Article

Designing and Implementing an In-Service Training Course for School Teams on Inclusive Education: Reflections from Participants

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Abstract: Significant and effective implementation of inclusive education (IE) has been a major challenge in many countries during the last decades. Although teachers' knowledge and skills are considered a key factor for successful inclusive practice, the whole school staff commitment and contribution to implementing IE policies are equally important. Collaboration between different professionals such as teachers, school leaders, and support specialists is crucial. This study aimed to design and implement an in-service training course for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) on IE in the Estonian context and to explore how participants experienced learning as a team in this course. The results of this study showed that the main aspects of the in-service training for school teams valued by participants were: (1) All topics covered in a systematic and coherent way gave a good opportunity to focus on relevant issues, which should be considered in the schools' self-development activities in the field of IE; (2) practical approach to training structure helped to identify priority areas that need to be developed in particular schools; (3) learning from each other both within their own school team and across school teams contributed to finding the best solutions for meaningful implementation of IE. The implication of these findings is further discussed in the paper.

Keywords: inclusive education; in-service training; school teams; learning experience

1. Introduction

While the idea of inclusive education (IE) has been accepted in most countries, problems are still encountered with its meaningful implementation [1–3]. Although a number of guidelines have been developed for the implementation of IE at the international level [4–7], barriers to the implementation of IE have not been overcome in a diverse context. The academic and social inclusion of all learners is hampered by a number of factors, particularly the lack of common perceptions and vision of IE [8–10]. Additional barriers are related to attitudes towards teaching all children in an inclusive classroom, lack of IE policy at the school level, limited resources, insufficient professional development programs for staff, and limited engagement with key stakeholders [11,12].

Planning and enhancing teachers' pre-service and in-service education programs has become one of the key policy priorities working towards the vision of IE and providing high-quality education for all learners [13,14]. Reviews of international studies have shown that the majority of in-service teacher training courses have been of short-term duration and have focused on specific types of special educational needs (SEN) and differentiated teaching [15,16]. Simultaneously, a whole school approach to increase capacities within schools through school level self-improvement and learning activities that promote removing barriers in everyday inclusive practice has been considered equally important by several researchers [1,17,18]. Studies have also shown that teachers who are dissatisfied with the insufficiency of efforts to implement inclusive teaching in their schools often acknowledge the inadequacy or total lack of collaborative teamwork at the school level [19,20]. More

specifically, the development of teachers' agency related to the promotion of IE depends on cooperation at the school level [21]. Collaborative teamwork, in turn, contributes to the development of collective agency, which is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of IE at the school level [22].

Previous studies [23] have found that a whole school training approach is useful in eliminating the view that implementation of IE practices is the responsibility of only those teachers who have been trained for this. Instead, shared responsibility and collaboration among all staff members is important for successful inclusion. Several studies have highlighted that teachers, support specialists, and school leaders are the most important staff members to achieve the goals of IE [24–26]. The need for more collaborative teamwork and in-service training for school teams was also confirmed by a recent study conducted in Estonia [10], which forms the context of the current study.

Finally, McMaster [27] has recognized that successful and sustainable in-service professional development for promoting IE will only progress when all school staff and community stakeholders share the same vision and work collaboratively. Despite this recognition, there is little research on the effect of a long-term in-service training course on IE that targets diverse staff members at school. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to design and implement a long-term in-service training course for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) on IE and to explore how participants experienced learning in this course as a school team. More specifically, we were interested in what was valued in the training course and what suggestions were made by the participants for the development of the training course.

1.1. Whole School Approach to School Improvement

Schuelka and Engsig [3] have discussed that inclusive education is a complex multilayered socio-cultural process within the educational system and propose analyzing and framing inclusion as a non-isolated subset of the educational system and not as one interdependent element of the whole educational system. Such an approach must be acknowledged, but the reconstruction of education systems is a long-term and complex process. Following the ecosystem model worked out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, which provides a holistic approach of the complex network at micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro levels, a large-scale change at the national, community, and also the school levels is required [17]. To promote inclusion and equity within education systems, Ainscow [1] has formulated a framework where the five factors of school development, inclusion and equity, community involvement, use of evidence, and administration are closely interrelated. He has pointed out that although external contextual factors influence the way schools organize their work, increasing the capacity of mainstream schools must be in focus. In the context of the current study, a whole school approach aims to raise quality and standards across the entire school. For this approach to be effective, schools need to identify and address the needs of the school community and engage in continuous cyclical processes for improvement.

Although school improvement has internationally been in focus for decades, there are still challenges. Hopkins et al. [28] have emphasized different factors of inclusive school development process. These include understanding the school's organizational culture, conducting research initiatives at the school level, building capacity for pupil learning at the local level, and emphasizing leadership. To make progress in these domains and create a better school through organizational learning, all stakeholders need to be involved, as shown by Thapa et al. [29]. Thus, it becomes clear that building human and social capacity requires collaboration within schools and between schools [30]. This is preceded by a common vision and a shared understanding of the meaning of IE [9,31]. Moreover, Mitchell [32] emphasizes that educators must recognize the vision and principles of IE at all levels, and this must be reflected in both legislation and policy at all levels of the education system. Kinsella [33] points out that special educational students' achievements depend

on the extent to which an inclusive culture is taken into account in the organizational development process.

Thus, to ensure the successful implementation of IE a need for school-based professional development programs have been highlighted by several researchers [12,18,26]. When planning these activities and redesigning school improvement strategies, it is important to take into account national and local policies [34]. In the following section, we will introduce the background of IE in Estonia and specify further the needs for developing long-term in-service course of IE.

1.2. Estonian Context

The principle of IE has been established at the legislative level in Estonia since 2010 [35]. According to the Estonian Information System of Education Statistics, the number of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools has increased since the Act came into force. However, with that the number of students enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools has also increased. A study conducted in Estonia showed that the meaning of IE is understood differently by teachers and leaders of educational institutions [36], and even among the specialists who train or advise teachers and schools [10]. In the present study, we follow the definition agreed between the member states of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, according to which "the ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers" [37] (p. 1). This has also been used as a founding principle for developing IE policy in Estonia. This means that the educational institution of the student's place of residence takes into account the student's academic and social abilities and needs and ensures the availability of the necessary support [38]. However, schools are often struggling with this.

As in many former Soviet and Eastern European countries (see, e.g., [39–41]), the expectation that support for students with SEN should be provided by special educators is still prevalent. Although the content of teachers' training has focused on how to differentiate teaching of SEN students in an inclusive classroom, less attention has paid to how to create a whole school IE policy with the aim to raise the achievements of all students and staff.

The Estonian education system leaves great autonomy to the local authorities and school leaders to organize compulsory education in their schools, including the provision of special needs education [42]. Studies conducted in Estonia have revealed that although many school leaders accept the philosophy of IE [43], not all of them have positive attitudes towards IE.

Analysis of in-service courses on IE in one of the major universities in Estonia providing teacher training showed that these courses have primarily focused on training teachers' special educational skills, and inclusive education has been considered only in the context of the state level legislative framework. There are a few in-service training courses for school leaders, and the topic of IE is also briefly addressed only at the legislative level. In addition, in-service training courses are not provided for school teams with different occupations, such as teachers, support specialists, and school leaders. It is also highlighted by Estonian experts, who train or advise schools on IE, that universities should develop long-term in-service courses and focus on topics like leadership, creating an inclusive learning environment, allocating necessary recourses, supporting teachers through collaborative school culture, and taking into account individual needs of schools with the aim to provide equal opportunities for all students to achieve their academic skills and social belongings [10]. These facts indicate the need to change the content and organizational form of training on IE in the Estonian context. Thereby attention had to primarily be paid to developing common understandings and values of IE.

Taking into account the complexity of an inclusive school improvement process and the need for enhancing teachers' and other school staff professionals' development through pre-service and in-service training curricula at the universities level in the Estonian context,

long-term in-service training for school teams seemed to be one possibility to enhance school-wide approaches to become more inclusive school communities. As teachers, support specialists, and school leaders play an important role in creating an inclusive learning environment for all students and should share a common vision about the school development process [26], an in-service training course on IE for school teams, which included professionals mentioned earlier, was developed by our research group. In the following section, we will describe the training course in more detail.

1.3. Description of the Training Course

The overall goal of designing the training course was to develop the school staff's attitudes, skills, and knowledge about the concept and meaning of IE and its effective implementation through inclusive school development strategies.

This course was developed in the context of a larger in-service teacher education program that aims to enhance IE. The whole training program included 60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Teachers had to complete the entire program, support specialists had an opportunity to participate in the whole program or complete 29 ECTS (see Appendix A). One course of this long-term training program described, with the topics below in Figure 1 and named Inclusive Education with the volume 10 ECTS, was planned for school teams (teachers, support specialists, and school leaders). In this study, we focus on this particular course.

Figure 1. Main topics of the training course Inclusive Education (IE).

The training course topics were based on the ecosystem model worked out by the European Agency [17]. Key indicators from the meso-system like leadership, a continuum of support, collaboration, the professionalism of the staff, ethics for everybody, and family involvement, were combined with the exo-system around the school, i.e., community commitment working together with other professionals outside of schools. Finally, macro-system indicators like state legislation and policy, governance, and funding, monitoring, and quality assurance were taken into account. These topics were chosen based on the main needs for school teams revealed from previous studies in the Estonian context [10,36]. For instance, the need for clear school policy, allocation of resources, creating an inclusive school environment, the professionalism of whole school staff, and collaboration. International studies have also pointed out that professional development of teachers on IE should pay more attention to build on collegial interaction and collaboration between different

stakeholders [44,45]. The fact that teachers and support specialists participated in a longer training course for raising their capacities to work in the inclusive classroom was also considered. These courses covered topics such as learning and development, professional development, social-emotional learning, the inclusion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities, and action research (see Appendix A). All these topics were addressed in the context of IE.

As the course was planned, the relevance of topics and teaching methods for school teams with different professions at the school level (teachers, support specialists, and school leaders) was considered. To make the topics to be covered meaningful to participants, the principle of linking theory and practice was implemented by associating concepts from literature, national education policy, with peculiarities of the local community, and the school context. In addition, a co-creative approach in designing the training course was used. Vyas et al. [46] argue that the multi-disciplinary co-creation in the designing process where trained professionals and members from the community with whom the project is focused can lead to harmonious working, co-owned decisions, and the conceptual inner values into a practical research framework. Therefore, the content and volume of the training course were introduced to the participants before the training course. Participants' feedback was taken into account throughout the course. In addition, all school teams' members were given the opportunity to assess compliance with their expectations during group interviews conducted in the middle of the training course and at the end of the training course (see also Section 2.2. Collecting Data and Analysis).

Nine training sessions were conducted during November 2019 and January 2021. Each session consisted of 6–8 academic contact hours and after that schools' teams had to continue with certain topics in their schools. Training took place monthly or bi-monthly. During the summer holiday, there was a longer interval (4 months). This long training period allowed schools to plan development activities involving the entire school staff. In addition, Gibbs and Coffey [47] have found that training courses that have lasted for at least 18 months have the greatest impact on changes.

Three necessary dimensions to the development of inclusion within the school, like producing inclusive policies, creating inclusive cultures, and exploring inclusive practices, are described in the guidebook *Index for inclusion* [4]. Characteristics and requirements of inclusive schools are worked out by Kinsella [33], and guidance materials for raising achievements of all learners [17] were considered as foundations in the designing and conducting of the training course. Lectures and diverse group work activities were used as main methods. The latter included individual preparations as well. The balance between lecturing and group work was planned as 40 percent and 60 percent, respectively.

Regarding the learning outcomes, it was aimed that after completing the course, participants:

1. Understand the approach and application of IE;
2. can analyze the key components of IE and their combined effect;
3. know main models of collaborative networks and know his/her role in the implementation of inclusive practice;
4. are committed to professional development in the implementation of inclusive school culture and practice;
5. have readiness and know-how for designing an inclusive school.

More information about the training course is presented in Table 1.

The whole training process was developed so that school teams had to map their current situation and set up short-term and long-term development activities based on the addressed issue in a training session. It was meant that some of the improvement areas like school level policy documents, amendments to the school curricula, or some other activities were revised and implemented during the training course period. At the same time, long-term improvement areas were mapped and formulated in the final school improvement strategical document. To ensure that the participants work as a team in their

school, learning tasks were set up in all training sessions, which required the input of all parties in both group work and homework.

Table 1. Description of the training course.

Themes and Subthemes	Time for Contact Training and Group/Independent Activities	Homework: Practical Input to the School Development Process
Vision and school culture • the definition and meaning of IE • diversity and social justice • inclusive school culture • indicators of inclusive schools	Session 1 8 academic hours contact training 20 hours' independent or group activities	School's current background data and situation are mapped. Shared vision about the definition and meaning of IE and inclusive school culture is defined at the school level.
Legislative framework and school policy • state policy for IE • school policy for IE • inclusive curricula and assessment • structures for special educational needs (SEN) provision • support system • self-assessment	Session 2 and 3 16 academic hours contact training 40 hours' independent or group activities	Schools policy documents are analyzed and revised. Short-term and long-term goals are set based on the results of self-assessment.
Learning environment and resources • physical environment, Universal Design (UD) • personnel resources • financial resources	Session 4 6 academic hours 20 hours' independent or group activities	The current situation of the learning environment and resources are mapped. Short-term and long-term development goals have been formulated.
The professionalism of staff • roles of the school staff • competencies and development of school staff • leadership • inclusive pedagogy • evidence-based inclusive classroom strategies	Session 5 and 6 12 academic hours 40 hours' independent or group activities	The roles and duties of different school staff members are clarified and defined. Short-term and long-term training needs for raising staff competencies have been mapped.
Collaboration • collaboration between school staff • collaboration with parents • collaboration with local authorities • collaboration with external agencies • students' voices	Session 7 6 academic hours 20 hours' independent or group activities	Improvement areas for collaboration within the school and with partners outside of schools have been mapped. A development plan for improving collaboration is composed.
Quality assurance • state-level quality assurance • school-level quality assurance indicators • gathering quantitative and qualitative data • schools' strategic development plan to ensure quality education for all learners	Session 8 6 academic hours 60 hours' independent or group activities	Quality assurance indicators are set at the school level. The school strategic development plan is finalized.
Concluding seminar for sharing composed school developmental plans and reflecting the whole training process	Session 9 6 academic hours contact training	Final outcome: Schools strategic developmental and operational plan for IE is composed.

The training was conducted by two trainers: A leading trainer from the University of Tartu and an assistant trainer from Tallinn University. The trainers ensured that all participants were actively involved in the learning activities and, if necessary, the school teams were advised individually during the training sessions. A reflection on the training process was carried out after each session. This gave a good opportunity to make flexible changes in the teaching methods or materials during the training course. Both trainers have experience with teachers' pre-service and in-service training on IE and are involved in a joint project between the two universities, which aims to develop and enhance the teaching quality of IE curriculum.

The Aim of the Study and Research Questions

As the main goal of the current study was to design and implement an in-service training course for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) on IE and to explore how participants experienced learning as a team in this course, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What was valued by the participants in the in-service training for the school teams on IE?
2. What suggestions were made by the participants for the further development of in-service training for school teams?

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The qualitative study sample consisted of the team members of the 4 schools that participated in the training: From each school 4–6 teachers, a support specialist (special teacher or social pedagogue), and a school principal or a deputy principal. The choice of schools was based on all schools' wishes, and recommendations were given, in the case of 2 schools, by the local government running these schools. The interest of the local government was to raise the capacities of schools, which had the readiness to teach all students in their schools of residence. Background data from study participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Background information of participants.

	The Type of School	The Whole Number of Students in School	The Number of SEN Students in School	Team Members		
				Teachers	Support Specialists	School Leaders
School No 1 (X1)	Basic school	762	205	5 subject teachers who teach in grades 2 to 9	1 support specialist: Social pedagogue	1 deputy principal
School No 2 (X2)	Basic school	505	139	4 subject teachers who teach in grades 4 to 9	1 support specialist: Social pedagogue	1 deputy principal
School No 3 (X3)	Basic school	554	165	4 subject teachers who teach in grades 4 to 9	1 support specialist: Special educator	1 school principal
School No 4 (X4)	Basic school and upper secondary school as one institution	827	226	6 subject teachers who teach in grades 4 to 12	1 support specialist: Social pedagogue	1 school principal

Participation in the study was voluntary, but all participants agreed and gave written consent. Researchers guaranteed confidentiality.

2.2. Collecting Data and Analysis

Participants' feedback was collected twice during the training course. After the sixth session semi-structured school-based group interviews with all school teams were

conducted by both trainers using Zoom. Fontana and Frey [48] have pointed out that semi-structured interviews are the best way to understand other people. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison [49] have noted that group interviews can be effective in educational research because group members have worked together towards a common goal and thus enable them to support and complement each other. According to Arksey and Knight [50], interviewing several people at once results in more complete and reliable information because it is possible to identify relationships between group members—how participants support, influence, complement, agree, or disagree. The purpose of the interviews was to get feedback on the current content and organization of the training in order to make modifications if necessary. Before conducting the interviews, the interview plan was discussed among experienced researchers. The choice of interview questions focused on the research questions arising from the goal of the current study. To get answers to the first research question (What was valued by the participants in the in-service training for the school teams on IE?), participants were asked, for example: What are your opinions about the content and volume of the training? How do you evaluate participation in in-service training as a team? The main questions about the second research questions (What suggestions were made by the participants for the further development of in-service training for school teams?) were: What are your suggestions for making the content and volume of the training course more meaningful? What are your suggestions to increase the practical value of the training? In addition, the main questions of the interview were supplemented with follow up questions (e.g., can you give some examples?). Finally, the interviewees offered the opportunity to add more about the training course at their own request (question: What else do you want to say about the training course we did not talk about yet?). All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The duration of the interviews was between 1 h and 1 h and 10 min. During the interviews, it was observed that all team members expressed their opinions by answering the questions.

After the end of the course, data were collected in the final school-based semi-structured group interviews and individual written open-ended questionnaire to get the final feedback and recommendations to further develop the training course. An individual open-ended questionnaire, as an additional method, was chosen to complement group interviews and allow all participants to provide individually important information as well as additional information [51,52]. Through the final interviews and a questionnaire, we looked for answers to the questions: What is the final assessment of the training? What changes should definitely be introduced in future training? What was the value of participating in the training course as a team? The duration of the final interviews was between 1 h and 1 h and 30 min.

All data were analyzed by qualitative inductive content analysis using the qualitative data analysis web application QCAmap (qcamap.org). This method highlights important features, similar experiences and meanings, and describes differences [53]. Data from all data collections were analyzed by study questions. First, meaningful items related to the research questions were found and coded independently by the first and the fourth authors of the article. After the initial analysis, the researchers reviewed the labelled codes together and, if necessary, clarified the scope of the marking and the names of the codes. Units with similar codes formed subcategories, which in turn formed the main categories. For example, the codes "all topics were necessary", "the topic of external cooperative network was important", etc., formed a subcategory, necessity of topics. The codes "integrated approach to the topics", "multi-dimensional self-assessment tools", etc., formed a subcategory, comprehensive approach to the topics. The codes "optimal value", "reasonably distributed value", etc., formed a subcategory, volume of the training course. Finally, three subcategories formed the main category, content and volume of the training course.

All co-authors were involved in the final data analysis process to ensure the quality of the study. Both coding and categorization decisions were discussed with researchers until a consensus was reached.

3. Results

3.1. Issues Valued by the Participants in the In-Service Training for the School Teams

After analyzing the data, two main categories were set:

- Content and volume of the training course; and
- organization of the training course.

3.1.1. Content and Volume of the Training Course

In general, all the topics covered in the training course were considered important by the school teams and the comprehensive approach to the topics was highlighted.

Necessity of Topics

It was emphasized that covering the topics helped create an overall picture and a system for the aspects to be addressed in implementing IE at a school level. Feedback from participants revealed that while before the training it was felt that a lot had been done in the context of supporting all learners and implementing IE at the school level. However, the needs to further develop IE emerged in several instances after going through the different topics of improvement areas. For example, the school team was sure they had a well-developed support system at school, but bottlenecks were revealed during the training (like the clarity of the role of different stakeholders, taking into account students views to their study organization, etc.) and it was decided to improve their system. It was also discussed that many topics could seem familiar from theory (e.g., legislation, learning environment, and resources). Still, it became clear that not everything really works that way in school practice. It was mentioned that schools have not always correctly understood the meaning of statements of legislation, and thereby school policy directly applied from legislation did not work in their school practice.

Although it was first emphasized that all the topics covered in the training course were important, there were also examples of the importance of different topics. For example, it was highlighted that knowledge of the legislative framework provided an understanding of what school development activities, including policy documents, should be based on. As a result, special attention was paid to improving the support system and school curricula.

> Our curriculum is now coming in a whole new way, much more child-friendly and understandable. We have thought about this thanks to this training and we will start practicing from the new academic year (X2, deputy principal).

Feedback from participants showed that internal and external cooperation network was also a significant topic. The involvement of children and parents themselves to support the student's development was considered a priority, and it was emphasized that during the training, it was possible to think about it with team members and organize, for example, a child development interview guide which was understandable and useful for all parties.

The issue of assessing the quality of IE was also emphasized as an important topic of the training. It was pointed out that the planning of school development activities is a cyclical process. The development of internal evaluation criteria for ensuring quality education for all students in the context of a specific school was very important.

Comprehensive Approach to the Topics

Although the participating schools had expectations for various specific areas for development, the teams from all schools found it valuable that the integrated approach to the topics during the training helped create a comprehensive picture of the necessary development activities for the organization as a whole. Particular emphasis was placed to conduct the school self-assessment questionnaires (see Table 1, sessions 2 and 3) among the whole school staff. This self-assessment tool, worked out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, covers seven dimensions (pedagogy for all learners; support for learning; leadership roles and approaches; learner well-being and participation; curriculum development; partnership and collaborative working; support system for staff

and leaders) and was perceived by the course participants as a very valuable framework for raising school capacities in implementing IE [17]. The interview results showed that the results of this questionnaire were surprising for the members of the teams participating in the training and provided a lot of information that should be taken into account in further development activities. The head of one school said:

> What came out of it was thought-provoking. Get to know our team, our institution, in terms of how much we take this inclusive education into account, and what opportunities, resources, and areas for development are important (X4, principal).

The participants of the training course pointed out that the training provided input for the systematic development of an inclusive education policy within the school, taking into account the national legislative background and specific needs of schools, ensuring the well-being of students and the satisfaction of parents.

Volume

Regarding the volume of training, it was considered optimal and reasonably distributed among all topics. It was emphasized that the volume of contact training and independent study, including homework, was balanced. It was expressed that 10 ECTS in-service training for school teams focused on planning the development activities of an inclusive school was sufficient, if at the same time specific courses for support specialists and teachers are taking place.

3.1.2. Organizational Side of the Training

Feedback on the organizational side of the training revealed that involvement of different professions in the training course, participation with teams from other schools and with own schools, practical approach, and balance of teaching methods was valued.

Balanced and Various Teaching Methods

Regarding the teaching methods, it was pointed out that lecturing and more activating teaching methods were in balance. The theoretical part was considered necessary among all team members who participated in the training. It was pointed out that the participants were actively involved in the lectures, and this resulted in interesting discussions. It was emphasized that while discussing the theoretical framework (e.g., social justice, legislation, resources, the professionalism of staff, etc.) points of view that had not been intended before emerged, which in turn provided a good background for continuing various practical group work. It was emphasized that the set of group work tasks was well designed and provided input for further development activities at the school level.

> Such a very well-thought-out group work management and the setting of these questions or tasks were, in fact, very, very forward-looking for everyone. That it was, yes, super (X2, teacher).

Participants in the training were satisfied that different forms of group work were used: Working only with members of their school team, with participants from other schools, and also in groups formed according to job responsibilities. It was explained that this made it possible not only to analyze the problems of one's own school, but also to find out the experiences of other schools, which would help to improve the work of one's school.

> These four schools were a good group size. It adds a lot when other bystanders comment or see differently. Otherwise you're in your own bubble, it's still good to hear the experiences of other schools. Working with other schools is good and should be continued (X1, teacher).

Practical Approach

According to the participants, the activities carried out in the training courses made it possible to plan immediate and primary activities to implement IE at the school level in

the areas where development needs were identified. For example, it was pointed out that, during the training, the roles of different parties at the school level, the development of a common vision for the implementation of IE, and the organization of specific trainings for the entire school staff were immediately addressed. Team members from all schools appreciated that the activities that took place during the training days were aimed at completing independent homework. The opinion was expressed that independent work at home was extensive and time-consuming, but it was a pleasant and affordable activity because it was understood what and why it was done. They were satisfied that the impulse for their school's inclusive development activities came from the training session. At the same time, there was an immediate obligation to go deeper with the topic.

> Homework in the subject of inclusive education has been analytical and practical. They have been very, very useful to me in building this whole SEN system. Because, in fact, we analyze all this homework based on the situation of our school—what are the pros, what are the cons, how to move forward, they have really been very useful to me (X4, support specialist).

Participation with Own School Team

Participating in the training as a team was considered very important, and it was emphasized that there is no other way to develop inclusive school practice. Group work with their school team was valued precisely because of the practical impact. It was emphasized that there is often not enough time at school to listen to the thoughts of others, but the training valued listening to different opinions and thus finding the best possible solutions.

> I also like discussions, I also like discussions with other school groups, but discussions at my school are really very useful in the sense that we bring these issues to school and there we deal with them in-depth (X3, teacher).

As a value of participating in the training as a team, it was emphasized that it creates responsibility for the members of one's group, but also for the whole school staff. As the development of inclusive education is a complex and long-term process, it was recognized that supporting each other and maintaining motivation is important in taking the lead, and a long-term training course will help to achieve this.

Discussions and the development of common understandings between different professionals were considered useful for both the team and the school as a whole. It was also considered a value that all schools had representatives of different disciplines, which, in addition to the whole school development topic, made it possible to share internships and support each other on specific topics in the specialty. This experience was considered particularly important by teachers and support professionals. Teachers pointed out that their involvement in school-based inclusive development training is important and emphasized that existing training only for teachers as key players in implementing inclusive education does not provide a bigger picture and is often limited to individual classrooms and therefore has little impact on the school as a whole.

> It is as if teachers alone do not seem to have all this information. Additionally, that is what we needed the background information for (X4, teacher).

On the other hand, school leaders and support professionals emphasized that the value of the training was enhanced by the fact that a sufficient number of teachers from each school were involved.

Participation with Teams from Other Schools

The organization of the training in a way that involves teams from four different schools was also positively assessed. It was appreciated that while at the beginning each school had focused on its specific needs, which seemed to be a priority, the discussions also raised other issues that should be addressed in the context of school development and better solutions sought. It was pointed out that getting to know different approaches also allows you to analyze the situation of your school from a different perspective and

make changes in those areas that have so far seemed to work well. The interviewees emphasized that the exchange of experiences between different schools was very important for certain topics, like collaboration, structures for SEN provisions, and school policy on inclusive education. Interviewees got interesting ideas that could be tested and practiced in their own school. According to the participants, the involvement of the four schools in the training course was optimal; it allowed for mutual communication, sharing of practical experience, and the emergence of positive synergies. It was acknowledged that the existence of common problems in implementing inclusive education and the sharing of different practices provided support and encouraged to address even the most problematic issues and seek solutions.

> It was a very enriching experience! Each time again, there were so many fresh new ideas to see how they do and see how they have addressed and what the most important concerns for them are or values. I think it's just nice that if perhaps this training had been done in such a way that all the schools were separate, there would not have been this effect (X2, deputy principal).

At the same time, the participants were pleased that the participating schools respected each other's autonomy to deal with certain situations differently depending on the specifics of the school. The opinion was expressed that training based on only one school might not have been so effective.

3.2. Suggestions Made by the Participants for the Further Development of An Inservice Training Course for School Teams

The answers to the second question can also be divided into two categories:

- Content and volume of the training course; and
- organization of the training course.

3.2.1. Content and Volume of the Training Course

Although the discussion of the school's IE policy documents was considered to be a very positive and useful topic, at the end of the training course it was pointed out that in some cases it could have been even more thorough. This proposal was primarily related to the development of the school curriculum.

> We did a lot of work with the school curriculum, but it seemed that some parts still remained too general. It would be good to get expert opinions on how to make it more meaningful and concrete in the context of inclusive education (X4, support specialist).

One of the important concerns was the fact that in the upper school level (grades 7 to 9 in the Estonian context) problems often arise, which require different approaches. Therefore, this issue could have been addressed separately in the context of IE.

> At the younger grades we are able to make our support system work effectively, but at the third school level we would need resources and knowledge on how to improve cooperation between teachers and support professionals (X3, teacher).

The trainees considered the sharing of different experiences very important, and therefore it was pointed out that it would have been possible to get a more in-depth overview of the experiences of other countries, especially the Nordic countries where inclusive education have been implemented effectively for years.

> The experience of the Nordic countries has been cited as an example in Estonia. It would be interesting to know how the implementation of inclusive education actually works there (X4, principal).

With regard to addressing training issues, the need to further address the issue of the extracurricular network in supporting children with behavioral problems and their families was emphasized. Reference was made to various possibilities for cooperation with child

protection specialists. It was suggested that some training sessions could be organized with child protection experts designated as responsible in the participating schools.

> In this training, we talk about how collaboration should work, but in real life, child protection staff and the school team may not work towards a common goal. Aid is often scarce (X4, principal).

The participants emphasized that since the meaningful analysis of the topics covered in the training course was important and time-consuming, the development goals were set, but they would have needed more time to develop a specific strategic plan and quality assessment matrix.

> We have set targets, but at the same time we want to continue working with the assessment tools shared in certain training courses, and the strategic development plan still needs to be improved. We will continue to work on it (X2, support specialist).

It was expressed that cooperation between schools and trainees could continue after the training, as new challenges arise in IE in a rapidly changing world. Thus, according to participants' opinions there is a need to constantly engage in the self-development of an inclusive school, and outside counselling is very important.

3.2.2. Organizational Side of Training

The interviewees expressed the opinion that although during the training there was an opportunity to share experiences and thus learn from each other, it could also have been an opportunity to visit participating schools. This would have created an even broader picture of how one or another topic works in the practical life of the school.

> I really missed not having the opportunity to visit the schools with whom we shared our experiences during the training (X3, support specialist).

The wish to visit a special school was also mentioned in order to get acquainted with the system of how students with disabilities are supported in special schools and how to introduce changes in their school as well.

Although the training plan provided an opportunity to invite trainers to individual school counselling, only one school used it. Participants stated that they were overwhelmed by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis and therefore could not prioritize it. At the end of the training, the need for such activities was seen, and it was pointed out that this part of the training program could have been more mandatory.

> I really, really, immediately really like it when you come and look from the outside, because the look from the outside is a little different. You have built your system in your bubble there, we all do our work with passion and we like what we do and we are very happy with what we have achieved. But sometimes you get stuck in your business, and then when someone comes from outside and says a little bit about something, for example, you can go to another level and benefit from it (X4, support specialist).

It was also suggested that there could have been more mindset discussions and case study-based debates. It was also recommended to use the trainees themselves as trainers in such a way that different target groups who participated in the training go to other schools as a so-called job shadow. The team of one school was of the opinion that there could have been even more inconvenient activities that would have brought the participants out of the comfort zone. Although participants did not consider the organization of training through Zoom, due to the COVID-19 emergency being a significant obstacle, they expressed the view that the sharing of experiences, and the good synergies already created, would certainly have been even more effective if all the training courses could have taken place through contact learning.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to design and implement an in-service training course for school teams (teachers, support specialists, and school leaders) on IE and explore how participants experienced learning as a team in this course. The in-service training course (10 ECTS) for school teams (teachers, support specialists, and school leaders) was designed and implemented. Feedback from the training course was gathered through group interviews with all school teams and written open-ended questionnaire individually from each participant.

The results revealed that participants considered it very important that the training addressed in a complex and coherent way the most important topics (see Table 1) that affect the meaningful implementation of IE at the school level. To achieve the outputs of an inclusive school, which are related to the development of students, staff, and the whole organization, including school culture [33], it is necessary to approach all issues that affect these outputs cyclically and systematically. Thus, in order to support the self-development process of schools in the meaningful implementation of inclusive education through long-term in-service training, it is important to focus on all the key factors (i.e., vision and school culture; legislative framework and school policy; learning environment and resources; the professionalism of staff; collaboration; quality assurance) influencing changes in the organizational structure as a whole.

Although schools in the Estonian context have sufficient autonomy to manage the study process in their schools, the reviewing of schools' policy documents revealed that the organization of education for children with special needs had been copied too directly from the legislation, which on the one hand obliges all students to provide the necessary support systems in inclusive classrooms, and on the other hand leaves opportunities to have special classes for students with specific special needs [41]. Multiple reviews [54] also emphasize that practitioners at the school level often carry out statements of politicians and do not pay enough attention to the philosophical aspect of IE and all the other characteristics which should be taken into account when implementing and monitoring this within the school system. For example, the participants expressed that, before the training, they felt that the support system for children with special needs seemed to be well organized, and thus they could be recognized as inclusive schools. However, after covering the topics of the course revealed many bottlenecks, which are to be addressed. It was emphasized that the training provided a broader and more systematic view of inclusion, focusing not only on the availability of ability-based learning and support for students with SEN, but also on whole inclusive school development areas, taking into account the needs of all parties. Black-Hawkins and Florian [55] have also pointed out that in many cases, schools consider themselves inclusive, but in practice only focus on issues of how to support learners with SEN. Consequently, long-term in-service training, which covers a variety of topics related to the characteristics of an inclusive school, promotes a common and shared understanding of the concept and meaning of inclusive education.

Feedback from participants indicated that the training could have had even more mindset discussions, as developing common values is a complex process. Thus, more value-based debates on the equal rights of SEN children to education and social justice should be covered during the training. Even more, these discussions should be initiated at the level of schools, communities, and society as a whole. As the principles of IE often remain at the declarative level, they are not realized in real school life. In contrast, shared values and shared understandings of IE at all levels enable the analysis of schools´ inclusive practice more meaningfully, and to find solutions that support all learners as well as the whole school staff. Based on the experience of this training, it could be recommended to expand the school team with educational or social professionals from the local governments. Leadership training for school leaders, officials of local authorities, and schools' staff was piloted in Estonia some years ago, and participants reported good feedback, first and foremost, related to enhancing pupils' learning outcomes [56].

All teams participating in the training emphasized that the structure of the training, in which theory was linked to the practical experience of their school, mapping the real situa-

tion, and identifying areas for short-term and long-term development activities, provided good input for further self-development activities of the school as a whole. The participants acknowledged that schools often follow the inner feeling that they are doing the right things and the obstacles are not considered to be due to the school itself, but to factors from outside. It was appreciated that participants were guided during the training course on how to set priorities for development areas, how to involve the whole school staff, and how to assess the fulfilment of the set goals at the school level. The participants of the training course admitted that mapping a real situation of different topics and conducting question-naires among the whole school staff clearly showed that there are areas at the school level that need internal development. In summary, using different self-assessment tools during the training course enabled support for the development of evidence-informed practice, for identifying strengths, and areas needing to be improved, as well as for priorities to be set for strategic plans in the short or longer term at the school level.

Participation in the training as a team in one's school, representing different professions such as teachers, support specialists, and school leaders, was considered very important. Many studies have highlighted the importance of collaboration between teachers and support professionals to work in a heterogeneous classroom [19,20]. The role of the school leader in creating an inclusive school culture and practices and collaborative teamwork to achieve high-quality education for all students have also been seen as important [57,58]. Less evidence can be found of how, by learning together and at the same time sharing leadership between different professionals developing the activities of an inclusive school affects the whole school approach to self-improvement and well-being of all stakeholders. Participants expressed the opinion that during the training course they recognized the importance of working together and that could be the best way to start developing activities of an inclusive school. It was pointed out that during various discussions, it was possible to listen in depth to the opinions of various parties, about what are seen as the strengths and bottlenecks of the school, and to draw consensual conclusions on further areas for development. Findings of a study conducted by Ricci, Scheier-Dolberg, and Perkins [26] also indicate the need for common professional development to achieve the goals of inclusive schools because teachers, support specialists, and school leaders often focus on different aspects in the school development process. It was emphasized that participating in the training as a team creates motivation to contribute to the school development activities, but also obligations to the participants of one's team and the whole school staff. Although initial and in-service teacher training on IE is essential in teaching all students in an inclusive classroom, the results of this study showed the relevance of composing and conducting a long-term in-service training where school teams with different professionals can participate together. This means that the state and local governments should find ways and incentives to motivate schools to participate in such kind of courses.

The results of the study showed that participation in training with teams from other schools was also experienced positively. Although schools have their specific characteristics and approaches to improving the implementation of IE, cooperation between schools and sharing experiences had a major impact on finding the best solutions to problems. Ainscow, Muijs, and West [59] have found that there is a strong evidence that collaboration between schools can widen opportunities and help address vulnerable groups of learners.

It was emphasized that further training should pay even more attention to cooperation between schools, and school visits could be planned to gain even better practical experience. Training for teams from different schools also makes it possible to enhance further cooperation between schools and learn from each other in the context of the whole school's development activities and between different professions. Many researchers also have emphasized that cooperation between schools expands the opportunities for better implementation of inclusive education [1,18,59]. One of the main advantages of inclusive education is that differences enrich, and this also applies perfectly for providing in-service training courses on this topic.

After the training course, it was pointed out that visiting schools and providing individual feedback on their strengths and weaknesses by trainers could be planned on a mandatory basis. This would have helped to get even more comprehensive feedback from the point of view of the school system as a whole. The importance of collaboration between schools and trainers from universities has been emphasized by many researchers [19,60]. Therefore, individual schools' counselling during the training course is very important and should continue after the training course. This also provides a good opportunity for expanding the impact of the training course for the staff of whole school.

In conclusion, although the realization of the idea of IE depends to a large extent on the education system and national education policy of a particular country [34], significant changes can be achieved as a result of developing schools' internal resources to increase well-being and involvement of all stakeholders at the organizational level. Long-term in-service training for school teams, involving teachers, support professionals, and school leaders, provides a good starting position for this.

5. Limitations and Further Research

Although the study provides several important insights, we would also like to point out some limitations. Firstly, all the schools involved in the training were highly motivated and worked as a team. Therefore, we do not know how the training courses will be evaluated if there are negative power relations between the team members participating in the training. Secondly, due to the COVID-19 emergency, some sessions of the training were held via Zoom. In the beginning, it was unusual, but very soon, trainers and participants got used to it, and this gave an opportunity to experiment with different teaching methods.

Despite the limitations, this study has a practical value for in-service training and supporting schools' development activities in implementing inclusive education policy in similar contexts. Further research is needed to examine the longer-term impact of training activities on school-wide stakeholders (especially the well-being of students with SEN and also students without SEN) and explore the factors that support or hinder schools' development activities on inclusive education.
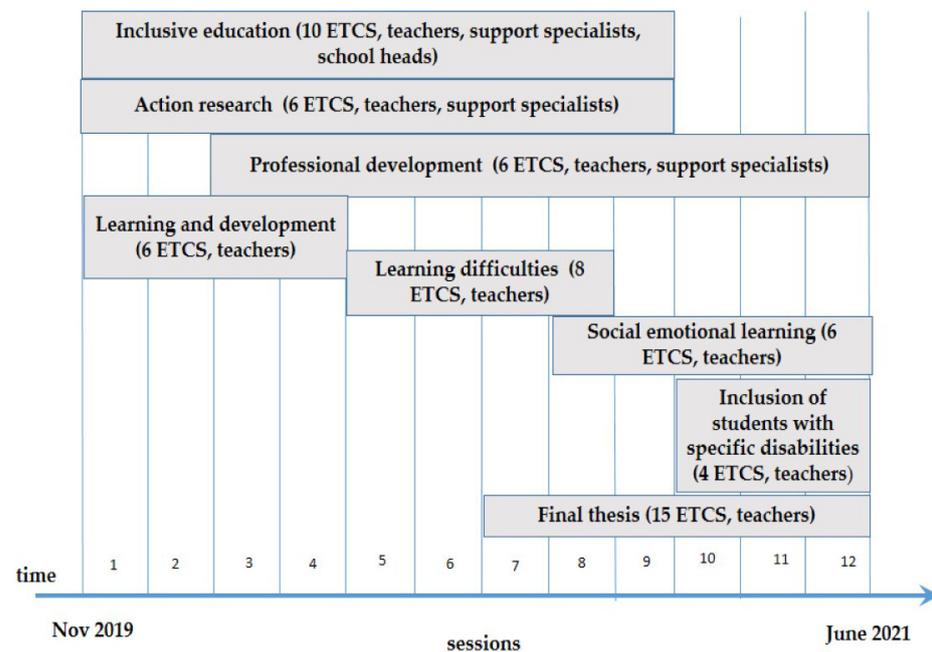
Appendix A

Figure A1. The whole training program.

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