, and on the link between teacher education with schools and in-service teachers. In addition, we recommend research on different starting points to differentiation and different evidence-based practices linked to the term of differentiation that teachers adopt to support the learning of all pupils in their classrooms. The findings of this study can inform future planning in teachers’ professional education contributing to the quality of ITE programmes in Europe and beyond.

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