EXPLORING TEACHER EDUCATION FOR INCLUSION: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS FROM SWEDEN AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract: Questioning whether preparation for inclusive education is effectively integrated into teacher training programmes, this study aims at conceptualising pre-service teachers' perceptions of their study programme's preparation for inclusive education and their feeling of being prepared to teach inclusive classrooms. By conducting semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers from Sweden and the Czech Republic, a comparison of the respective study programmes' approaches to inclusive education and their effects on the students is achieved. The interview transcripts were analysed via qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). While this study found an overarching appreciation of and/or wish for more input on inclusive education, there were also some differences to be found in the Czech and Swedish pre-service teachers' perceptions. While the Czech participants perceived their study programme's input for inclusive education as insufficient and too theory-heavy, the Swedish participants appeared confident that they would be able to apply their theoretically gained knowledge in their future classrooms, as practised at university. Students felt prepared to teach inclusive classrooms because of, for example, instances of active engagement with inclusive teaching paradigms and peer discussions in the university context. Still, participants from both countries were intimidated by obstacles embedded within the respective national school systems. Observing (inter)national tendencies and discrepancies in teacher education for inclusion, this study provides insight into the student perspective to inspire a reassessment of teacher training programmes to effectively cater to pre-service teachers' needs in the future.

Keywords: Inclusive education; international comparison; pre-service teachers; teacher education.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, inclusion is commonly understood as an environment in which all children, regardless of abilities or disabilities, belong, are accepted and supported, and where each child's individual needs are met (Obrusnikova & Block, 2020; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). It is less frequently talked about, however, who ensures such a classroom environment, and how the people responsible are prepared to do so. Previous research has found that a teacher's knowledge, beliefs and values are important for creating an effective learning environment for all pupils (Reynolds, 2001). Such teacher attributes are even understood to be more influential regarding learner achievement than any other factors like class size or composition (Bailleul et al., 2008, as cited in Biamba, 2016, p. 120). Vice versa, unsatisfactory results of inclusive educational settings might be caused by weak pedagogical practices rather than inclusion itself (Cara, 2013), and according to Kurniawati et al. (2014), teachers' sense of inadequate training for catering to students with special educational needs may pose a barrier to effectively implementing inclusion. The teacher education majors in Wash & Freeman's study (2014) even identified meeting the needs of students with disabilities as their greatest weakness, which is why the researchers demanded a stronger emphasis on working with students with disabilities in regular education classrooms already during teacher training (Wash & Freeman, 2014). What follows is a plea for updated teacher training curricula to optimize inclusive classroom practices, possibly including input on behaviour management skills, the construction of effective learning experiences, disability characteristics as well as legal and ethical issues involved in inclusive education, among other ideas (Smantser & Ignatovitch, 2015; Kurniawati et al., 2014).

Teacher education and its importance for recognizing the right to education for all has already been addressed in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). Here, it is explicitly mentioned that states subscribing to the UN resolution must take measures to employ teachers with disabilities, teachers who are qualified in sign language and/or braille, and to train school staff in "disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities" (UN, 2006, Art. 24). Both Sweden and the Czech Republic are member states of the United Nations and hence adhere to the contract. In Sweden, besides a legally prescribed knowledge area of special education (Reinfeldt & Björklund, 2009), at least one subject concerned with intercultural knowledge and competence as well as with inclusion and social equity are to be installed as part of the common education area of teacher training programmes (Rasmussen & Dorf, 2010). Similarly, training for inclusive education is part of the mandatory university curriculum in the Czech Republic (Bielik et al., 2022). Given previous reports on unsuccessful teacher training for inclusive education in the Czech setting (Bielik et al., 2022; Šmelová et al., 2016), as well as an observed hierarchy prioritising special education over inclusive education in Swedish policies (Miškolci et al., 2020), it remains doubtful in how far inclusion is effectively integrated into the respective study programmes.

Based on these explorations Swedish and Czech pre-service teachers' perspectives on their respective teacher training programmes for inclusive education will be investigated. The students' perspectives will be conducted via semi-structured interviews to gain insight into their university preparation for teaching inclusive classrooms and to complement previous research with first-hand perceptions by pre-service teachers themselves. Following this aim, these research questions will be approached in this paper:

(1) How do pre-service teachers from Sweden and the Czech Republic perceive their respective university programme's preparation for inclusive education?

(2) How do those approaches to inclusive education in the study programs influence future teachers' feeling of preparedness for teaching in inclusive classrooms?

The results of this study might help expand the common understanding of pre-service teachers' needs concerning their training for inclusion and might additionally shed light on the effectiveness of certain teaching methods in university programmes according to their students. This study thereby contributes to previous research by applying an international-comparative perspective, aiming to uncover similarities and differences in specific teacher training approaches to inclusive education. Being aware of what works and what does not work for pre-service teachers in different countries and systems, university teacher training programmes could then reflect on their own study programmes to further enhance teacher education for inclusion and contribute to fair education for everyone at school.

2. Methodology

To follow up on previous research on pre-service teachers' sense of preparedness to teach inclusive classrooms, four teacher-training students, two from Sweden and two from the Czech Republic, were interviewed for this study. All participants were at the time enrolled in teacher training programmes in the respective countries, although they differed in age, the years spent studying and the type of teaching programme enrolled in. The interviews were conducted via the online communication platform *Zoom* in June 2023, followed semi-structured and priorly developed question guidelines and took about 45 minutes each. All interviews were recorded and shortly after their conduction transcribed verbatim by the author of this paper, reproducing grammatical errors as they were made and noting pauses in speech as well as time stamps. Thus, the data used for the analysis consisted of four interview transcripts.

Conducting comparative-international research on teacher education, this study aims to widen the understanding of singular teacher education systems, to reveal similarities and differences between these and to reveal case-specific approaches to international trends (Afdal, 2019) – in this case to inclusion. As a promise of such an approach, Afdal (2019) expresses that "the contrasting mode reveals issues not so easily uncovered by single case studies and enables us to question taken-for-granted assumptions" (p. 271). It should be clear that this study neither aims at generalising the teacher training programmes in Sweden and the Czech Republic nor does it want to motivate a black-and-white comparison between the two countries' systems. The explored pre-service teachers' thoughts and perceptions are subjective and need to be treated accordingly, and the results stemming from this study need to be considered in their respective contexts.

This international comparison was complemented by the study's focus on the student perspective to learn about the subjective perceptions of those involved in teacher training systems. Conway (2001) and Conway and Clark (2003) have pushed forward the notion of emphasising the future-oriented nature of teachers' reflection, as will be conducted here, stating that teacher education must acknowledge student teachers as "persons with history but also persons with possibility" (Conway, 2001, p. 104). Additionally, Veenman (1984) claimed that knowing about the issues teachers in their first few years of teaching face can serve as a starting point for improving pre-service and in-service programmes. Such an acknowledgement of students' perceptions may also lead teacher educators to better support new teachers to navigate the distance between their anticipated teaching goals and their momentary abilities (Hammerness, 2003). Thereby, this study aims to answer its research

questions, noted above, according to those experiencing teacher training first-hand, listening to the students' experiences and perceptions.

Participation in the study was voluntary and the interviewees were informed beforehand about the aims of the study. Alongside oral information on the project and the interviewees' participation, participants received written information regarding the procedure of the study and signed a consent form stating that quotes from the interviews may be used for research, while all participants will stay anonymous. Thus, for ethical reasons and to guarantee anonymity, no more information on the participants will be presented other than that stated by themselves during the interviews. Recordings of the interviews were deleted right after finishing the research project.

After a small talk phase to make the individual interviewees feel comfortable, the interview started with a warmup phase of broad questions about bibliographic information and general questions about the respective study programme to allow the participants to ease into the interview. This was then followed by a set of pre-prepared open guiding questions which encouraged the students to specifically discuss the integration of inclusive topics in their study programmes and their gained competencies thereof, providing the opportunity to let elaborations develop spontaneously. The interviews were thus structured via a pre-prepared interview guide which, although prompting the participants' free reflections on the topic, still allowed for a basis of comparison between the interviews (Döring, 2023).

As a first step leading toward analysis, the data was thoroughly looked through, then structured by deriving codes and categories and lastly analysed following a systematic, structuring qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). Definitions were determined which allowed categories to arise inductively and as close as possible to the original material to answer the priorly established research questions. During a feedback loop, initial categories were revised and eventually reduced to the main categories that will be presented in the following section. This process is made transparent here to approach the reliability of the results, despite the author's sole contribution to the analysis. Also, this study's results will be compared to previous findings, i.e. establishing triangulation, in the discussion section to further enhance the validity of the results (Mayring, 2000).

3. Results

Following the outlined process of analysis, four categories were derived from the data to structure the students' perception of preparation for practising inclusive education: theoretical knowledge (1), engaging with theoretical content (2), insufficient training for inclusive education (3) and external challenges (4). These will be further focussed on in the following to reflect the participants' sentiments as expressed in the interviews.

3.1 Theoretical knowledge

All participants stated that they are provided with input on inclusive education principles in their study programmes, for example in classes specifically dedicated to inclusive education or via additional input in other didactics/educational science classes. The latter, for example, is true for a Swedish student who learned about inclusive education in classes, *inter alia*, about relationships, identity and racism:

> *"I think I've seen parts of inclusion in, like, almost everything we've done so far. I don't think we had in the Swedish classes. But like, a lot in the pedagogy and some now. […] yeah, it's like a part of a lot in other subjects."* (Sweden)

The participants in this study reflected on their level of preparedness for teaching inclusive classrooms, for example claiming that they are aware of inclusive education principles in theory and knew of inclusive teaching practices, too, mentioning the usage of headphones in

the classroom to diminish noise and smaller group sizes for students in need of that. One of the Swedish students additionally explains how their study programme addresses possible challenges in the future classroom by theorizing them in their university classes:

> *"So just the fact that the education that we receive, it's very realistic and we problematize a lot about the challenges about being a teacher so that we are prepared for the actual challenges."* (Sweden)

The last few words in this utterance are key – the knowledge that she receives theoretically on behalf of her study programme makes her feel prepared not just for her future profession generally, but specifically for the obstacles that she anticipates come with that profession.

However, learning about inclusive principles theoretically at university does not always seem to be only valued, as one Czech student who wishes for more practical training suggests: "*we talk about it again and again. But it's everything theoretic based*". She emphasizes her study programme's focus on theoretic knowledge while also noting that input on inclusive education at university remained marginal: "*we don't have a special subject [about inclusion]*". Already at this instance, it can be summarized that there seems to be an implicit critique of the Czech teacher training for insufficient and dominantly theoretical input on inclusive education, whereas the Swedish students articulate appreciation for the provided input.

3.2 Engaging with knowledge

According to the Swedish students, engaging with inclusion-related ideas at university, for example, when opportunities for student-to-student exchange are established in teacher training classes, proves to help acquire new perspectives and ideas:

> *"We can exchange our different experiences when we talk and discuss. So even if some, for some, I think, for some teaching students there's a gap of knowledge because of their lived experiences, maybe because they are part of the majority, but they are part of the norm, if like, society caters to them. […] I think it's great that you can partake in discussions and share and learn about each other's experiences also."* (Sweden)

Although this utterance does not hint at theoretical inclusive paradigms, exchanging what she calls "lived experiences" can also support teaching students' learning about inclusive ideas and values. Peers at university accordingly profit from each other's experiences and knowledge and learn from each other through active exchange. But students claim to benefit from engaging with theoretical knowledge, too, insofar that they think about how to apply theory to practice:

> *"we very much critically examine all the different teaching theories and apply them to how would this work if we had someone who's neurodivergent, someone who has maybe ADHD or someone, it could be whatever, or second language learners."* (Sweden)

This process reflects an activation of theoretical knowledge and application thereof in imagined classroom scenarios. But even in real classroom situations, students are provided with the opportunity to transfer theoretical knowledge onto practice: "*I think what was good at university is it's all connected to like, the classroom setting. So, just to be able to apply all these things to the classroom you really understand the importance of it*" (Sweden).

Whether in actual practical settings or in imagined classroom scenarios, engaging with theoretical knowledge seems to be appreciated especially by the Swedish students. While the Czech students did not mention an active theory-practice-transfer taking place at university per se, some instances were traced still in which pre-service teachers explained how they

benefitted from trying out inclusive ideas in real-life situations beyond the classroom setting, for example in private tutoring lessons:

> *"when I started thinking about, you know, what are the differences between those people, maybe what would be the best for them, what methods would suit someone I can really see a difference, and that's really cool. I'm really happy about that."* (Czech Republic)

In a scenario beyond the university or the school context, the interviewee thus adopts and engages with ideas about inclusion, resulting in success. This shows that classroom experience is not necessarily essential for pre-service teachers to engage with ideas presented in teacher training, but that nonetheless an active engagement with inclusive content appears beneficial for their professional development.

3.3 Insufficient training for inclusive education

While theoretical knowledge hence seems to be provided by and engaged with in the study programmes, to varying extents in quantity and the students' valuation, both Swedish and Czech students also noted reasons for dissatisfaction with their teacher training programmes. Firstly, especially on behalf of the Czech students, insufficient training for inclusive principles in general was noted: "*Well, I think we, we talked about some examples, but to be honest I don't really remember because it was just like, you know, two minutes and let's keep going*". The other Czech student explained that they do not have a specific class at university about inclusive education but on "special education", in which they learn about, for example, speech therapy. Such a neglecting stance toward inclusive education in teacher training programmes, as observed in these two examples, can lead to uncertainty about the concept of inclusion. This is further illustrated by a participant struggling to properly define inclusion as a pedagogical concept:

> *"Inclusion from my view, it's a class full of children and there are some students with special needs and the students need some assistant because he doesn't work alone. He needs someone who will support him. So, I think that's inclusion."* (Czech Republic)

Unlike integration, inclusion is not about individual pupils for whom the curriculum needs to be adapted, different work devised or support assistants provided, and it is not about assimilating individual pupils with identified special educational needs into an already pre-defined school structure (Vislie, 2003). Rather, "[a]n inclusive school is an institution that changes and adapts to the needs of all students", implying "a kind of fellowship and participation that is fostered through a school organization that welcomes and can deal with diversity" (Hausstätter & Jahnukainen, 2015, p. 122). Following these definitions, it can be assumed that the interviewee fell victim to a semantic confusion of the terms 'inclusion' and 'integration'.

Secondly, specific areas of knowledge were identified which, according to the interviewees, would have needed more attention during teacher training. One interviewee reflects on pupils who are not yet fully proficient in the classroom language and thus run the danger of being excluded from learning in the classroom. To oppose that obstacle, she would wish for more information on how to deal with multilingual and language-learning classrooms:

> *"I'd like more on bilingualism. In Sweden, the Swedish subjects, it's actually divided into two. It's Swedish and then it's Swedish as a second language. […] when becoming a teacher you can study both of them as two different subjects at university. So even though there is Swedish as a second language, I would like to have some of that aspects even now for me who's studying simply Swedish."* (Sweden)

Students also wished to address more profoundly other areas of expertise in their teacher training programmes such as how to deal with new students who are also refugees, such as Ukrainian children currently starting school in other European countries, and issues of racism in the classroom. Moreover, students would prefer more information on special needs education and on how to implement inclusion in the specific age groups they will be confronted with in their classrooms. Lastly, questions that they would have liked to have answered also centred around inclusive teaching material.

Thirdly, students criticized the limited internship experience granted during their time of studying. The Czech students especially proclaimed a wish for more practical experiences in the classroom, suggesting that they would feel more prepared to teach inclusive classrooms if they had been confronted with the 'reality' of the classroom more: "*I'd appreciate really experience from the school, not the theory-based, but the real experience from the school*". Repeatedly, this student explains that she is "not prepared" for teaching inclusively because of the dominance of theoretical learning during her study programme in combination with a lack of practical experience.

3.4 External barriers

Besides insufficient teacher training for inclusive education, more barriers were found that students believe will impede their capacities to teach inclusion-friendly but that are not directly linked to the study programme. Given that these factors still seem to influence the students' perception of readiness, they will be taken into consideration to account for the complexity of the issues students find themselves confronted with. All participants, no matter the study programme or location, mentioned challenging classroom realities, burdens stemming from the respective national school systems as well as a lack of resources and materials for practicing inclusive education. One Swedish student, for example, explained such external challenges as follows:

> "*Because there's so much paperwork, so many other things, am I able to see all of the students especially if you have a class with like thirty students, am I able to see all of them?*" (Sweden)

This quote shows the multiple layers being at play in inclusive classroom settings – bureaucracy, teaching large classes, and still being able to meet individual students' needs. Here, it is thus classroom-internal and external barriers colliding, making the pre-service teacher question her abilities to be able to cope in such a classroom scenario. This commentary already illustrates challenges within the national school system, which were also articulated by participants from another national context:

> "*in the Czech Republic I don't really feel like [inclusion is] a thing. It's been, it's been a thing since past few months or maybe even a year or two years, like, people started realising that there are some needs that, you know, you should try to do your best and to include everyone. But still, I would say, you know, like, it's first an idea, but I don't know if it's working. I wouldn't say so.*" (Czech Republic)

Embedded in this utterance are the fact that inclusion is still regarded as a new phenomenon in the Czech Republic as well as a tendency to not believe in the applicability of this new concept in the Czech classroom. More explicitly, another student noted challenges, indirectly also revolving around the criticism of the overall system, concerning a lack of resources and materials to successfully perform inclusive teaching practices: "*Because you don't have all the money in the world, all the time in the world to help everyone*" (Sweden).

Summary

The participants' perceptions of being ready for teaching inclusive classrooms hence stem mostly from knowledge of theoretical inclusive education principles and, to some extent, from practising theory-to-practice-transfer guided by their teacher training. Still, the application of such in practice is opposed by challenges anticipated by the pre-service teachers due to limited preparation for their future profession on behalf of their study programmes as well as external barriers mostly embedded within the respective national school system.

4. Discussion

In the following, an expansion of the results will be introduced via explorations of scholarly and wider contextual interconnections on international-comparative grounds. Thus, an approach to answering the research questions about the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the Swedish/Czech university programme's preparation for inclusive education and its influence on the pre-service teachers' feeling of preparedness for teaching in inclusive classrooms will be initiated. This part will ultimately be followed by an approach to the study's limitations.

4.1 International-comparative discussion of the results

As has become apparent in the results section, the Swedish study programme for future teachers, according to the two interviewees, delivers helpful information for working in inclusive contexts, motivates exchanges of diverse perspectives among peers and supports theory-to-praxis-transfer, discussing anticipated challenges and providing the pre-service teachers with inclusive teaching methods. One Swedish student even proclaimed: "*I think I will be prepared for [inclusion]*". Interestingly, despite the focus on special needs education rather than on inclusive education in the national curricula for teaching study programmes (The 2010 SFS Education Act, as cited in Magnússon, 2020, p. 29), there has been little to no mentions of special needs education in the interviews, but there was instead a focus on inclusion. Nonetheless, despite their perception of a supportive study programme and their positive anticipations regarding their future profession and teaching inclusively, the students mentioned that they would appreciate even more input on inclusive education, especially concerning their chosen school forms and second language didactics, *inter alia*. This perceived need for more support aligns with previous research on Swedish universities' incorporation of inclusive teaching paradigms into teacher training programmes. The needs of pre-service teachers from this study can thus complement previous research, such as conducted by Miškolci et al. (2020), who have already advocated a need for more guidance to improve student awareness of which teaching practices are considered inclusive and why, and to refine the understanding of the relationship between special education and inclusive education as well as between disability, special needs and diversity.

The Czech interviewees, however, only valued the theoretical knowledge on inclusive education to a limited extent and rather criticised their study programme as theory-heavy and only dealing with topics of inclusive education marginally. Like in the study conducted by Miškolci et al. (2020) in a Swedish context, a refinement of the pre-service teachers' understanding of the pedagogical terms 'inclusion' and 'integration' could be attempted in the future, as this study has shown that such a blurring of concepts can become problematic when students turn against inclusion out of a lack of education. Schmidt (2012) found that pre-service teachers just entering their study programme already hold certain beliefs about their anticipated profession, about the kind of teacher they want to become and about what they presume works and does not work in the classroom. These beliefs, among other factors, stem from years of experience as students at school, observing other teachers. They may stick

throughout the study programme and sometimes even influence what students learn during their time studying (Schmidt, 2012). In this study, it has become apparent, too, that the participants' personal attributes can add to both their feelings of being prepared for teaching inclusive classrooms, as well as enhance feelings of uncertainty or even rejection toward inclusion. For instance, one Czech interviewee articulated:

> *"I'm not really supporting inclusion. I'm really against the inclusion because when I was in my high school, there was a lot of gifted students and students with special needs, and the teacher (...) the teachers improved only the students with the special needs. And students, the gifted students were stuck."* (Czech Republic)

Thus, memories of past times at school can lead to a construction of fearful (or, in other instances, desired) visions of the teacher self that students wish to rather not become. To process preexisting beliefs, Miller & Shifflet (2016) suggest that teaching students should be provided with reflection skills and taught about pedagogical practices, challenging their initial understanding of the teaching context and extending their primary beliefs. While the relevance of teachers' beliefs and values for creating an effective learning environment for all pupils (Reynolds, 2001) has already been mentioned, it needs to be emphasised again that pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion should be acknowledged and guided during their time studying.

Still, most of the participants highlighted their personal inclusive attitudes which they suspect will come in handy when teaching inclusive classes. This was shown in the results section via the example of the Czech pre-service teacher who explained how seeing the effects of practising inclusion in real life led to a change toward a more inclusive attitude when she realised the effects of her adapted teaching methods on her students in private tutoring, i.e. unrelated to university-guided teacher training, but after learning about teaching and inclusion in her study programme. Likewise, other participants explained that – due to discourse on social media and growing up in a "mindful" generation – they were already interested in learning about inclusion and concepts of diversity prior to taking up their studies and are now motivated to utilize inclusive concepts in their future classrooms. According to one participant, her attitude toward inclusion was subsequently only solidified by the study programmes: "*I think [my attitudes regarding inclusion] have just solidified. I think it's just like a confirmation on why it's so important especially now that I've been out in school and have interacted with students*" (Sweden). Here, an active engagement with inclusive ideas seems to have taken place as the verb "solidify" suggests, resulting from practical interaction with school pupils.

Thus, the emphasis in this latter exploration of the development of the student's attitude toward inclusion is on experience in actual classrooms. Such experience, although guided by her study programme, is external to the university, and for such a learning to take place, practical phases of teacher training need to be installed in the first case – which is not a given for all participants in this study. On behalf of the Czech pre-service teachers', the dominance of theoretical knowledge on inclusive education in the study programme was equated with a lack of practical training, causing students to feel unprepared for teaching in inclusive settings. These findings hence support the results brought forth by Šmelová et al. (2016), who identified a lack of training for inclusive education and found pre-service teachers to not feel prepared for future challenges in the inclusive classroom due to not only insufficient knowledge but also due to scarce practical experience with inclusion in Czech teacher training programmes.

Any opportunities for engaging with theoretical input on inclusion, however, which do not necessarily have to be set in a real classroom, have been found to help pre-service teachers

feel more prepared for teaching inclusive classrooms. Such can consist of peer discussions but also of imagining classroom scenarios within the university context, problematizing possible challenges and courses of action according to inclusive teaching paradigms. Thus, while being provided with theoretical knowledge alone is not always valued by pre-service teachers, engaging with such in groups and with the actual classroom in mind has been appreciated in this study.

Apart from the Czech students' wishes for more practical training, in all interviews, no matter the university's national context, suggestions for improving the respective study programmes were expressed. Adding to the recommendations of Smantser & Ignatovitch (2015) and Kurniawati et al., (2014) for updating teacher education curricula, this study's interviewees expressed wishes for more guidance and information about second language didactics and including migrant pupils, among others. Interestingly, despite this study's focus on inclusive education instead of on special education paradigms, pre-service teachers frequently mentioned their fear of not being prepared to appropriately deal with pupils with special educational needs, which constitutes another finding that aligns with previous research (Slowik et al., 2020; Wash & Freeman, 2014).

It has also become clear that both Swedish and Czech students anticipate challenges due to external impediments. However, for the Swedish students, these external factors seem even more challenging than those related to their university preparation. Mostly, concerns about challenges related to the school system were phrased. The following quote illustrates the ambiguity of the Swedish pre-service teachers' situation, entangled between supportive teacher training and a challenging school system, as expressed in this study's interviews:

> *"But it's all about, it's a matter of time and resources. It depends on how much resources you have. […] So that's, that's the challenge. I feel like I have the knowledge and the tools, but it depends, will the actual, like, system, the organisation that I work within, will it allow me to help everyone feel included and be included?"* (Sweden).

Subsequently, teacher training approaches providing and engaging with theoretical input on inclusion, which have been acknowledged as helpful, have been laid out, as well as the importance of considering individual students' attitudes toward inclusion. The latter seems to be of importance especially when certain pedagogical terms and concepts remain fuzzy in the imaginations of pre-service teachers despite teacher education. Additionally, it can be suggested that the Swedish students deemed their university's preparation for their future inclusive classrooms effective and helpful, while the Czech students rather expressed challenges related to their university-set preparation, criticising their teacher training programme for being too theory-focussed and not dealing with matters of inclusion sufficiently. While the Swedish students did not seem affected extensively by obstacles related to their teacher training, they as well as the Check students identified challenging external barriers which influence their perception of being able to teach in inclusive settings. However, this vague comparison of the Swedish and Czech teacher training programmes certainly cannot be generalised as representative, as will be further elaborated on in the subsequent discussion of the study's limitations.

4.1 Limitations and relativization of the study

Qualitative research can provide detailed information about participants' accounts; however, to successfully analyse data, the data itself needs to be rich in content and the participants need to feel at ease and comfortable enough to freely share their thoughts and experiences (Döring, 2023). Although an attempt was made to create a natural conversation mood, the online format and the language barrier could have affected the interviews.

Unfortunately, Zoom presented the only possible way of conducting the interviews due to the different locations across Europe of everyone involved, and English was similarly the only language all participants had command of. During the interviews, it became obvious that some participants were more proficient in the language than others, which might cause differences in the respective richness of content in each interview.

Additionally, only four interviews were conducted, which might influence the reliability of the attempted international comparison across the data. Hence, the diversity of the student body enrolled in teacher training programmes in Sweden and the Czech Republic as well as their experiences and wishes cannot be fully represented in this study. Since this study considers student anticipations and perceptions, it also needs to be stated that these might develop and change throughout the study programme (Eisenschmidt et al., 2010; Kim & Cho, 2014) and that these are often biased or characterised by "unrealistic optimism" (Weinstein, 1989, p. 57). Furthermore, future-oriented visions are highly subjective even solely due to different ways of expression within focus groups, some having a more narrowed, others a broader focus (Hammerness, 2003). When considering student anticipations, it is thus important to keep in mind that these are not factful statements or definite predictions of the future, but that these are affected by students' ongoing professional development and biases. Statements, for example, about the quality of a study programme need to be considered accordingly.

There are also some limitations concerning the international comparison approach of this study that need to be made transparent. While such an approach can be insightful insofar that the results from such studies might help decipher "problems 'at home'" (Phillips, 2009, p. 1073), it needs to be emphasized that when an "educational transfer" (Phillips, 2009, p. 1061) of ideas and practices from an apparently successful teacher education system to another is suggested, any of those principles need to be adapted to the system into which they are to be applied (Phillips, 2009; Weidman et al., 2014). Thus, the success of educational transfers hinges on the respective contexts and the appropriateness of accommodating the borrowed practices from one system into another:

> Some of these borrowed teaching frameworks, concepts, and methods are appropriate and others fall short when considering them in international settings. Societal obstacles such as customs, cultures, languages, norms, ethnicity, and religions often make what are deemed as good or best practice teacher education programs in one country less or entirely ineffective in others. (Weidman et al., 2014, p. 131)

While this article does not offer enough space to tackle contextual characteristics of the teacher education systems in question, it has thus still been disclaimed that the success of teacher education principles in a national context does not equate to success thereof in another; context and adaptability need to be considered.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to conceptualise pre-service teachers' perceptions of their respective study programme's preparation for inclusive education and their thereby influenced feeling of being prepared for teaching inclusive classrooms. Participants in this study were enrolled in teacher training programmes in Sweden and the Czech Republic, making it possible to detect similarities and differences between the study programmes and their effects on the students. Following this aim, semi-structured interviews with two pre-service teachers from each of the two countries were conducted and the resulting data was analysed via qualitative content analysis. The details in the students' accounts were explored in international comparison and with regard to previous research in the field.

Returning to the proposed research questions, it first needs to be stated that there has been found an overarching appreciation of and/or wish for more input on inclusive education in the dataset, which is nevertheless at points opposed by realistic views on external barriers and unsatisfying teacher training. Specifically, it can be concluded that while the Czech pre-service teachers perceived their programme's input for inclusive education as insufficient, too theory-heavy and confusing when it comes to differentiating between different pedagogical concepts, they to some extent still showed personal inclusive attitudes and adaptability to test out inclusive practices nonetheless to make them feel more prepared for teaching inclusive classrooms in the future. The Swedish students seemed satisfied with their programme's preparation for teaching inclusive classrooms and seemed confident that they would be able to apply their theoretical knowledge in their future classroom practice – as practised at university – but were still intimidated by obstacles embedded within the national school system.

Nonetheless, the Swedish model observed in this study, based on the students' articulations, still offers knowledge about effective teacher training for inclusive education. According to this study's findings, then, actively providing opportunities for student-student exchange, theorising possible classroom challenges and – even if just theoretically – practising theory-practice-transfer were acknowledged as helpful preparation for future inclusive teaching practices by the pre-service teachers.

Still, insecurities on behalf of the pre-service teachers have been found in areas such as second language didactics, age-group-specific variables and including migrant pupils, among other factors, showing that there is still room for improvement for both teacher training programmes. Additionally, concerns have been found regarding external obstacles which have a daunting effect on students from both universities; challenges connected to the school system thus seem to influence the students' perception of being prepared in both Sweden and the Czech Republic. Hence, some students find themselves entangled between not just their perceived insufficient preparation for inclusive teaching on behalf of their study programme, but also due to external barriers connected to the school system, large classes, time management and other challenging factors. The conflict becomes especially obvious when considering the Swedish interview transcripts, which showed that while the Swedish pre-service teachers do feel mostly prepared for inclusive teaching, they are also aware of what their programme cannot prepare them for – although even attempts at discussing possible challenges in future classrooms have been made by their university training.

Future research is hereby invited to further explore (inter)national tendencies and discrepancies in teacher education, conceptualising what works and what does not work in teacher education in national contexts according to those experiencing teacher education first-hand. For now, this newly gained international perspective on teacher education for inclusive education can inspire a reassessment of individual teacher education programmes to effectively cater to students' needs, for example by considering active engagement with theoretical knowledge and listening to students' perspectives and ideas. While such an approach to teacher education research, in the long run, might support new teachers in developing into their professional roles on the micro level, it might on the macro level also serve to further optimize inclusive teaching internationally.

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