

Teacher training for inclusion within an egalitarian framework in France

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Abstract

In France, recent years have seen a national-level acceleration towards embracing inclusive schooling, with the 2019 education law reform providing for a standardised national teacher education curriculum. While teachers are in theory being better prepared for inclusive practices, France's egalitarian constitutional model remains in ideological conflict with differentiated treatment of diversity. In this context, is initial teacher education effectively preparing teachers for their work with pupils with diverse learning and special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools? A qualitative study carried out in Bordeaux in 2021-2022, as part of the research project Empowering Teachers for Inclusion in Schools (ETIS), explores this question by discussing views from teacher educators, mainstream teachers and deaf specialist educators. Findings highlight educators' views that a separatist approach to preparing teachers for inclusion of diversity leaves teachers having to find 'do-it-yourself' solutions for SEN learners in their classes. In response to this problem, SEN and mainstream educators alike suggest that school inclusion could be strengthened by reinforcing preparation within core initial teacher training programmes.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Inclusion, France, Egalitarianism, Deaf Learners, SEN

Points of interest:

- France has a dilemma about how to implement school inclusion, due to the country's constitutional egalitarianism which requires that everyone be treated equally. This means that elements of inclusive schooling such as adaptive teaching and differentiation for individual learners, are difficult to set up within the French system.
- Even so, France is beginning to embrace the idea of inclusion. This is evident in a series of recent law and education policy reforms. In particular, the new requirement since 2021 that initial teacher training programmes offer 25 hours of training on school inclusion for all new teachers.
- This article reports on a small-scale study carried out in Bordeaux, France, in 2021-2022, which seeks to understand a range of educators' views of teacher preparation for meeting diversity in the classroom, as well as their lived experiences of teaching inclusively.
- Interviews with 17 teacher educators, mainstream teachers, SEN and deaf specialist educators find that inclusion training remains as yet inadequate, and leaves teachers having to 'DIY' solutions for SEN pupils in their classes.

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Introduction

Since the assurance of ‘equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship for people with disabilities’ enshrined in the French law of 11 February 2005, the notion of inclusion for students with special needs has begun to find its way into the French education system. Progress towards adopting an internationally-defined form of school inclusion is however slow, and hampered by ongoing debates over politically-entrenched norms, such as the semantic and logistical differences between ‘integration’ (introduced in 1975) and ‘inclusion’ (current from 2013), and the constitutional imperative of egalitarianism arising from the French Revolution of 1789. This means that inclusion itself is treated as a notion that requires adaptation in order to reconcile any ideological conflicts arising within the French national context. As explained by Malet (2023), inclusion of diversity has a long and controversial history in French education, and tends to be relegated to a specific subject area within schools, rather than used as a state tool for whole school reform:

In France, Republican principles oppose discrimination and all forms of intolerance in schools. However, this model can itself be an obstacle to acknowledging and discussing the cultural, linguistic or religious diversity of French society (Soysal & Szakács, 2010). Since 2013, cultural diversity issues are addressed through ‘moral and civic education’ courses centred on the transmission of Republican values, openness to others, and respect for differences. (p.222)

To explain some of the tensions and contradictions of egalitarianism in relation to inclusive education, the underlying principle of *égalité* in France is that civic identity and social unity are prioritised over recognition of differences arising from individual interests and identities (Bird, 2001). One result is that French schools adhere to a universalist approach that tends to merge pupil differences rather than differentiating to accommodate diversity (Tomlinson, 2017; Perrin et al, 2024). So while policies and practices of inclusive education entail differentiation for diverse school populations in mainstream settings, French egalitarianism prefers to render pluralist dimensions invisible, “because of a fear of social fragmentation leading to the destruction of the Republican ideology” (Lefebvre, 2003, p.15). A resulting ideological conflict arises from a set of French laws, values and principles dating back to 1789, and their difficult application to the egalitarian governance of a contemporary, highly diverse population.

According to Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reports issued by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)(2019), one systemic outcome for teachers in France today is that they report insufficient preparation in inclusive approaches, and a lack of experience and support for addressing severe needs among students. Despite positive attitudes to the principles of inclusive education, in a context with little support for adaptive practices, teacher adherence and commitment to transformative processes for developing inclusive schooling remains only partial (Fortier et al, 2018; Reverdy, 2019; Malet & Bian, 2020).

Recent years have however seen a national-level acceleration towards embracing inclusive schooling in France, with the 2019 education law reform providing for a standardised national teacher education curriculum within a 3-year teacher preparation framework, while at the same time allowing greater flexibility for regional teacher education institutions to deliver modified programmes. In 2021, the Comité Interministériel de Handicap announced its objective of “investing in young generations with disabilities”, specifically through the compulsory component of 25 hours of training on inclusive pedagogy for all new teachers within initial training programmes at the state-run teacher education centres Instituts Nationaux Supérieurs du Professorat et de l’Éducation (INSPE).

Within this national context where new measures towards school inclusion are meeting historically-important cultural values, we (researchers, teacher educators and teachers alike) are in the beginnings of constructing responses to the challenges and opportunities encountered in meeting the diverse needs of students with SEN.

Literature review

In France, as globally, the model of an inclusive society is founded on international human rights, of which one essential pillar is school inclusion (OECD, 2010). While politically the notion of inclusion remains ideologically at an impasse with the Republican principal of egalitarianism (*égalité*) as non-differentiated acceptance of diversity, some French research argues for positive discrimination as a way of producing more equal results for disabled people (Joly, 2016; Brun, 2018; Stiker, 2019). However the dilemma remains that as a political consequence of egalitarianism, any discriminatory policy would be contrary to the constitution, be it based on race, religion or disability. Inherently a universalist model, the French social accord embodies principles of secularism, equal rights and access to public education, requiring all citizens to uphold these as constitutional rights. Ville and Ravaud (2007) attribute egalitarianism with the weak development of French disability research as a specific field, as well as explaining the difficulty in differentiating for minority group identities and their particular needs.

The challenge of implementing school inclusion in France is therefore one of balancing constitutional rights on the basis of which French society cultivates national cohesion, with a growing international recognition of identity as ‘polymorphic and dynamic’ (Lemaire, 2009). Further, the sharing of common space is not enough to achieve inclusion, but instead inclusion is defined above all by “the capacity to include the disabled person in the circularity of inter-human communication” (Ployé, 2018). As such the tensions are multiple, touching on political and cultural values, as well as stretching across educational and societal domains.

The semantics of inclusion within this context continue to be debated, and culturally situating the term presents a dilemma for researchers and educators alike. As pointed out by Le Capitaine (2022), the label ‘inclusion’ has been attached to schooling as part of the 2019 education reform, while in practice the French education system remains relatively unchanged. Dugas (2023) further highlights this dichotomy, in that the ambition of developing an inclusive society cannot be achieved without the active participation of all people concerned, most especially disabled people; while the hierarchical decision-making status quo in France leaves little space for power-sharing.

In the area of initial teacher education (ITE), inclusion is also under tension. On the one hand, inclusion carries the weight of a new training obligation in ITE that remains as yet more theoretical than grounded in practice. Since the 2019 education reform (law of 28 July 2019 Pour une école de la confiance), inclusive education is now a compulsory part of ITE, and INSPE are required to prepare teachers to meet the learning needs of SEN pupils in mainstream schools (Article L721-2 of the Education Code, 2 March 2022). While this is a significant leap forward in inclusive education policy in France, studies on the implementation of this training reflect the need for a more practice-based approach to promoting differentiated teaching for the wide diversity of learners and situations that teachers meet daily (Duguet & Morlaix, 2021; Dintrich et al, 2022). Another issue raised in recent literature is that mainstream teachers in France generally express low self-efficacy in their ability to implement inclusive pedagogies (Desombre, Lamotte & Jury, 2019). While many causal variables have been identified for this (Wray et al, 2022), one is a persistent sense of low self-efficacy due to initial training that is general and theoretical, coupled with difficulty accessing further training in inclusive classroom practices (Moussi, 2020). In response, the role of initial teacher education in constructing empowered and enabling attitudes towards inclusion, as a professional posture, has been studied nationally (Lemoine et al, 2024), as well as through a comparative lens (Kohout-Diaz et al, 2020).

On the other hand, the adaptive requirements of inclusive teaching have potential to birth innovative pedagogies and creative ways of preparing teachers for diversity, and French teacher education seems to be picking up on this. One example is the emergence of technologies for autonomy and inclusion, such as pedagogical video games rendered accessible for disabled students (Garbarini & Muratet, 2020). Another is the design and trial of a Serious Game for teacher training in inclusion at l’Institut national supérieur de formation et de recherche pour l’éducation inclusive (INSEI) (Arneton et al, 2022). This points to two interesting approaches emerging in French teacher training for inclusion: (1) an awareness of the need to pique pre-service teachers’ curiosity about, and playful engagement with, inclusive pedagogies, and (2) an exploration of the potentially positive impact of technology as a learning tool for pupils with disabilities of all types.

Furthermore, this type of innovative thinking links back to a basic principle of inclusion in the classroom: when teachers adapt their ‘normative’ teaching practices in order to better include the most vulnerable pupils, they adopt an ethical stance of concern for the wellbeing of pupils with special educational needs (Jellab, 2021).

The ETIS project

The Empowering Teachers for Inclusion in Schools (ETIS) research aim is to examine how various inputs from the teacher education continuum enhance teachers’ self-efficacy in relation to their work with pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds and learning needs, and to promote an ethos of inclusion in schools. A comparative approach draws on qualitative data gathered in England, France, Italy, Belgium, Portugal and Finland. The project’s broad research objectives are to: (1) analyse teacher education and school inclusion policies in selected European contexts; (2) compare induction programmes and school-level strategies to empower teachers to meet diverse learning needs; and (3) investigate teachers’ beliefs and attitudes toward equity and inclusion in schooling and teaching.

This article reports on responses in the domain of the third objective, gathered from 17 participants in Bordeaux, France, between 2021 and 2022, being teacher educators, mainstream teachers and SEN educators.

Research question

The specific research question reported on in this article is: Is initial teacher education in France effectively preparing teachers for their work with pupils with diverse learning and special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools, within an egalitarian framework?

In order to understand a range of educators’ views, all participants were asked the following interview questions: How are teachers prepared to include diversity in the classroom? Is training effective for addressing the needs of all pupils? How could inclusion training be improved?

Participants’ responses to these questions allowed the study to identify issues and solutions raised by educators working within the French system. It also allowed the researchers to test the study’s opening problematic — that an egalitarian framework of education in France presents challenges in implementing inclusion in schools, due to an ideological conflict.

Context and participants

Bordeaux was chosen as the research terrain, due to the project’s association with the teacher education centre at INSPE Aquitaine. As the ETIS study is particularly interested in induction programmes and school-level strategies to empower teachers to meet diverse learning needs, a small number of local schools in Bordeaux were invited to participate so as to make this link with inclusion training within local teacher training programmes. Alongside an investigation of the mainstream setting, we also sought views on inclusive education from teachers and teacher educators specialising in adaptive pedagogies for SEN pupils. For this reason, we also invited l’Institut national supérieur de formation et de recherche pour l’éducation inclusive (INSEI) and a local deaf education centre to participate. The educational leaders, teachers and resource staff interviewed offer valuable perspectives on inclusion, drawing on experiences within mainstream and/or SEN sectors.

The mainstream school participant Lycée A is a vocational high school in Bordeaux which prepares students for professional integration and is fairly representative of mainstream high schools in Bordeaux in terms of diversity. The deaf education centre coordinates schooling support for deaf students (some with additional special educational needs) who are learning within an inclusion environment and/or within specialised support units in Bordeaux. The participation of these two education providers allows the project to see how inclusion is managed in public school settings at secondary level, as well as how adapted approaches for deaf learners (in some cases with additional SEN) may be organised in France.

Methodology

In complement to a comparative analysis of policies of inclusion across the six countries researched during the ETIS project, the study also intends to ascertain prominent issues about inclusion arising in educational practices in two areas — initial teacher education and school teaching. To achieve this, a qualitative research methodology was chosen in order to gather comprehensive data on educators’ views and practices of teacher training for inclusion, in the form of observations and interviews.

1. For the school observations, three mainstream schools and the centre for deaf education were visited. Of the mainstream setting visits, two were to observe deaf students receiving extra learning support from deaf education specialist teachers, in one-to-one or small group situations.
2. For the interviews, participants with a particular interest in inclusive practices were selected (Table 1). The interview format is semi-structured and follows schematic question guides covering three main areas: professional profile and role, inclusive practices, and pre-service/in-service preparation for school inclusion. The question guide was adapted for four types of interviewee:

- teacher educators
- school leaders
- school teachers
- SEN specialists

Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and each interview was recorded and transcribed². The text data was then analysed using Thematic Content Analysis to identify common themes. This inductive method was chosen in order to give expression to the commonality of concerns across participants, and to limit researcher bias (Anderson, 2007).

Table 1
Distribution of participant profiles

Teacher educa-tors	School lead-ers	Mainstream school teachers	Deaf centre educators / SEN specialists in schools	Pre-service teacher in mainstream pathway	Total in-terviews
5	2	4	5	1	17

Findings and Discussion

When asked the interview questions about teacher training for inclusion, and teachers’ experiences of meeting diverse needs in the classroom, there were echoes across the French interviews of similar problems and solutions identified. The main problems identified are (1) institutional teacher training takes a separatist approach to preparing teachers for inclusion of diversity, and (2) a lack of initial teacher preparation for inclusion leads to ‘DIY (*bricolage*)’ in response to the needs of SEN pupils in schools, rather than structured, strategic approaches that support learning. In a third finding, mainstream and SEN educators alike share the view that school inclusion could be strengthened by reinforcing preparation within core initial teacher education programmes.

² Participants received an informed consent and information sheet that details the method of data storage, in accordance with Le règlement général sur la protection des données (Commission Nationale de l’Informatique et des Libertés web-site, 24/05/2016) and University of Bordeaux ethics requirements for research involving human participants.



Solutions identified across the interviews differed between mainstream contexts (INSPE and schools) and SEN contexts (INSEI and the centre for deaf education). Both mainstream and SEN sectors tended to see a systemic approach to teacher training as part of the solution, however from two slightly different perspectives. For mainstream educators, teaching has become more complex due to increasing student need, and all teachers should therefore be prepared for a wider range of diverse learning needs during initial training. SEN educators agree and are more than willing to be part of the solution for preparing teachers in inclusive practices for diverse learners. Additionally, SEN educators recount their experiences of marginalisation from the national teacher education system, despite their considerable expertise, specialised knowledge and mobilisation in the terrain.

Finding 1: Institutional teacher training takes a separatist approach to preparing teachers for inclusion of diversity

In France, the state-run INSPE are primarily responsible for teacher education, yet, as educators repeatedly raised in these interviews, there is insufficient attention given to inclusion in ITE programmes. Additionally, there are few short professional development courses on themes of diversity and inclusion offered by INSPE that could be accessed by in-service teachers post-2019 to support skill development in SEN pedagogies. This results in a type of segregationist approach to institutional teacher education which consists of INSPE offering generalist preparation in the Master of Education (MEEF) pathways³, while SEN training is considered to be either (a) the domain of specialised institutions such as INSEI, or (b) only relevant for teachers who will be responsible for teaching SEN groups (in Certificate of professional aptitude in inclusive education (CAPPEI) or French as a second language (FLE) courses, for example).

A gesture of separatism is evident in this structuring of teacher education, which seems to marginalise inclusive teaching practices to the fringes of mainstream schooling, instead proposing inclusion modules within ITE programmes that remain generalised and theoretical, rather than specific and practical. As has been suggested by French researchers, the recent adoption of the term ‘inclusion’ in French education policy has yet to markedly change ITE programmes or classroom pedagogy (Le Capitaine, 2022).

In this climate therefore, French teacher training for inclusion suffers from the ‘drop-in-the-bucket’ syndrome, whereby individual teachers may choose specific SEN pathways to develop pedagogical skills in this area, but there may be little diffusion of this professional knowledge amongst the school collective. The following interview extract from a teacher educator at INSEI highlights this:

A teacher comes to us, he is trained. I'm sure that on his return to school he doesn't hear his school leader asking him, "What have you learned, and how can it be beneficial for all of us?" Instead he's likely to hear, "Finally you're back, you'll be able to get back to your pupils." Basically, the teacher had to insist on taking time off for training, perhaps he had to be replaced, etc. So there was no perceived value from the school in saying, "You learned something, how collectively we can benefit from it?" We still find ourselves trapped in this kind of dynamic. But this actually reflects the organisation of learning that we have with our pupils in schools. We are in a system where ultimately we have very little confidence in the pupils, and in their ability to create conditions for adding value to the collective. So I think that it is our model that needs to be re-examined in depth, because today, faced with the challenges of inclusive education, ultimately, teachers are in difficulty. And the current structuring of education does not make it possible to resolve this difficulty. (Interview with teacher educator, INSEI, 31/03/2022)

In brief, the segregation of SEN training away from mainstream within the French teacher education system effectively blocks potentially valuable knowledge sharing and professional development in inclusive practices.

³ Master Métiers de l'enseignement, de l'éducation et de la formation (MEEF) is a two-year Masters of Education, primary or secondary school options, that leads to national qualified teacher status.

In an interview with one SEN teacher, she explains that deaf education specialists would like to share their expertise within INSPE courses, but that the system does not accommodate external trainers, as follows:

Q: Are there ways in which you are able to offer training? Either within schools, or are there teachers seeking specific training from you? And if not, do you see ways of sharing your expertise about deaf children, perhaps in partnership with INSPE?

A: There is no such thing as external training of mainstream teachers. So we have never informed/trained, other than what we call Deaf information wherever it is needed... That's why we contacted the INSPE, saying to ourselves, if we were able to raise awareness amongst young people who are in initial training courses, they would already have in mind some knowledge or awareness of the needs of deaf children. Or this would become relevant the day they receive a deaf child in their class. (interview with deaf educator, 10/02/2022)

This testimony speaks clearly of the separatist approach to inclusion training, legitimised by France's egalitarian ideology that favours universalism in initial teacher training. It also raises the question of how much flexibility regional INSPE retain in the design of ITE programmes, that ideally prepares teachers for the specific types of diversity they will meet in local schools. Furthermore, how are local diversity and teachers' needs taken into account when designing inclusion modules?

As an example, the Aquitaine region is home to the second largest population of deaf people in France⁴, approximately 1 million immigrants⁵, and almost 10,000 young people under the age of 20 with learning diversity or SEN (receiving the allocation Disability compensation benefit (Prestation de compensation du handicap - PCH) or Third Party compensation allowance (Allocation compensatrice pour tierce personne - ACTP))⁶. However, within the ITE programmes at INSPE Aquitaine, there is no specific training offered in adaptive pedagogies for inclusion of deaf pupils in mainstream learning. As one specialist teacher of deaf pupils describes below, this kind of SEN training could be incorporated as a natural continuation of the modules that teachers already receive on first language development in early childhood. In addition, deafness training could serve as a springboard into building understanding of other types of learning needs characterised by language and communication difficulties, such as dyslexia and dyspraxia.

To understand a deaf child, you must understand that we are working with language development. What is language? It's technical and philosophical and relational. It takes time to fully understand. Well, then I think that teachers know what this is in early childhood development. There must be plenty of courses on language development [in ITE], I imagine, at least for primary school teachers. So this type of training could be extended into talking about deaf children. And especially when it comes to deafness, it is such a profound type of disability that it applies to all other language disorders. That is to say, once we have understood how the development of oral language works, and all its difficulties, we are able to adapt to a dyslexic child, a dyspraxic child, all other types of specific language disorders. (Interview with SEN educator, 10/02/2022).

We find this point of view highly interesting, as it raises the question of how much place is actually accorded within initial teacher education to understanding how language develops during childhood, and how teachers are being prepared to work effectively with common language-related learning difficulties. While INSPE currently provides new training modules for inclusive approaches within the ITE programmes, some correlating of child development studies with SEN child development could improve schooling for significant groups of pupils in local schools, particularly those with language and communication needs, such as deaf

⁴ Approximately 33,000 young deaf people in Gironde. https://www.acfos.org/wp-content/uploads/base_doc/divers/surd-ite_gironde.pdf

⁵ <https://www.regions-of-france.com/regions/aquitaine/population>

⁶ <https://creai-nouvelleaquitaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Chiffres-cles-handicap-33.pdf>

pupils. This gap between the social composition of local communities and ITE programme content leads us to question whether the separatist framework of French teacher education may be a model which could, with conceptual and pedagogical correlations such as those suggested by a SEN educator, better serve the education system, its teachers, and SEN pupils. This point is reiterated by French researchers and international findings alike, in that differentiation for diverse learning needs tends to produce more equal outcomes for SEN pupils, but likewise for all pupils (OECD, 2010; Stiker, 2019; Jellab, 2021).

Finding 2: Lack of initial teacher preparation for inclusion leads to ‘DIY (bricolage)’

Mainstream teachers report low self-efficacy in adaptive pedagogies for including SEN pupils, describing experiences of implementing ‘do-it-yourself’ (*bricolage*) solutions for individual learners. While teachers across primary, secondary and special education sectors express a desire to make inclusion work for all students, they also describe feelings of isolation and unpreparedness, as the following extracts show:

There is an obvious desire on the part of schools and teachers to do well. But we are often left to operate independently as a school. That is to say, we have to face a need that imposes itself on us, and we do not necessarily have all the resources, all the necessary background to really constitute truly thoughtful, anticipated care. *It reminds me a bit of DIY (bricolage)*. We are faced with a difficulty, and there you have it, necessity means that in the interest of the pupil we will have to adapt. (Interview with school leader, Lycée A, 08/12/2021)

It’s very complicated because it depends on each teacher who welcomes the child into their class. What I see is that inclusion starts from the good will of a teacher, or a team of teachers, who wants to understand what consequence the type of sensory deficit of the child has on their learning, and what impact that will generate ... A successful teacher is one who realises that you have to quickly adapt to the child’s behaviour, and who quickly puts something in place, *even if it is DIY (du bricolage)*. (Interview with SEN educator, 10/02/2022)

In my second year of teaching, I arrived at a school, and there I was given a mixed ability class. There was a child with a disability, with multiple disabilities actually, and I think that was a bit of a gift for the new teacher. Basically, no one wanted him and strangely he was also a child who had been refused by the municipality where he should have been schooled. At the time, it was already quite shocking that he was rejected from a school. My school said yes but then it was a bit like “who’s going to take care of him?” ... so it was really *a matter of doing what we could (de la débrouille)*. (Interview with mainstream teacher, 22/06/2022)

As these comments suggest, school leaders and teachers accept the moral and professional obligation to include SEN pupils into mainstream classes. However they identify an inherent difficulty in this, due to little preparatory training in adaptive teaching coupled with an absence of SEN support structures within mainstream schools. These conditions place teachers in situations where, faced with a newly-arrived SEN pupil in mainstream learning, they have to invent solutions ‘out of necessity’, which means extra effort and hit-and-miss approaches to meeting specific educational needs. This speaks to a blind-spot in the French system vis-à-vis minority groups and effective teaching in diverse classrooms (Smythe, in press; Ville & Ravaud, 2007), as differentiation is still considered unconstitutional and arguments for positive discrimination are yet to be wholly embraced (Joly, 2016; Brun, 2018; Stiker, 2019). It is this dilemma that poses a challenge to teacher education in providing training in inclusive pedagogies — how to strike a balance between the constitutional imperative of egalitarianism and international rights that consider identity as ‘polymorphic and dynamic’ (Lemaire, 2009)?

In these and other interviews, teachers' discourse bears witness to the difficulty and isolation of this experience, with expressions such as: "faced with a need that imposes itself on us / necessity means that / we will have to adapt / make an effort / it's very complicated / no one wanted him / it was already quite shocking"⁷.

We can therefore identify a gap between the realities of diverse classrooms that teachers are working in on a daily basis, and preparation for this during the initial teacher education period. One outcome described by teachers is feeling powerless to put effective solutions in place, as they are left to their own devices to invent solutions on a case-by-case basis. The words '*bricolage*' and '*débrouille*' came up several times across interviews and within different education sectors, suggesting that this experience is common and arises from a common root — that of insufficient preparation in inclusive pedagogies. This finding suggests a cause-effect relationship between a generalist ITE training that merges the plural dimensions of pupil diversity and teachers' largely stressful experiences of having to improvise inclusive strategies on-the-hoof.

In response to this situation, we support recommendations that training in specific, adaptive, inclusive classroom practices be integrated into initial teacher training programmes at a national level and within a framework of ongoing educational policy reform (Colin et al, 2021)

Finding 3: School inclusion could be strengthened by reinforcing preparation within core initial teacher education programmes

Both mainstream (INSPE and schools) and SEN sectors (INSEI and the centre for deaf education) tend to see a reinforcement of teacher preparation for diversity, within the framework of core requirements for initial teacher education, as part of the solution to strengthening inclusion in schools. However, two different perspectives were expressed across interviews with mainstream and SEN educators.

Firstly, mainstream educators express the view that teaching has become more complex due to increasingly diverse pupil needs, and all teachers should therefore be prepared for this during initial training. As one primary school teacher interviewed expressed, while inclusion training is available at a post-graduate level, she perceives the initial training as impoverished as far as preparation for classroom teaching with SEN pupils goes. She also points out that at the time she trained as a teacher, the main teaching qualification pathway (MEEF) offered zero hours of inclusion training. Until the 2019 reform, only those teachers who pursued an optional pathway in inclusive pedagogies (for example certificates in inclusive education (CAPPEI) or French as the language of schooling for migrant students (FLE)) received targeted training in differentiated approaches to teaching and learning. Therefore, the majority of teachers in French schools today are likely to have bypassed diversity training. The following interview extract outlines this perspective:

I have never had specific training on disabilities. So for me it still remains a big problem. I have had training in French as a second language, and everything that is multicultural. Everyone has gone through secularism training, etc., and these may be areas that possibly overlap, we could say. But in the initial training we need more training in inclusion, even if we do have a small part now. For those teachers who went through their training when we really had zero hours of inclusion training, we should have some professional development in this area. (Interview with mainstream teacher, 22/06/2022).

Secondly, SEN educators agree that SEN training is needed and are more than willing to be part of the solution for training teachers in inclusive strategies for learners with specific types of disability. However, SEN educators are experiencing that despite their considerable expertise, specialised knowledge, and mobilisation in the terrain, they remain marginalised and unable to effectively penetrate the national teacher education system.

For example, deaf educators have proposed training sessions on how to adapt teaching for deaf and hearing impaired pupils, open to all INSPE students and staff. However, these have been extra-curricular and excluded from formal evaluations within the training programmes, and as a result the opportunity has not been widely

⁷ Translated from the original French: 'face à un besoin qui s'impose à nous / la nécessité fait que / nous devons nous adapter / faire des efforts / c'est bien compliqué / personne n'en voulait / c'était déjà assez choquant.'

taken up by pre-service teachers to receive training from experts in deafness. Deaf educators also offer ongoing training for in-service teachers, as the following interview extract describes, but again these are not well-attended, perhaps due to time constraints, as the following extract from an interview with one deaf educator explains:

We're not really in demand for training, even if some teachers may be interested in what we do. I think that unfortunately teachers don't have a lot of time off to attend training. They should be given the opportunity each year to free up their teaching time to do some training. And if that were the case I think that we would have fewer problems raising their awareness, and in ensuring that they can adhere to projects supporting deaf and disabled children, in general. As long as we give them the opportunity to train, and allow time for them to think about the issue of disability, then ... (Interview with SEN educator, 04/02/2022).

Similarly, an experienced teacher educator at INSEI hinted at the frustration of this missed opportunity to create an intersectionality between SEN experts and mainstream teacher training institutions. The following interview extract points out a lack of cooperation between INSPE and INSEI, which in effect blocks any real advances that could be made through knowledge-sharing, mutual consultation and common goal-setting towards training teachers in inclusive pedagogies.

The idea was to try to rethink the role and position of this establishment [INSEI] as an establishment that unites both resources and knowledge in terms of research and skills. It was hoped that we could also play a coordination role to foster cooperation between fellow teacher educators, all of whom have their own areas of expertise, and these would benefit from being coordinated overall. But not everyone is yet into the culture of cooperation, which seems to me to be a key to the success of inclusive education. (Interview with teacher educator, INSEI, 31/03/2022).

This raises an important point to take forward from this study: the SEN sector carries considerable specialised expert knowledge on how diverse pupils learn best, and is willing to share that knowledge with the mainstream sector. In France, as was similarly reported in other countries investigated during the ETIS project, SEN educators often feel marginalised from the mainstream sector, and would welcome opportunities to interact meaningfully with mainstream colleagues in a professional capacity, and to contribute formally to teacher education programmes. This point is supported by research, in that inclusive practices are defined and co-constructed through communicative practices (Ployé, 2018).

A third and related point arises. In response to the problem of teachers having to invent solutions in a short space of time and with little training to support decisions (the '*bricolage*' issue), French educators unanimously signalled the need for dedicated training in SEN. Some French mainstream teachers reported feeling that not only have they received insufficient preparation in inclusive approaches during initial training, but they are expected to accept SEN pupils into their classes with little institutional support. Each time this point is raised, mainstream educators cycle back full circle to the need to improve ITE, as a way of alleviating the pressurised situation that teachers currently find themselves in. For example, one mainstream school leader described this in some detail, also reporting that post-Covid conditions further highlight a place for such training, as follows:

You should know that at the moment, with Covid but also with the reform of high schools, teachers are extremely busy and feel a form of saturation in terms of work and tasks to be carried out. And when we present to them a situation of a pupil with special needs, when we tell these teachers that the integration of this pupil into their class will require adaptations and effort on their part, they often experience this as a constraint, and as an additional workload given to them, when they are already overwhelmed by the tasks linked to their usual functioning. And so it can be a bad experience. We sometimes get reactions saying, 'Not only are we not trained, but this pupil should not be welcomed

into this school because we are not able to fully meet his needs, and a more suitable learning structure may be necessary.

I think that every teacher should receive specific training on handling special needs. And that he should have a sort of toolbox that he would master before even meeting the pupil and the need, so as not to have to do so at the beginning of the year, when he will find himself in this situation for the first time. (Interview with school leader, Lycée A, 08/12/2021).

So where can mainstream teachers access appropriate training for inclusion? As the following extract from a SEN teacher educator testifies, there are now multiple actors in the field of teacher education, but little requirement for mainstream teachers to enrol in inclusion training as part of ongoing professional development. Specialist training institutions such as INSEI have to walk a fine line between responding to teachers' needs to work more effectively with diverse pupils on the one hand, and on the other hand not crossing into territory where INSPE is administratively responsible for training the nation's teachers. This point was raised in the following way:

Our mission is to try to meet the needs of teachers who are faced with the challenge of inclusive education, and all its related issues. So we are trying to find the training format that will be the most relevant.... But foremost it is INSPE which, on paper, must normally provide initial and ongoing training for teachers. (Interview with teacher educator, INSEI, 31/03/2022).

This finding cycles back to the separatist approach to teacher training that continues to characterise the French system. Paradoxically, while significant expertise in adapted pedagogies for SEN pupils is in evidence, both within teacher training institutions and in the terrain, the separation of targeted, applicable, pedagogy-based inclusion training away from state-run ITE programmes means that mainstream teachers continue to feel under-prepared. Furthermore, SEN expertise that could be integrated into ITE programmes, in order to better prepare teachers for working with diverse learners and SEN pupils, remains marginalised to non-state teacher training institutions (such as INSEI) and segregated off into specialised learning centres (such as the centre for deaf education that participated in this study).

Conclusion

In conclusion, from these interviews with French educators, it has been possible to compare the views and experiences of mainstream and SEN specialists as relates to teacher preparation for inclusive practices in schools. We reiterate several points to take forward from this part of the ETIS study, as follows.

Firstly, education leaders and teachers in both sectors unanimously agree that initial teacher education for inclusive approaches is currently insufficient at a national level. Mainstream teachers commented that they feel unprepared to meet the needs of SEN pupils, and that additionally they are seeing a growing number of pupils with learning, social, psychological and economic needs, post-Covid. As a result, teachers find themselves under pressure to respond to a wider range of diverse needs amongst pupils, yet feel ill-equipped and under-prepared due to a lack of formal training in inclusive approaches.

Secondly, both mainstream and SEN teachers reflected that there are logical links between topics already addressed within ITE, pointing out that inclusion modules could naturally flow on from these: language development and deafness / secularism (*laïcité*) and intercultural awareness, as examples. This is a point that we highlight as a key recommendation arising from this research. While SEN training is currently compartmentalised into a specific area of further teacher education, teachers interviewed in this study clearly identify a need for more initial preparation in this area. Without having received this training, teachers describe their attempts to 'DIY (*bricolage*)' solutions for SEN pupils, and their resulting professional frustration.

A central question arising from this study is therefore, does the national teacher education institution value inclusion as an educational ethos? If so, could inclusive pedagogies eventually be better prioritised within

initial teacher education programmes? The French paradox is that schools are required to include all pupils, even SEN pupils with high needs or very specialised learning needs such as deaf children; however, SEN training for mainstream teachers remains minimal and generalised. This creates an ongoing dilemma for teachers in French schools — how can they effectively include diverse pupils in their classrooms, without the support of training in inclusive classroom practices and particular types of SEN (Joly, 2016; Brun, 2018; Smythe, 2023)?

A further paradox is found in the willingness of SEN educators to contribute their expert knowledge and time to ITE programmes; yet teacher education institutions seem hesitant to seize this opportunity to improve SEN content within programmes, through incorporating experienced SEN educators into initial training delivery. The quality of learning for the sizeable population of SEN pupils in French schools is therefore an area in which further understanding could be developed in an inter-sectorial approach (Colin et al, 2021).

Reflecting on these findings, we can say that in part these interview responses suggest that the French teacher education institution itself has yet to adopt a fully inclusive approach. This is evident in the top-down decision-making processes about content development in ITE programmes, which could better take into account teachers' interest in more targeted inclusion training. This study suggests that consultative processes with in-service teachers could provide valuable information to INSPE about teachers' needs currently in schools, and the type of training that teachers see as necessary for improving their teaching experiences and learning outcomes for pupils.

Finally, the separatist framework of French teacher education may be a model that is under-serving the education system and its teachers, at this time. School teachers describe an education system that may not be evolving apace with the changing needs of France's diverse population. SEN sector teachers and teacher educators express frustration at their inability to make a systemic difference to education in France. Instead, they experience limitations imposed on their attempts to share expert SEN knowledge within inflexible and seemingly indifferent state structures. Nonetheless, both INSEI and special education experts in the terrain continue to interact with the state education sector wherever possible, delivering training to individual teachers who are receptive.

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Disclosure statement

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