Empowering Students Through Inclusive Teaching: A Case Study of Dedicated Teachers Making a Difference

Exploring the transformative impact of inclusive teaching practices on student success and well-being

Author: Candice Astorino

Editor: Vasiliki Katsomaliari

SIDIT

This publication has been written and published as part of the Erasmus+ project "Supporting Inclusion and Diversity in Teaching (SIDiT)".

Partners of the project

Empowering Students Through Inclusive Teaching: A Case Study of Dedicated Teachers Making a Difference

Contents

Introduction

Inclusive education has been steadily gaining attention and recognition in the realm of educational research and policy-making. Globally, 20% of children and young people face exclusion from education on a daily basis[1]. The UNESCO publication "A Guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education" stressed the urgency for education systems worldwide to commit to inclusive practices, "building a common understanding that more inclusive and equitable education systems have the potential to promote gender equality, reduce inequalities, develop teacher and system capabilities, and encourage supportive learning environments"[2]. At the European level, inclusive education has been reinforced through policy, with the European Education Area3 and the launch in 2020 of the "Digital Education Action Plan", an initiative of the European Commission, that sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe.

The present case study focuses on the inclusive teaching practices and the lessons learned from two primary schools in Brussels, where over the last three years (2021-2022-2023) the piloting of the Erasmus+ funded project Supporting Inclusion and Diversity in Schools (SIDiT) took place. SIDiT has developed a new teaching and learning approach, which provides a basis for inclusive education for children from diverse backgrounds, with particular emphasis on the inclusion of migrant children. More than 600 students have participated in the SIDiT lessons, and an average of 80% of the students belonged to the category of interest of the project and where from diverse backgrounds, including migrant backgrounds, specific learning needs and different ethnical, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. By promoting inclusion and diversity, primary schools can help to create a more equitable and just society for all.

There are many strategies that primary schools can implement to promote inclusion, and in this particular case, the schools explored different methods through the SIDiT cross-curricular lessons scenarios[4], offering extra support and resources to students who need them, promoting positive behaviour, using digital tools and offering opportunities for student choice and collaboration. The schools have also prioritized, through the implementation of the SIDiT

---

[1] UNESCO, Global education monitoring report, 2020: Inclusion and education: all means all. Available online via: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718
[2] UNESCO, A Guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education, 2017. Available online via: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248254
[3] European Education Area (European Commission): https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea
[4] The lessons scenarios can be found in the SIDiT Handbook for Teachers available online via: https://www.siditproject.eu/_files/ugd/74f199_92c23e59e08d47d788edf2c2851be7fe.pdf

project, the professional development of teachers to enhance their skills in teaching and supporting diverse learners through a teacher training course. This case study is part of a set of publications, alongside a discussion paper and policy recommendations[5], available via this link.

The purpose of the case study is to showcase how dedicated teachers, through their implementation of inclusive teaching practices, empower students and make a positive difference in their academic achievement, engagement, and social-emotional well-being.

Methodology

In the case study, a research design and methodology were employed to investigate the impact of inclusive teaching practices on student empowerment and the school environment.

The research design adopted for the case study was qualitative, focusing on gathering in-depth insights and understanding of the experiences and perspectives of teachers and students. Qualitative research is particularly effective in capturing the richness of participants' narratives. The methodology involved the use of semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers involved in implementing inclusive teaching practices as well as with the students who participated in the SIDiT lessons. These interviews consisted of a set of predetermined open-ended questions, providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, feelings, and challenges. The interviews aimed to gather detailed insights into the teachers' and students' perspectives and the impact of the lessons on their practices and their learning. The interview questions focused on assessing various aspects such as the teachers' confidence in implementing the lessons, the challenges encountered, the level of student engagement, the academic achievements, self-esteem of students, and social-emotional well-being.

Analysis

The collected data was subjected to rigorous analysis. For the interviews, a thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and key findings within the teachers' narratives. This involved organizing the interview transcripts, coding meaningful segments, and categorizing them into relevant themes. The qualitative data from the interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of teachers' and students' insights contributing to the overall findings of the case study.

---

[5] SIDiT project, 2023. Supporting inclusive education through cross-curricular programmes: lessons learned and way forward
https://www.siditproject.eu/_files/ugd/74f199_3a83c0c2668f4b26b8d3d69de2632899.pdf

Context and Participants

For this case study a total of 21 children that have taken part in the SIDiT lessons were interviewed, alongside 8 teachers. The teachers who participated in this project have demonstrated unwavering dedication and an exceptional commitment to inclusive teaching. Their passion for creating inclusive learning environments is evident in their everyday practices, as they go above and beyond to ensure that every student feels valued, supported, and empowered. These teachers have embraced the principles of inclusivity, recognizing the unique needs and strengths of each student. For them, "*SIDiT was another way thinking*" – 5th grade teacher, Belgium.

In this context the SIDiT methodology invites schools to engage in student-led project work that addresses the curriculum and offers teachers an opportunity to reflect on inclusive practices, focusing on the development of transversal competences. It is provided in the practical form of a toolkit; a handbook with sample lesson scenarios which promotes learning and inclusion and is easily accessible for educators to use in their classrooms.

The impact of inclusive teaching

This section outlines the positive changes observed in the classroom, based on the experience and feedback of the teachers.

Students' empowerment and sense of belonging

The SIDiT lessons have created a classroom environment that values and embraces diversity, the teachers have ensured that every student feels respected, supported, and included. The teachers have highlighted in the interviews how SIDiT has enabled them to take more time to get to know the students. Through the lessons scenarios, teachers have learned about their students' backgrounds, cultures, interests, and strengths. When students feel accepted and valued for who they are, they are more likely to engage in the learning process and develop a positive self-image. They found that the students learned more easily, and teachers were able to engage with all the students, using different learning tools. This knowledge helped to develop positive relationships with students and create a sense of belonging in the classroom.

"Every kid is important, every kid has his own opinion, must be heard and must feel he is heard; if they don't feel good about themselves, they can't learn anything, and that's the beginning of everything." – Teacher of 3rd grade, Belgium

The level of student engagement

Inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for the students to actively engage in their learning, collaborate with peers, and access resources that meet their specific needs. During the piloting years, some of the teachers have transformed the lessons scenarios and adapted them

into a week-long project, for the students to truly dive into the topic of the lesson (such as culture, discrimination, children's right…). The adaptability of the SIDiT lessons and the methodology is such that teachers could do one- or two-hours lessons but also transform them into bigger projects. A 6th grade teacher recognised the value of the lessons and the impact they had on student engagement and self-esteem. She also mentioned that the scenarios are very open, teachers can put their personality into it, taking into consideration the children, the group dynamic and needs. This has led to improved academic outcomes, increased motivation, and a sense of accomplishment, which had a tremendous impact on the classroom dynamic.

Linguistically inclusive classrooms

Inclusive teaching strategies acknowledge the linguistic diversity within the classroom, and it is exactly what the SIDiT lessons aimed to achieve. By accommodating different learning styles and backgrounds, it allowed the students to actively engage and open up in the language of their choice during the lessons, whether with their classmates, in writing or with the teacher. SIDiT helped in addressing linguistic barriers as it adjusted pedagogical strategies to meet the individual language needs of migrant students. A 6th grade teacher pinpointed that *"being able to communicate in other languages made them feel very comfortable"*. It has encouraged peer interactions and cooperative learning, providing ample opportunities for language practice and enhancement whether it is their native, second or third language.

Cultural exchange and understanding

The SIDiT lessons not only encouraged cultural exchange and understanding among students and teachers but allowed time and space to celebrate the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the students. Promoting empathy, tolerance, and appreciation for different cultures and beliefs, as the students learned to listen to each other. This exposure to diverse perspectives helped to foster a more inclusive and globally aware mindset among all students, aware of others, of different cultures and religions.

The lesson scenarios created real opportunities for students to share their cultures, traditions, and experiences, such as the "Me box", which "*created a safe environment for the students to learn about each other*" according to a 6th grade teacher.

Practice box   ***The "Me Box" & social emotional learning***
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) [6]provides children with a safe environment where they are encouraged to express their feelings, concerns, and thoughts openly, thereby

---

[6] https://www.cfchildren.org/what-is-social-emotional-learning/

helping them to open up. By understanding their own emotions through SEL, children can articulate their feelings more comfortably, even on sensitive subjects. For instance, when discussing topics like bullying, mental health, or family issues, SEL equips children with the necessary emotional vocabulary and tools to convey their experiences and perspectives.

The Me Box

The SIDiT methodology has incorporated lessons on SEL, for example with the "Me Box", allowing children to create their own personal and safe space. The children were instructed to create and decorate a box, where they could bring something that represents:

➢ The student's native language(s)
➢ The student's nationality or ethnic group
➢ The student's religion or beliefs
➢ The student's family
➢ The student's dominant childhood memories

Transformative power of social emotional learning

Both educators and students have shared the significance of the "Me Box", emphasizing its effectiveness, especially when implemented at the beginning of the academic year. An anecdote shared by a sixth-grade educator from the 2021-2022 school year serves to illustrate its transformative power.

The story involves a student who tragically lost his younger sister. Around this same period, the teacher introduced the "Me Box" lesson to the class. This instrument proved to be invaluable, providing the young boy with a tangible outlet to express and manage his emotions. By offering a space for self-expression and fostering open discussion, the "Me Box" enabled the student to process his thoughts surrounding the tragic event. The student frequently attested to the value of this tool, while the teacher expressed relief that he found a safe and effective means of expressing his emotions. The students were very respectful throughout this process.

The contents of his "Me Box", which included photographs and his sister's scarf, mirrored his grief and the bond he shared with his sister. The student continued to personalise the box throughout the academic year, adding items as he saw fit.

In advocating for student agency, the teacher allowed all students the freedom to populate their 'Me Boxes' as they desired. Reflecting on this innovative teaching strategy and its impact, the teacher confessed that it transformed her perspective on teaching: "*in terms of mindset, it was something that made me think how I wanted to be as a teacher*".

Development of digital competences

The use of digital tools has been an important factor in the success of the implementation of the SIDiT methodologies. The students have not only enjoyed using tablets and interactive tools in the classroom but have also developed their digital competences and therefore transformed their learning experience. Incorporating digital tools has facilitated self-paced learning, group work and enabling students to explore and delve into the topics of the lessons. The teachers have been able to step out of their comfort zone, sometimes letting the students lead and propose new ideas (new tools or techniques) that will help them achieve the goal of the lessons. The SIDiT lessons have demonstrated that the use of digital tools in the classroom significantly enriches the learning process, fostering creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Conclusion

With the aim to inform and inspire other educators to engage more in inclusive teaching, this case study has provided solid examples and learning points from the SIDiT project that can be replicated in other schools as well as other educational contexts.

Key learning points
If there were five points to take away from this case study, they would be the following:

1. Inclusive teaching methods are adaptable, and whether it is a one-hour lesson or a week-long project, all teachers can implement inclusive teaching strategies in their practice.
2. Inclusive teaching strategies encourage active participation from all students, thus increasing engagement and motivation. It ensures that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and learn effectively.
3. By acknowledging and appreciating the diversity of students' backgrounds, inclusive teaching cultivates empathy and understanding among students and teachers, fostering a sense of community and mutual respect.

SIDIT

4. Inclusive teaching ensures that all students feel valued and engaged, irrespective of their backgrounds. This fosters a positive learning environment, which in turn enhances the overall learning experience.

5. Inclusive teaching encourages students to consider multiple perspectives and viewpoints, leading to the development of critical thinking skills. It promotes an understanding of the complexity and diversity of the world, preparing students for the multicultural and interconnected global society.

In conclusion, inclusive teaching plays a vital role in supporting students from migrant backgrounds. By creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment, teachers can empower their students to reach their full potential, promote their well-being, and facilitate their successful integration into the educational system and broader society.