

# Opportunities of Arts Education in Implementing Inclusive Education: Learning Experiences of Teachers in the International Context

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the relevance of arts education and teachers' professional development while implementing inclusive education. The background for this article is an evaluation of an international in-service teachers' training program focusing on inclusive arts education. This study aims to investigate what inclusive education means to arts teachers and reveal their learning experiences in the international training program "Inclusive Arts Education". The qualitative research was conducted using the focus group method with international training program participants from three different European countries (Finland, Austria and Lithuania). The study involved 25 participants: 7 from Finland, 7 from Austria and 11 from Lithuania. The research has shown that in each country arts teachers work in different national and educational contexts but face quite similar challenges of inclusive education. The success of inclusive art education mainly depends on the teacher's professional abilities and attitude towards inclusion, as well as the creation of a favourable educational atmosphere and positive relationships with students in the educational process. The experience of the research participants highlighted their attitudes to the content and organization of international training, which will help to develop continuing education programs for arts teachers' preparation for inclusive arts education.

**Keywords:** *inclusive education, arts education, arts integration, international training, teachers' competence development.*

## Introduction

International conventions and EU legislation provide inclusive education guidelines for all countries to reform education systems and include inclusive education provisions in national laws, ensuring the right of all learners to the implementation of education. In the strategic tasks of the implementation of education according to the recommendations of the Council of Europe, all countries are obliged to create an open, responsible, conscious civil society, ensuring a lifelong learning process that encourages the implementation of equal, quality inclusive education (The Council of the Euro-

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pean Union, 2018). The strategic approaches of the Agenda for Sustainable Development education goal (SDG 4) on education are to strengthen policies, legislation and systems, emphasizing equity, inclusion and gender equality, focusing on quality and learning and promoting lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015). In many UNESCO documents, the role of teachers as agents of change for inclusion and their responsibility of teaching all learners are highlighted. All teachers will have to respond to a greater diversity of students, to their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and to a wide range of individual learners. At the same time, it is essential to create safe and inclusive learning environments, which are free of violence and discrimination of any kind (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 31).

In this context, teacher education and teachers' professional learning for inclusion become crucially important in every country. However, teachers' attitudes often mix commitment to the principle of inclusion with doubts about their preparedness and how ready the education system is to support them (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 19).

Research on teacher education for inclusive education shows that teachers are not well prepared to work with diverse student groups, teacher training programs are often not adapted to rapid educational changes, professional development opportunities are fragmented, and do not always meet teachers' needs (Lakkala et al., 2019; Devine, 2016; Saloviita, 2018; Wain, 2016; Woodcock & Hardy, 2017; Florian, 2021). According to Saloviita (2018), the attitudes toward the inclusion of class and subject teachers significantly differ from the ones of special education teachers. The author states that subject teachers could be less interested in inclusive education because of their greater emphasis on the subject matter rather than student development.

This article focuses on the arts teachers' preparation for inclusive education, therefore, it is very important to investigate how arts teachers are prepared, what challenges they face in arts education when teaching students with diverse needs and abilities, and what opportunities arts education opens up for the development of inclusive education. From the perspective of arts education, when developing the policy of inclusive education, the greatest challenge lies with the teacher, who must be able not only to teach arts, but to recognize, accept and act in the diversity of students, and also be independent, creative, critical, able to reflect on his/her activities as a person. Recognizing that the results of the teachers' work, activities in the classroom, and finally the success of inclusion depend on the professional competencies, value attitudes, knowledge and abilities of the teacher, there is a natural need to conduct research that helps to identify the opportunities for professional development of arts educators in the context of inclusive education, and this defines *the research problem of this article*.

Arts teachers were chosen in this study because the role of arts teachers in creating a culture of inclusive education in schools is very relevant. It is widely recognised that education through arts develops intellectual, creative, emotional and social skills and can also serve to improve student engagement, communication and well-being. Participating in school community projects, arts teachers, together with other teachers, can contribute to the development of inclusive learning programs. Changing concepts of inclusive education presuppose the need for professional development of arts teachers, because not all arts teachers may be sufficiently prepared to work with the diversity of students. Therefore, the reason for creating an international program of inclusive artistic education was understanding of the importance of developing competencies of arts teachers and values of inclusive education, focusing on theoretical knowledge and practical methods of arts education.

An international team of professionals from Finland, Austria and Lithuania created a continuing education program for arts teachers "Inclusive artistic education". Its purpose was to develop competencies of arts teachers in the field of inclusive education. The structure of the entire curriculum (5 credits) consists of several stages: orientation to inclusive education; intensive workshops; practical training in schools; online webinars; reflection and evaluation at the end.

This study aimed to evaluate learning experiences of arts teachers during intensive weeks of workshops held in three different countries to further develop an inclusive arts education curriculum.

## Literature review

The relationship between arts and inclusive education is a specific and broad area for investigation. The opportunities for arts education are very wide both in teaching arts and in using arts as a pedagogical tool for inclusion. As in other fields, arts education research and programs emphasize the importance of diversity, respect, equality for all learners and other core values of the idea of inclusive education.

The benefits of arts for inclusive education are emphasized in UNESCO (2010), EACEA/EU-RYDICE (2009) and European Parliament (2017) documents and reports concerning the goals and expected outcomes of arts education. It is important to find out which arts education goals are in line with the provisions of inclusive education. The Seoul Agenda has agreed that “arts education can contribute directly to the social and cultural challenges facing the world today” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 2). Arts education is fundamental to the balanced creative, cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and social development of children, youth and lifelong learners. The goals of the development of arts education emphasize the need to recognize and develop the dimensions of social and cultural well-being and to “support and enhance the role of arts education in the promotion of social responsibility, social cohesion, cultural diversity and cultural dialogue” (ibid, p. 9). Arts Council England Report (2014) states that participation in the arts can contribute to community cohesion, reduce social exclusion and isolation, and/or make communities feel safer and stronger (p. 8).

The benefits of art as a pedagogical tool are discussed in the works of Allan (2014), Anderson (2015), Henderson and Lasley (2014), D'Alessio et al. (2010), Robinson (2013), Chemi and Du (2017), Santos and Carvalho (2014), Del Gobbo and Galeotti (2018). It is recognized, that arts education grounded on the ideas of inclusive education harmoniously develops not only intellectual, creative, emotional, and physical powers but also sustainably satisfies students' need for self-expression (Florian & Spratt, 2013) and supports their social, emotional, and cognitive well-being and development (Chemi & Du, 2017). Henderson and Lasley (2014) state that art teachers “can use creative expression and art to practice cognitive, language, social, emotional and motor skills while integrating them into themes and relating them to content” (p. 7). According to Santos and Carvalho (2014), active methods and expressive techniques of arts, such as musical expression, art, physical-motor expression and drama can contribute to the positive model of inclusive education, and these expressive techniques could be included in the curricular plans of initial teacher training courses in higher education. Del Gobbo and Galeotti (2018) assume that arts improve social and civic competencies as well as cultural awareness and expression. They recognize the arts as a tool for the promotion of cultural diversity, accessibility and equality of opportunities and the counteraction of discrimination and exclusion.

This confirms that arts education is very closely related to the principles of inclusive education. Recognizing that, it is important to discover how to prepare arts teachers for inclusive education and how to realize professional development, taking into account opportunities for arts education. Understanding of the benefits of arts and the core values of inclusive education, which are outlined in the *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* (2012), can contribute to proposing educational guidelines for arts teacher training.

## The research context and aims

The idea of conducting an international study was inspired by close cooperation with researchers and in-service teachers from several European countries: Finland, Austria, and Lithuania. Joint

work in the international team resulted in the creation of a unique continuing training program “Inclusive Arts Education” for teachers of arts. The goal of the program is to deepen arts teachers’ professional and special competencies, theoretical knowledge, practical abilities and attitudes while developing the manifestation of inclusive arts education in the pedagogical process. When preparing the program, the general system of inclusive education competencies, presented in the “*Profile for Inclusive Teacher Professional Learning*” (2022) and the professional development needs of arts teachers were taken into account.

The structure of the whole training program (5 credits) consisted of several stages: 1) the orientation stage, encompassing independent familiarization with the theoretical material, learning tasks and knowledge of key concepts, laws and history of inclusive art pedagogy (students were provided with recommended reading folders in English, German and Lithuanian); 2) The second stage of the training program consisted of 5 intensive days of workshops – experiential learning in national groups in each country; 3) practical training in schools – application of learning experience in practice in working environments; 4) work in small international groups in e-learning environments (online webinars, *moodle* forums, etc.); 5) reflection and evaluation at the end.

The core content of the 5 days’ workshops program was based on: a) creativity and dialogue – the basis for a good learning atmosphere, motivation and team spirit; b) multi-professional and multidisciplinary artistic learning methods based on discussion and reflection; c) implementation, considering national and international cooperation that exploits the potential of e-learning environments; d) continued cooperation with schools in national contexts. Multimodal learning includes contact teaching (theoretical lectures and practical activities), online studies, peer tutoring and learning, practice-based learning, independent studies, and self-assessment. The content of the intensive workshops program consisted of essential topics of inclusive education, which integrated various fields of arts education: music, dance, visual arts and elements of drama. Upon the completion of the workshop program, participants had to be able to combine theoretical knowledge of inclusive art pedagogy with arts didactics and practical application. The same training program was implemented in three universities: *Savonia University of Applied Sciences* (Finland), *Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien* (Austria) and *Vilnius University Šiauliai Academy* (Lithuania) with the partners: *Kuopio Conservatory* (Finland) and *Ich bin OK* (Austria) under the leadership of an international team.

**This study aims** to reveal arts teachers’ preparation and learning experiences in the 5-day intensive workshops course, with the purpose of assessing the relevance of the curriculum of the in-service training program for arts teachers. The workshops were held at different times in each country. Although the workshops were held separately in each country, it was important to maintain an international dimension. The classes were conducted by an international professional team of lecturers from Finland, Austria, Germany and Lithuania, who introduced the participants to the history and development of inclusive education, artistic education systems and the main provisions of inclusive arts education in each country. It should be noted that before and after the week of intensive workshops in each country, participants from all countries had the opportunity to collaborate, discuss and reflect in the e-learning environment.

Based on the evaluation plan of the project, the main **research questions** were raised: 1) What experience and knowledge about inclusive arts education do research participants have before workshops? 2) How do the participants evaluate the content of the workshops and their learning experiences in cooperation with the international group? 3) What are the most significant insights of participants about the quality of workshops and their improvement?

Based on the evaluation of workshops, the whole continuing arts education training program will be further developed and improved, and future research into reflections on practical training in working environments, related to inclusive arts education, will be conducted.

## Methods

**The method.** A qualitative research strategy and focus group method were chosen because it is a convenient and effective research strategy that uses open-ended questions to collect and obtain qualitative data. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), the focus group method is helpful after a certain program and is used for its evaluation, discussing how the program can be improved, whether the expected results were achieved, what works well and what does not (p. 9).

Three focus groups were held in each country separately: one group in Finland, one in Austria, and one in Lithuania immediately after the workshops of the international training program. Participants revealed their preparation and learning experiences and were encouraged to discuss specific topics in a relatively informal atmosphere, “which allows underlying opinions, meanings, feelings, attitudes and beliefs to emerge alongside descriptions of individual experiences” (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 26).

**Participants.** The research involved 25 teachers across three countries – all who participated in the workshops: 7 Finnish, 7 Austrian, and 11 Lithuanian participants. Arts teachers working in general education schools could participate in the training. Due to the limited number of places in the application procedure, certain eligibility criteria were applied: motivation, preparation, and knowledge of the English language. The participants’ decision to participate in the workshop week was also influenced by their employment, not everyone could participate in the 5-day intensive learning. More women (23) and only a few men (2) took part in the training. It can be said that such distribution of participants in terms of gender in this study was expected, since, statistically, female teachers dominate in schools. The age of the participants varied from 21 to 50 years. They had different work experiences as arts teachers: most of them worked as professional music, art or dance teachers in general education schools and some in kindergartens and social care centres. Some of the participants worked and studied at universities. The education and professional experience of the participants were very diverse, however, they all had a common goal – to develop their competencies in the field of inclusive arts education.

**Data collection and analysis.** Focus groups were conducted in national languages in each country separately. The sessions lasted 1,5 hours. The focus group discussion was held by a moderator and an assistant from each country. The moderators facilitated group discussions among participants and assistants helped with recordings and notes. The discussions were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were made in national languages and then translated into English.

Initially, all participants were informed about the research aims and the ground rules of the discussion, data analysis, and dissemination. The focus group discussions started with a random self-introduction of the participants and the introduction of their background and teaching experience. Efforts were made to establish an interaction between participants, facilitate discussions, and maintain the interaction throughout the session. Moderators met the requirements to ask clearly, give only open-ended questions (so that the informants can express their opinions in their own words), and follow a consistent sequence of questions.

Based on the program evaluation criteria, the focus group questions consisted of 7 topics and supporting questions, which were presented to all focus group participants (see Appendix 1). This article presents a small part of the more significant results of the qualitative research.

Research participants were provided with all the information they were interested in concerning the study and its publication, following the ethics of qualitative research, associated with the auton-

omy, well-being, and rights of research participants. Before starting the interviews, they were asked if they agreed to the recording of the interview. All participants provided appropriate informed consent for participation in the research. Conducting the study, the following essential ethical principles characteristic of qualitative research were fulfilled: respect for the person's dignity, human rights, confidentiality and anonymity.

In conducting the research, the qualitative content analysis was chosen, because the content analysis approach is most appropriate when considering focus group data (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The data of the focus group were analyzed based on inductive logic when individual, separate cases illustrating the participants' perception and experience were combined into a common whole. Based on these, the main themes representing each question emerged and were used in reporting our results. When analysing the data, the responses of participants were coded: Finnish participants – F-1, F-2, F-3, etc., Austrian participants – A-1, A-2, A-3, etc., Lithuanian participants – LT-1, LT-2, LT-3, etc.

**Limitations.** The limitation of this study is that was covered only a small part of the program assessment, namely, practical workshops. The sample size was relatively small, with participants from only 3 different European countries. Although the sample size is sufficient for the qualitative analysis, the findings of this study cannot be generalised due to the diverse contexts of different countries.

## Results

**Participants' prior preparation and expectations.** To find out what experience and knowledge about inclusive arts education research participants from different countries (Finland, Austria, Lithuania) had acquired, the following questions were asked after the workshops: What did you know about inclusive art pedagogy before? How much were you prepared? Participants presented rather different opinions about their **preparation for** inclusive education in the context of inclusive education.

Analysing the opinions of the participants about their preparation in inclusive education, the category *Prior experience and knowledge about inclusive education* was distinguished, which consisted of three subcategories: 1) Little knowledge about inclusive education; 2) Lack of information about inclusive education; 3) Sufficient knowledge about inclusive education (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Experience/knowledge about inclusive arts education acquired by the participants*

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statement*
Prior experience and knowledge of inclusive education	Little knowledge about inclusive education	"I didn't know anything about inclusive arts education, I had neither theoretical nor practical knowledge" (LT-1); "I haven't had much to do with this topic of inclusion theoretically" (A-4); "I had no personal pedagogical experience" (F-2).
	Lack of information about inclusive education	"Not very much. However, I had heard about it" (F-2); "I knew about inclusive education, but very little. A bit of theory and some problems I experienced at work" (LT-4); "I already had a bit of previous experience because I work with inclusive ensembles at Music School" (A-1).
	Sufficient knowledge about inclusive education	"For me, inclusion has been normal my whole life" (F-4); "I have experience with inclusive art education. I grew up with it" (A-7); "I had theoretical and practical experience about inclusive arts education. In each class, I had and have different children, with different needs, behavioral, emotional difficulties" (LT-8).

\* Only one example of representatives from each country is presented as an illustration of the subcategory formed.

Based on the analysis of the collected material, it can be assumed that the participants representing different countries evaluate the acquired personal experience and knowledge about inclusive arts education quite similarly. A small number of participants were hardly familiar with the concept of inclusive education before the beginning of the training: *“It was a new experience for me, I was not familiar with the ideas of inclusive education”* (LT-3); *“I had almost no knowledge, I was neither theoretically nor practically prepared”* (LT-11).

The participants who were more familiar with the concept of inclusive education felt a lack of broader knowledge of arts pedagogy and the meanings of definitions of inclusive education: *“My understanding was that inclusive art pedagogy applies to special groups. Groups that can be named separately in some way. The concept is familiar on some level”* (F-3); *“Terms: integration, inclusion, segregation I knew but I feel afraid to use. Do I really know what these terms mean?”* (F-4).

The discussion revealed that some participants had sufficient knowledge and presented their actual examples of experience in the field of inclusive arts education (the third subcategory): *“I’ve been teaching dance to a non-speaking autistic woman for the past two years”* (A-5); *“I noticed that I actually already do a lot of inclusion in my work. Maybe it’s not as new to me as I initially thought”* (F-1).

Most of the participants admitted that there was a lack of preparation and practice in applying inclusive education strategies. More experienced teachers who had encountered the diversity of students and their different needs in their practice felt more prepared for inclusive education; however, at the same time, they also recognized the need to improve their competencies. The results of the study showed that some Finnish and Austrian teachers successfully used methods of inclusive education in their professional activities. However, Lithuanian representatives are relatively less ready for inclusive education.

It was important to find out how they identified their expectations before the workshops. Participants’ answers to the question *“What were your main expectations before the workshops?”* were quite similar. It was observed that Finnish and Lithuanian teachers expected to deepen their knowledge of the concept of inclusion in general and to gain practical skills in arts methods: *“I want to know more on this topic and deepen my knowledge”* (F-4); *“I was looking forward to hands-on exercises and a workshop where we could have been involved in working with others”* (F-2); *“Before the workshops, I hoped to learn what inclusive arts education was and how it was practically and methodically applied in the educational process”* (LT-1). One participant hoped that the workshops would focus on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the training process – *“One of my great expectations was that the participants would also have a disability, ... that the participants or the lecturers would be of mixed ability. I was disappointed at the first day”* (A-7).

The statements of the research participants did not reveal very specific expectations regarding the content of the training, although it would be important to know the preconceptions and expectations of the participants in advance, which can influence the content and organization of the program in the future.

***The evaluation of the content of the workshop.*** Then, we could see how participants’ expectations were met by analyzing their answers to the question: What is your opinion about the content of workshops (knowledge, theoretical and practical part, observations)? Participants presented their experiences that highlighted both knowledge gained during the theoretical lectures and the practical skills acquired during the practical part of the workshops. Analysing the opinions of the participants, the category *Content of the inclusive education training* was singled out, which is confirmed by the three subcategories: 1) *Valuable theoretical knowledge and practical tasks*; 2) *Positive evaluation of arts integration*; 3) *Lack of music activities* (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Participants' opinions about the content of the inclusive arts education training*

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statement*
Content of the inclusive education workshops	Valuable theoretical knowledge and practical tasks	<i>"My observations about the practical lectures are excellent, there are many different methods, moreover, they can be presented in one's own interpretation. As for the theoretical lectures, the lecturers presented the essential and most important aspects of their topic" (LT-1); "One of the nicest things for me was the art workshop, there should have been more time for exchange, it was definitely all an incredible organizational effort, I have a lot of respect for that" (A-2); "The visual workshops were surprisingly therapeutic and went deep" (F-2).</i>
	Positive evaluation of arts integration	<i>"The art and dance sessions were the most memorable, but music also sounded there. Arts integration helps children to reveal themselves better, to get to know themselves and the other person" (LT-1); "I really enjoy mixing art forms" (A-3); "We should remember that we can use different art (dance, music, drama, ...) even we are not professionals in every area" (F-1).</i>
	Lack of music activities	<i>"I namely felt lack of music activities" (LT-3); "I expected more music emphasis. I couldn't think in advance that other arts would be present as well" (F-1).</i>

\* Only one example of representatives from each country is presented as an illustration of the subcategory formed.

When evaluating the content of workshops, (the first subcategory), participants identified that the content of the inclusive arts education course was valuable, interesting and useful for them: *"The teaching content was interesting, very diverse, from motivation and creation of the atmosphere to various apps" (LT-2)*. Most participants emphasized a good combination of theoretical and practical classes: *"The plan of the workshop and the material of lectures were excellent, there was no shortage of both theoretical and practical lectures, you could always ask the lecturers questions and discuss" (LT-1); "I actually thought it was good, the mix between workshops where you actively do something and the theoretical input is good" (A-6)*. The lecturers' high competencies and excellent preparation were also mentioned: *"Simply because there were so many competent people there" (A-5); "I am very grateful to all the lecturers of the project for their competencies in preparing the material for these courses" (LT-2); "What I particularly take with me – is the energy of the teachers" (F-2)*. These responses show that it is not only the interesting and meaningful content of the workshops that matters, but also the professionalism and good energy of the trainers.

The statements of the second subcategory (positive evaluation of arts integration) highlighted the attitude of the training participants toward the possibilities of integration of different arts (music, art, dance) in organizing the process of inclusive education. Arts integration methods used in the workshops were evaluated very favorably: *"I was most interested in and remembered the possibilities of group activities using various art forms" (LT-8); "There are transformation processes, here with art and music, that was something new" (A-2)*. Teachers gained new experiences during training, which helped them to identify the possibilities of using different types of arts not only for students but also for themselves. The training material and experiences gave them more self-confidence, and formed a favorable aspiration to use methods of various types of arts in their professional activities: *"I've learned now about music, such in-depth knowledge, and about dance and art. <...> it was really helpful for me to see this mixture and these mixed forms" (A-5); "Training inspired me to pay more attention to the possibilities of arts integration, I was especially interested in the possibilities of dance" (LT-7); "The dance stuff was probably the best. It became an experience that I could do something like this (dance) myself, even though I really am not a dancer" (F-3)*.

On the other hand, it was noticed that some Finnish and Lithuanian music teachers felt a lack of a wider context of music methods in the training course (third subcategory - *Lack of music activities*): “During training, I felt a lack of methods of applying inclusive arts education during the music lesson, how to teach music (singing, playing, rhythming) to children with special needs, disorders, diseases and the like” (LT-1); “I work as a music teacher, so I felt a lack of methods and forms of music education when organizing inclusive education” (LT-3).

In conclusion, it can be said that the content of the workshops was useful for the participants because many practical arts activities could be applied in the educational process. The connection between theory and practice, and competent lecturers with international experience are of particular importance. The use of music, visual art, dance, drama methods and integration of different arts in inclusive education has proven itself. On the other hand, aiming to include all types of art in the training course, there was a lack of deeper attention to each discipline separately. Music education, art, drama or dance have specific opportunities for artistic expression, which should be revealed through designing of separate in-service teacher training programs in every discipline of arts.

*Evaluation of training organization and well-being of the participants.* For the research, it was also important to find out participants’ opinions about the organization of training and their well-being during workshops. They were asked the following questions: *How do you evaluate the workshop plan and organization in general? How did you feel during the workshops?*

Analysing the evaluation of the organizational aspects of the training program, the category *Organizational aspects of training* (see Table 3) was subdivided into 3 subcategories.

**Table 3**

*Participants’ opinions about the organization of the training work and psychological atmosphere*

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statement*
Organizational aspects of the workshops	Evaluation of the organization of workshops	“<...> it is an incredible organizational effort” (A-2); “The seminar was organized very well, I really liked the sincere work, dedication and care of all the teachers” (LT-9).
	Flexibility in the workshop program	“I must say that the workshop program was quite flexible, the teachers were happy to discuss the issues that concerned us” (LT-5); “I think it was very nice that we could be so flexible and could extend it if we still needed the time” (A-4).
	High workload and lack of time	“Towards the end of the day, it was already difficult to focus and listen to theoretical lectures” (LT-2); “The plan was pretty tight and intense” (A-6); “There has been a rush every day and all the time” (F-2).
Psychological atmosphere during the workshops	“I felt very good during the seminars, the microclimate was good, the seminar participants were warm and friendly people” (LT-1); “I think that most of the workshops have created a great atmosphere” (A-7).	

\* Only one example of representatives from each country is presented as an illustration of the subcategory formed.

The first subcategory (*Evaluation of the organization of training*) is focused on a positive evaluation of the organization of the training. The participants shared their experiences that the training was organized optimally, ensuring a safe and well-organized environment: “Practical things during the workshops made me feel extremely comfortable. And I also found it really great from the point of view of the organization” (A-4); “The activities were arranged very thoughtfully: theoretical lectures al-

ternated with practical ones. Practical activities were organized consistently – going deeper and deeper every day” (LT-9). In their statements, the participants emphasized not only the lecturers’ liberal approach to teaching – “I was very impressed by the liberal work of the lecturers” (LT-10), provided insights into new perspectives – “Yes, there were new perspectives” (A-3), but also the structure of the seminars itself – “From my perspective, it was much more structured than the previous workshops” (A-2).

Another subcategory is *Flexibility in the training program*. The participants noted the flexibility of the training program and shared that they considered such training content a privilege due to favorable conditions for availability: “Since that day I was sick and watched the classes online, I felt like I was given a privilege” (LT-7); “I think it was very nice that we could be so flexible and could extend it if we still needed the time” (A-4); “I felt such good energy from the lecturers, they were very flexible in adapting the training material to our needs” (F-4);

As to the organizational aspects of training, certain difficulties were also identified, emphasizing the heavy workload during training and a lack of time (subcategory – *High workload and lack of time*). The participants of the course emphasized an abundant flow of new information, which caused fatigue and a lack of focus: “I felt tired, I found that the movement activities were intense and too long” (LT-4); “There were so many activities, sometimes I just didn’t have time to cover everything” (A-4); “Placing the theoretical lectures in the afternoon felt heavy <...>” (F-3). On the other hand, it can be assumed that training organizers underestimated the fact that training was conducted in English; therefore, the flow of information presented in a non-native language could be one of the factors causing fatigue: “I couldn’t relax because I felt certain tension about the English language” (LT-3).

Some responses related to the organizational part of the training suggest rethinking the agenda and some components of the workshops and looking for alternative pedagogical methods that could be implemented in the future, especially concerning theoretical presentations, blended learning possibilities, time management, etc. It is also important to note that foreign language skills are essential for international training.

One of the most important values that emerged during the workshop was a favorable psychological microclimate (second category – *Psychological atmosphere during the workshops*): “I felt very comfortable with the way I could speak; with the way I could express myself and that I could really say and do what I wanted to” (A-2); “I am a strong feeling person. The moments of ‘touching’ were the most important. These moments give the meaning” (F-4). It has been found that the favorable psychological atmosphere in the workshops is a very important factor in inclusive arts education because mutual relations depend not only on the teachers’ well-being and work efficiency but also on the whole learning process and results of education.

This fact is confirmed by another very important detail of the workshop’s evaluation – a collaborative relationship that includes multifaceted partnerships involving every member of the community in joint activities.

In focus group discussions, the participants noted that in the workshops they gained new experiences by cooperating with members of the group (“I was glad to be a member of the team” (LT-9); “Great atmosphere, meaningful activities allowed the team of participants to get along and make friends” (LT-7). Communication with students from other countries who participated in the training program was also meaningful: “...it was very interesting that I met and can cooperate with like-minded people living and working in other countries” (F-4). Participants noticed that cooperation allowed them not only to share acquired experience, but also helped to improve their foreign language skills: “I try to keep in touch with foreign colleagues, although the language barrier is a bit of a hindrance,

*but I still feel very good*” (LT-6). Although conditions were created for students from all countries to communicate through e-learning tools, some participants regretted that there were no opportunities to participate in international training with students from other countries at the same time.

The discussions of the participants after the workshops in focus groups and the subsequent reflections in the e-learning environment revealed that in each country (Austria, Lithuania, and Finland), arts teachers worked in different educational contexts and faced quite similar challenges in their everyday practice. Arts teachers often face challenges of managing classrooms with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, with psychosocial needs and attitudes that may facilitate or limit their successful inclusion. Lithuanian students noted insufficient support at schools – there was a lack of teaching assistants and other specialists in schools who could help organize the teaching process. On the other hand, during the discussions between the participants, both in focus groups and in the subsequent meetings, other relevant questions were raised: What are the priorities for the implementation of inclusive arts education? How should inclusive education be implemented at different levels of arts education? How should the educational content for students with different abilities be formed and differentiated? Is professional arts education available to everyone?

These questions outline guidelines for other research on inclusive art education, they are also relevant for arts teachers and reveal the complexity of inclusive art education and the need for further professional development. The insights and participants’ experiences will help improve other programs for the development of inclusive arts education competencies. After the workshops, teachers will have the opportunity to apply and develop acquired experience in the work environment and to self-assess their competencies of inclusive arts education.

In summary, it can be stated that learning on inclusive arts education is a long, complex and not always smooth process, its meaning and purpose are perceived as an aspiration by the participants of international training. Although most of the participant teachers try to apply the main principles of inclusive education in their practice, some teachers lack basic theoretical knowledge and practical skills. It is also very important for arts teachers to self-assess their preparation and outline the guidelines for their further education.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Inclusive education, which is widely discussed in scientific research emphasizes that the education system must ensure inclusion of all learners in the education process and eliminate any kind of exclusion. It is evident that the essence of the inclusive education construct consists not only of the whole of implementing education but also of the organizational component, which leads to every student’s successful participation in seeking a personal result together with others (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Florian, 2021; Allan, 2014; Lakkala, et al., 2018; Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021; Saloviita, 2018). UNESCO (2015; 2020a, 2020b) and other reports on global experiences mention that special educators are sufficiently prepared to work in the inclusive environment; however, teachers of other subjects (including art) still lack knowledge and professional skills.

This has also been confirmed by our research, which has demonstrated that part of the participants do not feel sufficiently prepared for inclusive education, although this principle is essential in general education schools. Moreover, some of the students who took part in the group discussion admitted that they had hardly been familiar with the concept of inclusive education before the beginning of training: *“It was a new experience for me, I wasn’t familiar with the ideas of inclusive education”* (LT-3). The obtained data are reasonably worrying, since training of arts teachers still remains problematic and naturally raises the question: how can those who choose to become arts (music, art,

dance, etc.) teachers can professionally make sense of their knowledge and abilities when working with learners who have cultural, social or other differences?

Authors' studies emphasize that the intensity and duration of teacher education is too short to develop all inclusive education competencies needed for the teacher. It is therefore very important to plan in advance what qualities the teacher needs, what can be learned during studies, what is impossible (or hard) to achieve during an initial teacher education process, and what possibilities teachers have to continue (self-) development of competencies in professional development processes (Allan, 2014; Florian, 2021).

From this standpoint, the implemented international training program "Inclusive Arts Education" is timely and innovative, since it was prepared in close collaboration with researchers and teacher practitioners from several European countries and is based on the possibilities of arts integration, which prioritize the individual education approach for each student in order to overcome barriers to learning. It was sought that the implementation of the training program would promote flexibility in the content of the research participants' arts education and in its delivery approaches, collaboration and the possibilities of integrating forms of artistic expression in the educational process.

Our research has shown that the implementation of the workshop programme "Inclusive Arts Education" revealed important aspects of continuous learning. Learning objectives and content of the program enabled its participants to get familiar with the principles of social inclusion, integration, inclusive and personalised learning, which show that every student learns according to his or her needs and possibilities, ensuring that the learner is provided with educational assistance, equal opportunities and access to education. Training participants have got familiarized with international documents, regulations and laws that affect inclusive work in international and local contexts. This allowed them to identify different needs of individuals and self-develop tolerance and positive attitudes to diversity.

The informants who participated in the group discussion acknowledged that the program was not limited to providing only theoretical knowledge of the subject. The overarching part of the curriculum, which was made meaningful by practical ways of solving problems through forms of integrating various arts, was also very important (*"The art and dance sessions were the most memorable, but music also sounded there. Arts integration helps children to reveal themselves better, to get to know themselves and the other person"*). The participants not only learned about the variety of arts activities presented in the workshops, but also practically tested educational methods enriched by the synergy of various art forms (music, art, dance). Robinson (2013), Anderson (2015), Diaz and McKenna (2017) state that arts integration and a combination of appropriate methods provide many opportunities for inclusive education that helps students to engage in the learning process, fosters creative abilities, and improves students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes. The authors note that in the process of arts integration, a particularly important constituent is collaboration, which ensures mutual communication and helps to solve problems arising in the educational process.

In the group discussions, the participants stressed the importance of international collaboration and the friendly and partnership-based environment that emerged during the workshops. Mutual collaboration enables to seek continuous interaction, creates opportunities to share best practices, which is necessary for full participation in inclusive (self-)education processes.

Authors' studies state that teacher participation in professional development training events determines more positive attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education, since teachers' training in expressive arts area develops not only artistic and pedagogical skills but also their personal and

interpersonal competencies related to inclusion (Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021; Santos & Lima-Rodrigues, 2016). Our study has demonstrated that learning in the inclusive arts education program strengthened and deepened its participants' competencies and professionalism and opened up new opportunities for inclusive arts education. Students learned new arts methods, techniques and tools that help to create the inclusive learning environment. After this training program, teachers will have the opportunity to apply and develop acquired experience in the work environment, to reflect on and self-evaluate their competencies of inclusive arts education.

On the other hand, it must be noted that reflections of the participants in the international program have highlighted certain problematic aspects that are important for designing future research of a similar nature: 1) participants may have very different preparation, experiences and needs; therefore, when designing the training content and organizing workshops, the diversity of participants and their expectations must be taken into account; 2) the same curriculum is applied in different countries with different educational systems and contexts of inclusive education, which may result in different perceptions and interpretations of certain aspects of inclusive education; 3) one-time workshops does not cover all areas of the arts and their manifestation possibilities separately in sufficient detail and evenly in the context of inclusive education; therefore, it is relevant to organize continuous development courses focused on the specificity of individual fields of art, applied to implementation of inclusive education; 4) the 5-day program of intensive workshops was characterized by an abundance of information, which is why some participants emphasized high fatigue.

We believe that these insights and the participants' experiences identified in group discussions will be useful for designing other inclusive arts education development programs. Meanwhile, a more intensive collaboration between schools and universities at the international level could be one way to more actively develop teacher practitioners' knowledge and abilities to work with students' diversity.

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## Opportunities of Arts Education in Implementing Inclusive Education: Learning Experiences of Teachers in the International Context

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### Summary

In order to develop and implement an inclusive education in each country, depending on the historical and current context, the legislation and policy of inclusive education is formed, the concept of inclusion and its features are described in legal acts, and teacher training programs are prepared or reformed. In this context, teacher education and teachers' professional learning for inclusion become crucially important in every country. Research on teacher education for inclusive education shows (Devine, 2016; Wain, 2016; Saloviita, 2018; Lakkala, Juškevičienė et al., 2019) that teachers are not well prepared to work with diverse student groups, teacher training programs are often not adapted to rapid educational changes, professional development opportunities are fragmented, and do not always meet teachers' needs. The author states that subject teachers could be less interested in inclusive education because of their greater emphasis on the subject matter rather than student development.

This article focuses on the arts teachers' preparation for inclusive education, therefore, it is very important to investigate how arts teachers are prepared, what challenges they face in arts education when teaching students with diverse needs and abilities, and what opportunities arts education opens up for the development of inclusive education. The benefits of art as a pedagogical tool are discussed in the works of Allan (2014), Henderson and Lasley (2014), D'Alessio et al. (2010).

From the perspective of arts education, when developing the policy of inclusive education, the greatest challenge lies with the teacher, who must be able not only to teach arts, but to recognize, accept and act in the diversity of students, and also be independent, creative, critical, able to reflect on his/her activities as a person. Recognizing that the results of the teachers' work, activities in the classroom, and finally the success of inclusion depend on the professional competencies, value attitudes, knowledge and abilities of the teacher, there is a natural need to conduct research that helps to identify the opportunities for professional development of arts educators in the context of inclusive education, and this defines *the research problem of this article*.

**This study aims** to reveal arts teachers' learning experiences in the training program of inclusive arts education.

The idea of conducting an international study was inspired by close cooperation with researchers and in-service teachers from several European countries: Finland, Austria, and Lithuania. Joint work in the international team resulted in the creation of a unique continuing training program "Inclusive Arts Education" for teachers of arts. The goal of the program is to deepen arts teachers' professional and special competencies, theoretical knowledge, practical abilities and attitudes while developing the manifestation of inclusive arts education in the pedagogical process. When preparing the program, the general system of inclusive education competencies, presented in the "Profile for Inclusive Teacher Professional Learning" (2022) and the professional development needs of arts teachers were taken into account.

The research involved 25 teachers across three countries – all who participated in the workshops in Austria, Lithuania and Finland. Three focus groups were held in each country separately immediately after the workshops of the international training program. Participants revealed their preparation and learning experiences and were encouraged to discuss specific topics.

A qualitative analysis of the research data revealed that the educational goals and content of the implemented international program “Inclusive Arts Education” allowed the participants to familiarize themselves with international documents, rules, laws, principles of social inclusion and individualized learning, which affect inclusive work related to both international and local context. The research has shown that part of the participants do not feel sufficiently prepared for inclusive education, although this principle is essential in general education schools. Moreover, some of the students who took part in the group discussion admitted that they had hardly been familiar with the concept of inclusive education before the beginning of training.

In the group discussions, the participants stressed the importance of international collaboration and the friendly and partnership-based environment that emerged during the workshops. Mutual collaboration enables to seek continuous interaction, creates opportunities to share best practices, which is necessary for full participation in inclusive (self-)education processes.

On the other hand, it must be noted that reflections of the participants in the international program have highlighted certain problematic aspects that are important for designing future research of a similar nature: 1) participants may have very different preparation, experiences and needs; therefore, when designing the training content and organizing workshops, the diversity of participants and their expectations must be taken into account; 2) the same curriculum is applied in different countries with different educational systems and contexts of inclusive education, which may result in different perceptions and interpretations of certain aspects of inclusive education; 3) one-time workshops does not cover all areas of the arts and their manifestation possibilities separately in sufficient detail and evenly in the context of inclusive education; therefore, it is relevant to organize continuous development courses focused on the specificity of individual fields of art, applied to implementation of inclusive education; 4) the 5-day program of intensive workshops was characterized by an abundance of information, which is why some participants emphasized high fatigue.

We believe that these insights and the participants’ experiences identified in group discussions will be useful for designing other inclusive arts education development programs.

## Meninio ugdymo galimybės įgyvendinant įtraukujį ugdymą: mokytojų mokymosi patirtys tarptautiniame kontekste

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### Santrauka

Siekiant sukurti ir įgyvendinti įtraukiojo ugdymo sistemą, kiekvienoje šalyje įvairiais būdais, priklausomai nuo istorinio ir dabartinio konteksto, formuojama įtraukiojo ugdymo politika, kuriami įstatymai, teisės aktuose aprašoma *įtraukties* sąvoka ir jos ypatumai, rengiamos ar pertvarkomos mokytojų rengimo programos. Šiame kontekste labai svarbūs visuomenės ir ugdymo įstaigų dalyvių, ypač mokytojų, nuostatų į įtraukujį ugdymą pokyčiai. Atlikti tyrimai (Devine, 2016; Wain, 2016; Saloviita, 2018; Lakkala, Juškevičienė et al., 2019) rodo, kad mokytojų rengimo programos dažnai nėra pritaikytos prie greitai kintančių ugdymo poreikių, o profesinio tobulėjimo galimybės fragmentiškos ir ne visada atitinka mokytojų poreikius. Konstatuojama, kad mokytojai tiek bendrąja prasme, tiek dalykiškai pasigenda įtraukiojo mokymo teorinių žinių, jiems trūksta praktinių įgūdžių.

Susiklosčiusi padėtis neatsiejama nuo meninio ugdymo. Meno kaip pedagoginės priemonės, padedančios mokiniams mokytis ir įgyti naujų žinių, nauda akcentuojama Allan (2014), Henderson ir Lasley (2014), D’Alessio, Donnelly, Watkins (2010) ir kitų tyrėjų darbuose.

Meninio ugdymo perspektyvoje, plėtojant įtraukiojo ugdymo politiką, didžiausias iššūkis tenka mokytojui, kuris turi būti pasirėngęs ne tik imtis naujos veiklos, gebėti pripažinti ir priimti mokinių įvairovę bei joje veikti, bet ir būti savarankiška, kūrybiška, kritiška, gebančia reflektuoti savo veiklą asmenybe. Laikantis šio požiūrio, tenka konstatuoti, kad, rengiant meno dalykų mokytojus, vis dar esama spragų, nes pagrindinės studijos įprastai fokusuotos į konkretaus meno dalyko žinias, o praktinis mokymas mišriose ir kultūriškai įvai-

riose aplinkose labai ribotas. Profesinei praktikai ypač aktualu tobulinti kompetencijas, padedančias suvokti menų poveikį ir naudą, taikant įtraukiojo ugdymo principus, kurie būtini dirbant su mokinių įvairove, skatinant visų besimokančiųjų akademinį, praktinį, socialinį ir emocinį mokymąsi, palaikant visų besimokančiųjų gerovę, taip pat bendradarbiaujant su mokyklos bendruomene ir kitais švietimo specialistais. Pripažįstant, kad nuo pedagogo profesinių kompetencijų, vertybinių nuostatų, žinių ir gebėjimų priklauso jo darbo rezultatai, veikla klasėje, o galiausiai ir inkluzijos sėkmė, atsiranda natūralus poreikis atlikti tyrimus, leidžiančius identifikuoti meno pedagogų profesinio tobulėjimo galimybes įtraukiojo ugdymo kontekste. Tai nusako šio straipsnio *tyrimo problemą*.

**Tyrimo tikslas** – įvertinti meno dalykų mokytojų mokymosi patirtis, įgyvendinant įtraukiojo meninio ugdymo programą.

Bendradarbiaujant tarptautinėje komandoje su Suomijos, Austrijos ir Lietuvos mokslininkais ir pedagoga praktikai, sukurta tęstinių mokymų programa „Įtraukusis meninis ugdymas“, skirta meninio ugdymo mokytojams. Mokymo programos turinį sudarė esminės įtraukiojo ugdymo temos, praturtintos įvairių menų (muzikos, šokio, dailės) integracijos galimybėmis, skatinančiomis individualią ugdymo prieigą prie kiekvieno ugdytinio, siekiant įveikti mokymąsi ribojančias kliūtis. Buvo siekiama, kad mokymų programos realizavimas skatintų tyrimo dalyvių meninio ugdymo turinio ir jo įgyvendinimo prieigų lankstumą, bendradarbiavimą ir meninės raiškos formų integracijos panaudojimo galimybes ugdymo procese.

Mokymai, kuriuose dalyvavo 25 meninio ugdymo mokytojai, vyko 2021–2022 m. Austrijoje, Lietuvoje ir Suomijoje<sup>1</sup>. Pasibaigus mokymams, kiekvienoje šalyje organizuotos grupinės diskusijos (trys sutelktosios (angl. *focus*) grupės), kurių metu mokytojai reflektavo įgytas patirtis.

Atlikta kokybinė tyrimo duomenų analizė atskleidė, kad įgyvendintos tarptautinės programos „Įtraukusis meninis ugdymas“ mokymosi tikslai ir turinys leido dalyviams susipažinti su tarptautiniais dokumentais, taisyklėmis, įstatymais, socialinės įtraukties ir individualizuoto mokymosi principais, turinčiais įtakos įtraukiamam darbui, susijusiam tiek su tarptautiniu, tiek su vietiniu kontekstu. Kita vertus, nustatyta, kad kai kurie meno dalykų mokytojai praktiniame darbe palyginti mažai naudoja įtraukiojo ugdymo elementų, o dalis informantų iki mokymų pradžios net nebuvo susipažinę su *įtraukiojo ugdymo sąvoka*.

Mokymų dalyvių patirtys išryškino palankų tarptautinių mokymų turinio vertinimą. Informantai akcentavo puikų lektorių pasirengimą bei teorinių paskaitų ir praktikumų dermę, kuri buvo grindžiama ne tik skirtingų meno formų (muzikos, vizualiųjų menų, šokio) integracijos raiška, bet ir tarpusavio dialogu ir refleksija, įgalinančia kūrybiškai organizuoti įtraukiojo meninio ugdymo procesą. Daugumos informantų nuomone, mokymų metu labai sustiprėjo grupės tarpusavio ryšiai, bendrystės jausmas, pagarba kitokiai nuomonei ir pasitikėjimas savo jėgomis.

Minėtina, kad tarptautinės programos dalyvių apmąstymai išryškino tam tikrus probleminius aspektus, kurie svarbūs projektuojant panašaus pobūdžio tyrimus ateityje: 1) mokymų dalyviai gali būti nevienodai pasirengę, turėti labai skirtingų patirčių ir poreikių, todėl, modeliuojant mokymų turinį ir organizuojant mokymus, būtina įvertinti dalyvių įvairovę ir lūkesčius; 2) ta pati mokymo programa taikoma skirtingose šalyse, esant skirtingoms švietimo sistemoms ir įtraukiojo ugdymo kontekstams, todėl tam tikri įtraukiojo ugdymo aspektai gali būti interpretuojami skirtingai; 3) vienkartiniai mokymai nepakankamai išsamiai ir tolygiai apėmia visas menų sritis ir atskiras jų raiškos galimybes, todėl aktualu organizuoti tęstinius mokymus, orientuotus į atskirų meno sričių specifiką, taikomą įtraukiamam ugdymui realizuoti; 4) intensyvūs 5 dienų programos mokymai pasižymėjo informacijos gausa, todėl kai kurie dalyviai akcentavo didelį nuovargį.

Galima teigti, kad sutelktosios grupės diskusija šiame tyrime pasiteisino kaip veiksmingas tyrimo metodas, todėl gautos išvalgos leis ateityje tobulinti kitas įtraukiojo meninio ugdymo kompetencijų plėtojimo programas.

<sup>1</sup> Tarptautiniai mokymai organizuoti trijuose skirtinguose Europos šalių universitetuose (*Savonia University of Applied Sciences* (Suomija), *Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien* (Austrija), *Vilnius University Siauliai Academy* (Lietuva)) ir jų partneriuose (*Kuopio Konservatory* (Suomija), *Ich bin OK* (Austrija)).

**Appendix 1***Indicative questions for focus group discussions*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Additional questions to support the topic</b>
Preparation and expectations before the workshops	What did you know about inclusive art pedagogy before? How much were you prepared (more theoretically or practically)? What were your main expectations before the workshops?
Workshop process: professional context, emotional context, organizational context	What is your opinion about the content of workshops (knowledge, theoretical and practical part, observations)? How did you feel during the workshops? How do you evaluate the workshop plan, material and organization in general?
Knowledge and experience on art and inclusion	How are you going to use forms of inclusive arts education in your practical activity? What art forms (music, dance, drama, visual arts) will you use for inclusive education?
Discussion on the themes of the workshop, new knowledge, attitudes, opinions	What teaching methods did you like most and memorize during the workshops? How are you going to apply them in your practical activity? What is your opinion about the content (knowledge, theoretical and practical part, observations) of the workshops?
The best points of the workshops	What was most helpful to you? What are your most significant insights during the workshop week?
The weak points of the workshops	What information did you miss during the workshops? What difficulties did you experience during the workshops?
Future development of learning	What knowledge would you like to acquire in future learning? What could be your contributions to promoting inclusion later?