

TIINA KIVIRAND

The Meaning of Inclusive Education
and Supporting the Implementation
of Inclusive Education through
In-service Training Course
in the Estonian Context



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	7
LIST OF TABLES	7
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	7
LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS	8
1 INTRODUCTION.....	9
1.1 Research problem	9
1.2 Aim of research	11
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	13
2.1 Concept, meaning and practice of IE.....	13
2.1.1 Development of the concept and definition of IE at the international level	13
2.1.2 Interpretations of the meaning of IE and factors influencing it.....	14
2.1.3 Implementing IE in practice.....	18
2.2 Factors affecting meaningful implementation of IE at the school level	19
2.2.1 Whole school approach to development activities on IE.....	19
2.2.2 Role of and collaboration between professionals	21
2.2.2.1 Role of school teachers	21
2.2.2.2 Role of support specialists	22
2.2.2.3 Role of school leaders.....	23
2.2.3 Training school professionals in implementing IE at the school level	25
3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	27
3.1 Methodological standpoint	27
3.2 Research context.....	30
3.2.1 Conceptualization and implementation of IE in the Estonian context.....	30
3.2.2 School professionals' qualification requirements and tasks in implementation of IE in Estonia	32
3.3 Sample, data collection and analysis	34
3.3.1 Study 1 – Understanding the meaning and operationalization of IE in the Estonian context.....	34
3.3.1.1 Sample of Study 1	34
3.3.1.2 Data collection and analysis of Study 1	34
3.3.2 Study 2 and Study 3 – Designing and implementing the training course, schools' development activities	36
3.3.2.1 Description of the training course.....	36

3.3.2.2	Sample of Study 2 and Study 3	38
3.3.2.3	Data collection of Study 2 and 3	39
3.3.2.4	Data analysis of Study 2	42
3.3.2.5	Data analysis of Study 3	43
3.4	Ethical issues	44
3.5	Researcher's reflection	44
4	RESULTS	47
4.1	Study 1 – Meaning and operationalization of IE and the factors considered important by specialists who train or advise schools on IE ...	47
4.1.1	Understanding the meaning of IE by specialists who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE	47
4.1.2	Factors considered important for the implementation of IE by specialists who train or advise schools	48
4.2	Study 2 – Designing and implementing the training course	51
4.2.1	Participants' evaluation of the training course.....	51
4.3	Study 3 – Development activities on IE carried out by schools and factors affecting it	54
4.3.1	Cross-case analysis	55
4.3.1.1	Similarities and differences between the two cases in development activities carried out during the in-service training course	55
4.3.1.2	Similarities and differences between the two cases regarding factors affecting school development activities on IE	56
5	DISCUSSION	60
5.1	Discussion of the key findings.....	60
5.1.1	Understanding the meaning and operationalization of IE in Estonian context.....	60
5.1.2	Supporting schools in implementing IE through an in-service training course for school teams	64
5.2	Limitations and further research	71
5.3	Conclusions and Implications.....	72
	SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN	77
	APPENDICES.....	83
	REFERENCES.....	89
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	98
	PUBLICATIONS	101
	CURRICULUM VITAE	169
	ELULOOKIRJELDUS.....	170

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Dimensions of the meaning of IE	17
Figure 2. School-wide approach to development activities for IE.....	26
Figure 3. Understanding the meaning of IE and factors affecting the implementation of IE	51
Figure 4. Dimensions of school’s development activities and factors that influence them	59
Figure 5. Aspects of implementing IE in practice	71

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Overview of the RQs and studies	29
Table 2. Overview of the training course	37

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EASNIE – European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

IE – Inclusive education

SEN – Special educational needs

SENCO – Special educational needs coordinator

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

The dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referenced in the text by the corresponding Roman numeral:

- I. Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., Lepp, L., & Malva, L. (2020). Kaasava hariduse tähendus ja tõhusa rakendamise tegurid Eesti kontekstis: õpetajaid koolitavate või nõustavate spetsialistide vaade. [The meaning of inclusive education and factors for effective implementation in the Estonian context: a view of specialists who train or advise teachers]. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri*, 8(1), 48–71. <https://doi.org/10.12697/eha.2020.8.1.03>
- II. Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., Lepp, L., & Tammemäe, T. (2021). Designing and Implementing an In-Service Training Course for School Teams on Inclusive Education: Reflection from Participants. *Education Sciences*, 11, 166. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educi11040166>
- III. Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., & Lepp, L. (2022). Enhancing schools' development activities on inclusive education through in-service training course for school teams: a case study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 824620. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.824620>

Author contributions:

- Article I: formulating the research questions, conducting the study, collecting the data, analysing and reporting the data, and writing the article as a main author in cooperation with other authors.
- Article II: formulating the research questions, conducting the study, collecting the data, analysing and reporting the data, and writing the article as a main author in cooperation with other authors.
- Article III: formulating the research questions, conducting the study, collecting the data, analysing and reporting the data, and writing the article as a main author in cooperation with other authors.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research problem

Inclusive education (IE) has been a very topical issue both in Estonia and internationally during the last few decades. At first glance, it seems that the meaning of IE is clearly formulated in international agreements (Kinsella, 2020; Loreman, 2009); however, several studies have pointed out that the concept of IE is interpreted very differently across countries (Cameron, 2017; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). Arcidiacono & Baucal (2020) argue that the implementation of the principles of IE in practice has proven to be a challenge in most countries because it requires profound transformation in the way we think about education, developing educational policy and organizing everyday school life in practical terms. It seems that agreements have not been reached regarding these questions in many countries. This is problematic because a common understanding of the meaning of IE and the creation of a common vision for the development of an inclusive school culture is considered a primary precondition for the academic and social inclusion of all learners (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

The principle of IE, according to which students with special educational needs (SEN) study in regular classes with their peers, has been established at the legislative level in Estonia since 2010 (Basic Schools and ..., 2010). Statistics indicate that the percentage of pupils with SEN in special schools has decreased since the Act came into force, but at the same time, the number of students enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools has increased (Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem, 2021). This refers to the fact that the concept of IE has not been implemented in practice. Furthermore, studies conducted in Estonia revealed that attitudes towards IE vary among specialists. Even more so, teachers and leaders of educational institutions understand the meaning of IE differently (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Räis et al., 2016). Specialists who train or advise teachers have an important role to play in shaping the attitudes towards and concept of IE, as their own understanding of IE influences the organization of the learning of students with and without SEN in school practice. So far, there has been no evidence on how these specialists themselves understand the meaning of IE and what factors they consider important for implementing IE in the Estonian context. Therefore, knowledge of their perceptions on IE is essential.

In addition to a common agreement on the concept of IE and its operationalization, it would also be necessary to support the implementation of IE in Estonian schools systematically. Literature reviews show that inclusive school development has mainly focused on teachers' readiness to cope with SEN students in an inclusive classroom (Hansen et al., 2020; Santiago et al., 2016). Teachers' knowledge and skills play an important role in implementing inclusive classroom practice, but there are many factors that influence the meaningful implementation

of IE at different levels of education systems. The OECD (2003) report emphasizes the principle that educating pupils with SEN is a matter for the whole school, not just for individual teachers. Ainscow and Miles (2008) have pointed out that in addition to what is happening at the class level, the commitment of the whole school staff is equally important. This complex and multifaceted act requires a consciously targeted effort and particular ways of leading (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Moreover, Ainscow and Sandill (2010) emphasize that cultural changes in the workplace affect the way teachers view their work and their students. In order to design inclusive schools, it is important to enhance cross-professional collaboration (Hansen et al., 2020). A school-wide training approach, collaboration between teachers and support professionals and collaboration and support from school leaders and resource centres, including universities, promote the implementation of several characteristics of IE at the school level (Harris & Jones, 2017; Juma et al., 2017). Furthermore, Bjørnsrud and Nilsen (2019) have pointed out that collective learning paves the way for meaningful implementation of IE at the school level with an aim to ensure the academic and social achievements of SEN students.

Thus, schools' self-development activities are considered one of the most important criteria for removing barriers to the implementation of IE (Ainscow, 2020). The need for school-wide team training in this process has been highlighted by several researches (Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018; Ricci et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2018). Therefore, in-service training courses for school teams aiming to harmonize the understanding of IE and support system-wide school development activities that involve both organizational culture and inclusive policy practice at the school level should be paid more attention, especially in the Estonian context. Although the principle of IE is the guiding principle of education in Estonia (Basic School and ..., 2010, 2018), schools have faced problems with its implementation in everyday practice. Developing teachers' pre-service and in-service training courses has been in focus during the last few years, but there is no evidence that long-term training courses on IE for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) have been conducted or explored in Estonia. To fill the abovementioned gap and enhance the implementation of IE in the Estonian context, it is necessary to shape a common perception of IE and support schools through in-service training courses in the implementation of inclusive practice. Therefore, this doctoral thesis focuses on the meaning of IE and supporting school development activities in the implementation of IE through a long-term in-service training course designed for school teams in the Estonian context.

In addition, scientific literature on team training approaches for developing inclusive practices at schools is limited, therefore the results of the current doctoral thesis could be informative in the development of in-service training courses in this area.

1.2 Aim of research

The overall **aim** of this study is to find out:

- how specialists who train or advise schools in implementing IE understand the meaning of IE; and
- how to support the implementation of IE in the context of an in-service training course designed for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders).

Based on the first part of the aim of this study the research questions are as follows:

RQ 1: How do specialists who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE understand the meaning of IE?

RQ 2: What factors do specialists who train or advise schools consider important for the effective implementation of IE?

To support the training and cooperation of all professionals working at the school, an in-service training course was designed for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders). In regard to the second part of the aim of the current study, the following research questions were set:

RQ 3: How do teachers, support specialists and school leaders evaluate the in-service training course designed for school teams to improve the implementation of IE at the school level?

RQ 4: What development activities do schools carry out in implementing IE during the in-service training course?

RQ 5: What factors affect the development activities planned and carried out in the implementation of IE during the in-service training course?

To answer these research questions, three empirical study were conducted. Research questions 1 and 2 are addressed in Study 1, which examined how specialists who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE understand the meaning of IE and the factors affecting its implementation in the Estonian context. The results of this study are addressed in the original publication I:

Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., Lepp, L., & Malva, L. (2020). Kaasava hariduse tähendus ja tõhusa rakendamise tegurid Eesti kontekstis: õpetajaid koolitavate või nõustavate spetsialistide vaade. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri*, 8(1), 48–71.

The third research question is addressed in Study 2, which focused on designing and implementing an in-service training course for school teams on IE and identifying how participants experience learning as a team in this training course. The results are presented in the original publication II:

Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., Lepp, L., & Tammemäe, T. (2021). Designing and Implementing an In-Service Training Course for School Teams on Inclusive Education: Reflection from Participants. *Education Sciences, 11*, 166.

The fourth and fifth research questions are addressed in Study 3, whose aim was to find out how the in-service training course for school teams influences school development activities in the implementation of IE at the school level and what factors affect it. The results of this study are presented in the original publication III:

Kivirand, T., Leijen, Ä., & Lepp, L. (2022). Enhancing schools' development activities on inclusive education through in-service training course for school teams: a case study. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 824620.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The following chapter gives a theoretical overview regarding the topic of this study. First, the concept, meaning and practice of IE are described. The international understanding and implementation of IE is then introduced. Finally, the factors affecting the meaningful implementation of IE are provided.

2.1 Concept, meaning and practice of IE

2.1.1 Development of the concept and definition of IE at the international level

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, Article 26 of which enshrines the right to education for all, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) are the basis for IE (UNESCO, 2005), the term “inclusive education” began to spread internationally after the 1994 Salamanca Declaration. As a collective agreement of 92 countries, it was decided to follow the development of the concept of an inclusive school, which would ensure high-quality learning opportunities in mainstream schools for all students, regardless of their special educational needs or disabilities. It was emphasized that “*regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all*” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 3). Thus, the trend to promote an IE approach was adopted. The key issues highlighted were legislative change, appropriate teaching strategies, flexible curricula, the provision of resources and support systems, and the involvement of parents and the community. Further clarifications have been added to the definition of IE, emphasizing that IE is an ongoing process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to provide quality education for all students, targeting all students at risk of dropping out of the education system (UNESCO, 2005, 2009).

Since the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (Estonia ratified in 2012), the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools or kindergartens was highlighted once again because inclusion of this target group was not successful enough. Article 24 of the Convention deals with the right of persons with disabilities to education based on equal opportunities and obliges States Parties to ensure IE at all levels of education (UN, 2006). Thus, in addition to all target groups at risk of dropping out of education, more specific attention was paid to the inclusion of learners with disabilities.

Considering the challenges and obstacles to the implementation of IE, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities decided in 2016 to supplement the recommendations of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The document clarified the content of Article 24 and the obligations of the states that have ratified the Convention. The need to make

a clear distinction between exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion was emphasized, which would allow a clearer understanding of the meaning of IE (UN, 2016). The following definition of inclusion was defined:

Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences (ibid., p. 4).

With the aim to realise this vision of IE in practice, guidelines and core features of IE were presented in this document, focusing on a whole person and system approach, including culture, policy and practices. Hereby, the main idea is to prevent any form of direct or indirect academic and social exclusion, which inevitably occur in both the segregating and integrating educational arrangements of SEN students (ibid.).

At the European level, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), which was set up in 1996 and currently has 31 Member States (European Agency for ..., 2020), also contributed to the implementation of the idea of IE. The efforts of the Agency's member states to define the concept of IE have culminated in the following policy statement: "*All learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers*" (European Agency for ..., 2022a, p. 1). In the same document, it is emphasized that policies governing IE systems must set out a clear vision for IE and that the concept of IE must take an approach that improves educational opportunities for all learners. The operational definition of an inclusive setting refers to education in which officially defined SEN students study alongside their peers in mainstream classes for at least 80% of the school week (European Agency for ..., 2022b).

Thus, there is a long history of defining the concept of IE, focusing on different target groups and describing inclusive settings. To ensure high-quality education for all learners (SEN and non-SEN students), necessary changes in the education system have been emphasized as one of the important prerequisites. Due to the complexity of the topic concerning the concept and vision of IE, several studies still indicate that the meaning of the concept of IE is not clearly understood (Haug, 2017; Magnusson, 2019; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). This will be the focus of the following subsection.

2.1.2 Interpretations of the meaning of IE and factors influencing it

There are various interpretations of the concept of IE in scientific literature on the field of IE. Several authors argue that there is no uniform and clearly agreed upon definition and interpretation of IE (Cigman, 2007; D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009). Furthermore, it is emphasized that perceptions of the goals of IE and the

philosophy and practice of teaching vary from country to country and even differ within countries (Haug, 2017; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). The main reasons for this are that the policies and practices of education systems have evolved over time in very different contexts (Meijer, 2003); implementing IE is therefore very individual across countries (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009).

As described in the previous subsection, regarding the target group of learners affected by IE, two divisions are identified: **a narrow definition** and **a broad definition**. The *narrow definition* of IE is aimed only at students with officially identified SEN by multidisciplinary teams, in particular at the opportunities for students with disabilities to attend the school of their residence (Arduin, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2011; Haug, 2017). In this approach, the meaning of inclusion is that students with SEN should have access to differentiated programmes and individualized support that correspond to their abilities and interests (Anastasiou et al., 2015; Haug, 2014). In contrast, the *broad definition* covers all students, including marginalized groups who are at risk of dropping out of education (Thomas, 2013), and focuses on diversity and how schools are prepared to consider the specificities and needs of all students (Armstrong et al., 2011). This approach incorporates a much more extensive spectrum, which in turn requires a more complex and new approach in practice (Haug, 2017). Thus, one of the bases for the interpretations of the concept of IE is the target group, which is considered important in the context of inclusion.

In addition, researchers have interpreted the meaning of IE with different emphasis based on other aspects as well. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) synthesized how inclusion has been defined by scholars and distinguished four types of understanding of IE:

- (a) Inclusion as placement of students with disabilities in need of special support in a general education classroom.
- (b) Inclusion as meeting the social and/or academic needs of students with disabilities.
- (c) Inclusion as meeting the social and/or academic needs of all students.
- (d) Inclusion as creation of communities with specific characteristics.

However, the most common approach to IE is understanding that all students, regardless of their differences or barriers, attend a classroom with their peers in a school of their residence and receive quality instruction, intervention and support in order to succeed in the curriculum (Alquraini, 2012). The democratic values and social justice are hereby the dominant ideas; most European countries strive to implement IE based on the abovementioned approach (Haug, 2017). Although this idea has been adopted in most European countries, the background information of the member states of the EASNIE shows that the interpretation of the concept of IE still differs. The most important differences lie in the definition of the target group, which should be the primary focus in the context of IE, and in the ways of implementation, i.e. whether and to what extent they should learn

alongside their peers in the same classroom (European Agency for ..., 2022b). Meijer and Watkins (2016, p. 3–6) have pointed out four main factors that hinder the development of a common understanding of the context of IE.

- 1) *Language used.* Practitioners and policymakers in different countries may not refer to the same thing using terms, concepts and procedures when talking about IE and its related ideas. Specific terms do not always have a direct translation from English into other European languages and vice versa.
- 2) *Legislation followed.* Countries have formed historically and culturally different frameworks for the legislation and provision of general and special needs education. It has been explained that separate legislative policies for general education and special education do not support a common understanding of the meaning of IE in many countries.
- 3) *Conceptions held by policymakers.* Interpretations of terms such as special need or disability differ. Data collected by EASNIE indicate that there are big differences in identification rates of students with special needs or disabilities between countries. Ramberg and Watkins (2020) found that the main reasons for this are the differences in assessment procedures and financial mechanisms related to support inclusion and/or special education between countries.
- 4) *Conceptions held by practitioners.* As the term “inclusion” has been on a journey from being mainly associated with learners with SEN or disabilities to a far wider range of learners who may be at risk of dropping out of education, agreements on what settings are considered inclusive are still not so clear.

Göransson and Nilholm (2014) have concluded based on literature review that too much attention has been paid to how schools and classrooms should be in the context of IE ideology, but less to recognizing that implementing IE is largely a political issue. Thus, two dimensions conceptualizing the meaning of IE should be distinguished: **vertical dimension** and **horizontal dimension** (Haug, 2017). *Vertical dimension* means the target group of students considered that should be included: students with disabilities or all kinds of SEN, or whether all students are concerned at all. *Horizontal dimension* is a matter of the coherence of different parts of educational systems (state, local and school policy; levels of education; support for students and teachers; collaboration) to inclusion, as pointed out by several researchers and guidelines (see Haug, 2017; Leijen et al., 2021; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020; Schuelka & Engsig, 2020; UN, 2016).

However, systematizing and discussing definitions and understandings of IE is still relevant to support the development of inclusive education systems (Florian, 2014; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020). Recently, Nelis and Pedaste (2020) conducted a comprehensive systematic literature review to identify studies reporting key characteristics of IE in the context of early childhood education and developed a model that describes the various philosophical (access to education, human rights,

sense of belonging, social integration) and practical aspects (participation in education, support systems, child development) of IE. Based on the analysis, they proposed key characteristics of IE at five levels:

- 1) physical involvement, social involvement and psychological involvement at the child level;
- 2) teacher characteristics and teaching at the teacher level;
- 3) family involvement and family support at the family level;
- 4) organizational culture and structural characteristics of the organization at the institutional level;
- 5) policy and legislation, cooperation, resources and monitoring and evaluation at the country level.

The following definition of IE was formulated:

Inclusive education is an educational approach that considers human rights and provides all children with access to high quality education in a learning environment where children feel social integration and belongingness in their wider social network despite their special needs; it is achieved by the meaningful participation of all children and personalized support in the development of each child's full potential (ibid., p.145).

To sum up the different interpretations of the meaning of IE and the factors influencing it, on the one hand, interpretation of the meaning of IE may depend on the target group in focus and which kind of definition – narrow or broad – is used to define IE. On the other hand, key characteristics of IE and coherence among core features of educational systems are important in both cases (see Figure 1).

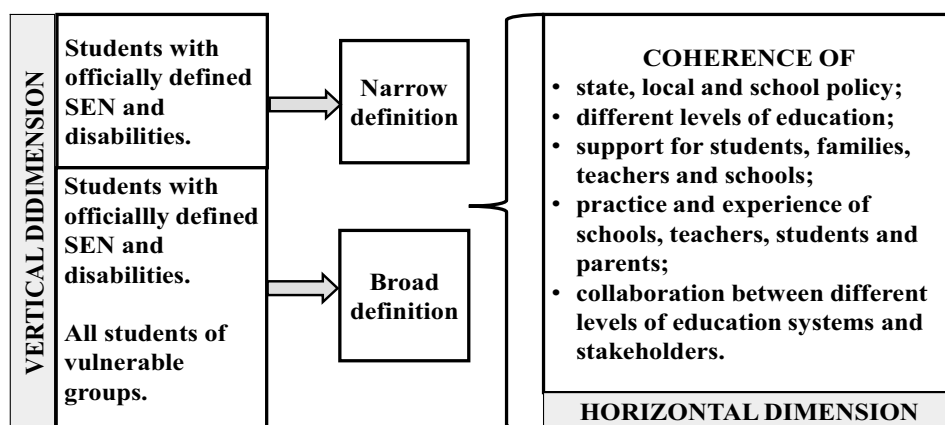


Figure 1. Dimensions of the meaning of IE

In this study, interpretation of the concept and meaning of IE is based on the broad definition of IE and the characteristics described by Nelis and Pedaste (2020) as pointed out above.

As the concept of IE consists of multifaceted aspects, the ways in which it is applied in practice are challenging and therefore various options for the implementation of IE and the study arrangements of SEN students are seen across countries.

2.1.3 Implementing IE in practice

Cigman (2007) distinguishes three approaches to inclusion in practice: the radical approach, the moderate approach, and the UNESCO approach. A radical approach means closing special schools and placing all students in mainstream schools. This means that schools need to be reorganized to meet the needs of all learners. The moderate approach accepts that special schools may remain for students with certain special needs, mainly those who require a particular type of assistance and support (e.g. students with severe disabilities or multiple disabilities). UNESCO's approaches do not discuss the existence or closure of special schools but focus on the equal right of all students to education. Thus, the implementation of IE is largely focused on the distribution of SEN students by type of educational institution.

Data collected by EASNIE and other international organizations (e.g. OECD, UNESCO) indicate that inclusive educational structures have been developed around the world, but there are currently very few educational systems in which almost all students learn together in inclusive settings (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). In only a few cases have school systems managed to move towards a radical approach with high inclusivity rates (over 90%), such as in Italy, Norway, Iceland, Malta and the United States (European Agency for ..., 2022b; Entrich, 2021). Although the data show that the proportion of SEN students in inclusive settings has considerably increased between 2008 and 2018 in most societies, the moderate approach to implementing IE has remained prevalent and even challenging for those countries in which special education traditions have been rooted for a long time (Entrich, 2021; Loreman, 2013). Countries such as Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia can be cited as examples (European Agency for ..., 2022b). Fitzgerald et al. (2021) highlight that despite the efforts towards the implementation of IE, the moderate approach (duality of inclusive education and special education) is also applied in such cases when students with SEN study in mainstream schools. This means that although the number of students in special schools is decreasing, the proportion of students studying in special classes in schools of their residence is increasing. The EASNIE statistics (European Agency for ..., 2022b) show such a trend, for example, in Finland, Hungary, Switzerland as well as Estonia.

According to scientific literature, the widely given reasons for this seem to be the interpretation of the vision of IE, the complexity of practice, beliefs about the effectiveness of IE and the insufficient training of teachers and support for schools

(Ainscow 2020; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Haug, 2017; Leijen et al., 2021). Entrich (2021) argues that more attention should be given and studies conducted on how countries' differentiation of SEN students, political conviction for inclusion in a whole society, financial distribution and cost effectiveness of special education and inclusive education influence the successful implementation of IE.

As no country has achieved 100% inclusion (European Agency for ..., 2022b), several authors have discussed whether and where there are limits to inclusion (Hansen, 2012) and whether teaching is only justified in separate educational institutions for certain special needs, both for ethical reasons and to guarantee their right to quality education (Hornby, 2015). Thus, the dilemma of IE, i.e. "inclusion for some" or "inclusion for all", is still under discussion in many countries. A study conducted by Leijen et al. (2021) shows the possibilities for bridging these two narratives and emphasizing the need for constructive dialogue in society as whole in order to remove barriers between somewhat opposing discourses. They propose closer cooperation between specialists in general pedagogy and special pedagogy to improve the ability of regular schools to deal with students with SEN and thus achieve better preparation for their future independent life. This approach is in line with the so-called *inclusive pedagogy framework* developed by Florian (2014), according to which the individual differences of learners are considered in the teaching and learning process, but marginalization is avoided if some learners require different treatment. According to the principle of inclusive pedagogy, the grouping of learners based on ability is not used, the learning environment is suitable and available for all learners, and differentiation takes the activities of all learners into consideration. Adherence to these principles primarily requires a change in thinking in regard to the nature of inclusion (*inclusion for all, not for some*), changes in teachers' beliefs that teaching some learners is not their responsibility, and knowledge of the appropriate teaching methods to apply in an inclusive classroom (Florian, 2014; Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Therefore, ensuring high-quality education for all learners in an inclusive manner requires an approach involving state-level political will (Haug, 2020; Leijen et al., 2021) and changes in teaching, but the interaction and coherence of several factors at the school level are also important, as detailed below.

2.2 Factors affecting meaningful implementation of IE at the school level

2.2.1 Whole school approach to development activities on IE

The whole school approach to increase capacities within schools through school-level self-development and learning activities that promote the removal of barriers in everyday inclusive practice has seen equally important by several researchers (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for..., 2017; Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018). Although the implementation of IE is a complex multi-layered socio-cultural process within the educational system (Mitchell, 2015; Schuelka & Engsig,

2020), and external factors influence the way schools organize their work, Ainscow (2020) has pointed out that increasing the capacity of mainstream schools must be in focus.

Markina et al. (2020) have analysed the structural and functional features of IE management systems over the world and found that qualitative changes in all aspects of implementing IE in practice are crucial. The issue of school culture should hereby be central to the process of development activities at the school level because organisational culture reflects the values, norms and language we use in the context of IE (Kinsella, 2020). Eredics (2018) has defined school culture as “*the collective norms, attitudes, ideals and behaviours that characterize a school and are demonstrated by school leadership, teachers, students and the larger community*” (p.16). Here, it is important that all students regardless of their ability and background are included – in general education classes and school events or out-of-school activities. According to Eredics (2018), the prerequisite of an inclusive culture is the positive attitude of all parties to ensuring access to mainstream school and valuing different learners in inclusive learning, which in turn requires a willingness to change one’s approaches and make adjustments, if necessary, so that all learners have the opportunity to participate and develop. Booth and Ainscow (2002) highlight two important aspects in shaping the culture of an inclusive educational institution: shaping inclusive values and shaping an inclusive community. The key characteristics of these two aspects are widely recognized in many countries because the wellbeing and learning outcomes of SEN students primarily depends on the extent to which attention is paid to an inclusive culture at the organizational level (Kinsella, 2020; Pavlović Babića et al., 2018). Therefore, a very clearly formulated meaning, vision, values and the goals set in schools’ political documents as a result of cultural changes at the organisational level affect the whole school’s development activities on IE (Ainscow & Sandill, 2008; Eredics, 2018; Mitchell, 2015).

Cultural changes are closely related to and interdependent with structural changes at the organizational level. Schuelka (2018) points out that inadequate school resources and facilities are often an obstacle to the implementation of IE. To ensure an inclusive school environment, both human resources and financial resources should be distributed in ways that benefit all students and staff (Bešić et al., 2016). According to Schuelka (2018), one of the key elements of the successful implementation of IE is a well-designed implementation strategy that includes a clear plan for how to organize everyday school life, ensuring that all students have possibilities to achieve their potential learning outcomes and social inclusion. A starting point for the development process should be evaluating the strengths and challenges of an organization. Well-known measurement tools, such as the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), offer a set of evaluative tools as well as a developmental application to facilitate increased inclusion in school systems. In addition, the EASNIE has developed self-evaluating resources for schools considering an ecosystem model for developing inclusive school systems (European Agency for ..., 2017a). According to this model, key indicators from the meso-system (school-level), such as leadership, continuum of support,

collaboration, professionalism of staff, overall ethic and family involvement, are combined with the exo-system around the school, i.e. community commitment and working together with other professionals outside of schools. Finally, macro-system indicators like state legislation and policy, governance and funding, monitoring and quality assurance are considered.

To make both cultural and structural changes at the school level, Kinsella (2020) describes nine characteristics of an inclusive school. These are: consultative process around the issue of inclusion, development of an inclusive school ethos, physical accessibility, school-wide coordinated response to SEN provision, appropriate expertise available in school, appropriate level of support, maximum communication between SEN personnel and mainstream teachers, inclusive curricula, and effective management of change.

Thus, to be successful in developing an inclusive school, it is important that all professionals at the school level are educated, know their roles and take responsibility for contributing to this challenging process. In the following, an overview of the role of teachers, support specialists and school leaders in the implementation of IE is presented.

2.2.2 Role of and collaboration between professionals

2.2.2.1 Role of school teachers

Due to learners' perspective in the implementation of IE, high expectations are set for teachers. First, teachers are expected to have a positive attitudes towards all learners, but they also should have the skills and knowledge to deal with the individual needs of learners in an inclusive classroom (European Agency for ..., 2012; Santiago et al., 2016). As the most important guiding principles, the EASNIE document (2012) states that teachers should:

- take responsibility for all learners;
- accept differences and different learning outcomes;
- notice learners' need for support and organize the availability of support in cooperation with colleagues, while avoiding labelling learners;
- acquire knowledge of several teaching methods that could be used effectively in an inclusive classroom setting;
- cooperate with colleagues and parents;
- maintain a positive attitude towards innovations and be willing to develop personally and professionally.

Thus, the implementation of IE presents a range of challenges for teachers; specific knowledge is needed to cope in inclusive classroom. However, teachers alone cannot be responsible for successful inclusion. The importance of forming

a collaborative network of professionals working in the school is increasingly emphasized (European Agency for ..., 2022c; Pavlović Babića et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that teachers who are dissatisfied with the efforts to implement inclusive teaching in their schools often acknowledge the inadequacy or total lack of collaborative teamwork at the school level (Juma et al., 2017; Lawrence-Brown & Muschaweck, 2004). More specifically, the development of teachers' agency related to the promotion of IE depends on cooperation at the school level (Miller et al., 2020). Collaborative teamwork, in turn, contributes to the development of collective agency, which is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of inclusive education at the school level (Lyons et al., 2016). Furthermore, teachers have a justified expectation of support and cooperation with support specialists, which is the topic of the next subsection.

2.2.2.2 Role of support specialists

The possibility of cooperation between teachers and support specialists plays an important role in the implementation of meaningful and learner-centric IE, which in turn supports the formation of a cohesive school community (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). The results of mapping the situation of support specialists' provision in European countries indicates that the definition of the term "support specialist" differs across countries. These specialists can be special educators (also named special teachers, special pedagogues, support teachers), social pedagogues, social workers, speech and language therapists, psychologists and more (European Agency for ..., 2019a). This study focuses primarily on the role of special pedagogues and social pedagogues. According to Perez et al. (2017), both specialists play an important role in cooperation with teachers and other school staff to ensure students' academic and social inclusion. If teachers and support specialists work closely together, their confidence and competence in teaching students with SEN in an inclusive classroom increases (Dyssegaard & Larsen, 2013). In this regard, Pettersson and Ström (2017) emphasize that in cooperation between teachers and support specialists, each party learns from the other's practices, which in turn helps to improve the involvement of SEN learners.

Evidence shows that many countries face the challenge of how special pedagogues could work to support teachers in inclusive classrooms (Florian, 2019; Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). The transition from integration to inclusion requires the necessary conceptual change for modifying the role of support specialists concerning inclusion. Traditionally, special pedagogues have taught students with special needs in isolated conditions outside the classroom (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019; Prater, 2010). Thus, there is more and more discussion about how the role of support specialists is changing in the implementation of IE (European Agency for..., 2019a; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Sundqvist, 2019). In addition to the traditional individual support for children with special needs, the role of support professionals is growing to include supporting, advising and collaborating activities (Perez et al., 2017). Besides to counselling teachers, special educators and social pedagogues must also advise other parties, such as parents and school leaders

(Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Sundqvist et al., 2014). Despite this trend, the actual practice of cooperation still turns out to be unclear (Venianaki, 2015). Lack of time, the need for more resources as well as an unclear work profile are highlighted as the most important factors hindering implementation of IE in the work of a support specialist (Bešić et al., 2016). Moreover, Sundqvist et al. (2014) emphasize that in order to be effective in counselling services, support specialists should be aware of the tasks that are expected of them. This, in turn, assumes that support specialists need relevant training.

As school leaders should also be team members developing inclusive practices at the organizational level, the role of school leaders in implementing IE is discussed.

2.2.2.3 Role of school leaders

School leaders play a critical role in creating conditions that positively influence school performance in inclusive practice (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018; Amin & Yasin, 2018). The core functions of school leadership by Skoglund and Stäcker (2016) are setting directions, human development, and organisational development.

The headmaster, as a leader, can define the school's vision and direction to ensure the appropriate learning and wellbeing of all students (European Agency for ..., 2019b). It is important that they prioritize equity and excellence throughout their decision-making, which affects learner groupings, staff allocation, access to curriculum and accreditation opportunities and resource allocation (Harris & Jones, 2017; Khaleel et al., 2021). In addition, when implementing IE, school leaders have to fulfil various responsibilities, both with the implementation of the national education policy and with the representative functions of the school in a broader plan (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Khaleel et al. (2021) emphasize that, in essence, inclusive school management means designing a school-wide system and policy that consider the various needs and abilities of students. Therefore, the school principal has a decisive role in valuing diversity and ensuring quality education for all learners (European Agency for ..., 2019b).

Ainscow (2020) highlights that in order to implement inclusive practices in school, it is important to create an environment based on inclusive values. Therefore, the head of the school should first be committed to inclusive values and guide other school employees to follow them as well. Many scholars (Schuelka et al., 2018; Sherab et al., 2015) emphasize that schools are successful and provide high quality education to all students as school leaders themselves own and run the school with a vision, hold inclusive values and motivate the entire staff. In addition, the headmaster's own attitude towards inclusive education is transferred to the school's staff, thus influencing all their attitudes. Even more, educational leaders' values, beliefs and perceptions towards inclusive education have a large impact on how other stakeholders view inclusion (Al-Mahdy & Amam, 2017; Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016). Thus, school leaders should take a leading role in promoting positive attitudes towards IE and the innovation

process for applying IE in everyday practice (Urton et al., 2014). To be successful in this process, they should build a strong leadership team and distribute tasks among stakeholders, ensuring sustainability and secure engagement (European Agency for ..., 2017b).

Therefore, school leaders have an important role in shaping an inclusive school, and high expectations are placed on them. Studies have shown that successful inclusive practices presume from school leaders using a combination of three leadership styles: transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). In the case of transformational leadership style, school leaders inspire others by shaping a shared vision and implementing cultural and structural changes that support high-quality learning and teaching (Day et al., 2016). Shared management focuses on developing people; a variety of tasks and responsibilities in the development process are delegated to school staff (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Jones & Harris, 2014). Liasidou and Svensson (2014) point out that in the case of shared leadership, leaders emerge in smaller teams and thus leadership extends to teachers or other school staff members. Finally, instructional leadership prioritizes setting clear goals, focusing on completing the curriculum and achieving students' learning outcomes (Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2015; Gumus et al., 2018).

Several studies (Khaleel et al., 2021; Porakari et al., 2015) have emphasized that school leaders need to be trained in order to be capable in shaping an inclusive school culture and developing everyday practices. Here, it is important that they themselves understand the meaning and importance of IE and its complex implementation (Khaleel et al., 2021). A study conducted by Pedaste et al. (2021) showed that school leaders who have completed special education training courses have a rather negative attitudes towards IE. Forlin et al. (2013) have pointed out that by completing training focused on the topics of IE, positive attitudes towards IE are formed and confidence in the importance of IE increases. In addition to the above, it is necessary to develop the skills of school leaders on how to implement changes when transforming a so-called ordinary school into an inclusive school (Porakari et al., 2015).

In conclusion, although studies have shown that school leaders principally value the philosophy of inclusion (Murphy, 2018; Pedaste et al., 2021; Ráis & Sömer, 2016), problems have arisen when it comes to their knowledge, skills and leadership styles in designing inclusive organizations (Amin & Yasin, 2018; Carter & Abawi, 2018). Thus, there is a need for training as teachers, support specialists and school leaders.

2.2.3 Training school professionals in implementing IE at the school level

Planning and enhancing teachers' pre-service and in-service education programmes has become one of the key policy priorities in working towards the vision of IE and providing high-quality education for all learners (OECD, 2020). Reviews of international studies have shown that the majority of teacher training programmes have been of short-term duration and focused on a specific type of SEN and differentiated teaching (Florian, 2019; Kurniawati et al., 2014). This means that so far, teacher education in inclusive education has often focused on increasing teachers' specific didactical competences to cope with certain kinds of special educational needs children. It has been stressed that professional development for teachers should pay more attention to building on collaboration and collegial interactions (Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). According to Forlin and Sin (2017), the development of teacher competencies as a curriculum for professional learning requires consideration of a number of key principles, including:

- engaging teachers, leaders and other stakeholders in dialogue regarding which competencies are required;
- developing a vision for professional learning that is integrated into system-wide and school-wide planning.

Lozano (2007) has pointed out that the school-wide training approach is useful in eliminating the view that the implementation of IE practices is the responsibility of only those teachers who have been trained for this purpose. Instead, shared responsibility and collaboration among all staff members are important for successful inclusion. Several studies have highlighted that teachers, support specialists and school leaders are the most important staff members through whom to achieve the goals of inclusive education (European Agency for ..., 2019 a, 2019 b, 2021; Ricci et al., 2020). Thus, to ensure the successful implementation of IE, a need for school-based professional development programmes has been highlighted by several researchers (Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018; Sharma et al., 2018; Ricci et al., 2020).

To sum up the factors affecting the meaningful implementation of IE at the school level (see Figure 2), the school-wide approach and response are crucial for shaping school culture and improving self-development activities on IE. This in turn depends on the effective management of changes at the organizational level; all school staff (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) play an important role in this process. To be successful, all parties need professional collegial training opportunities.

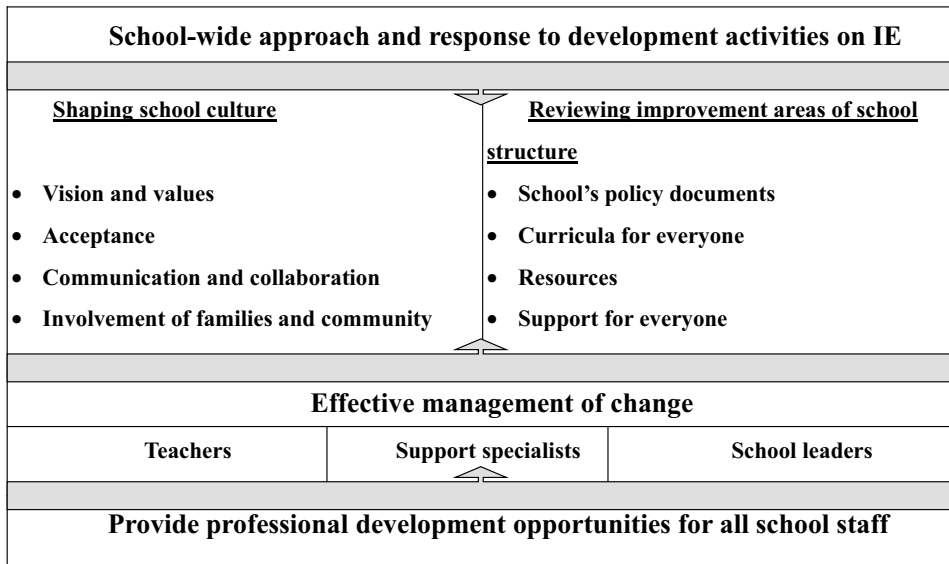


Figure 2. School-wide approach to development activities on IE

Thus, it is important to develop and implement in-service training programmes targeting school teams that involve several professionals working at a school with the aim to shape a common perception of the meaning of IE and support schools in implementing IE in practice.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section presents an overview of the research methodology of this dissertation. First, the methodological standpoint is introduced. Next, the research context is described by discussing the conceptualization and implementation of IE in the Estonian context and schools professionals' qualification requirements for IE in Estonia. Sample, data collection and methods of analysis are then explained separately in Study 1; Studies 2 and 3 are presented together.

3.1 Methodological standpoint

To answer the research questions, the qualitative research method was chosen and conducted because according to Gillham (2000), it enables the empirical exploration of complexities that are beyond scope and the individual experiences of people as well as the true conduct of the group or organisation. Therefore, a qualitative research method is appropriate for exploring people's perceptions about IE and documenting how the implementation of IE is influenced by a specific context, i.e. in-service training for school teams.

This study is guided by the social-constructivism paradigm, often described as the *interpretivism* worldview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Researchers conducting studies based on interpretivism "*focus on specific context in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants*" (Creswell, 2012, p. 60). As knowledge of IE has been determined by politics, ideologies, beliefs and values, this worldview fits the research topic.

The interpretivism paradigm is also influenced by the philosophy of phenomenology (Mack, 2010), which focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Since this study focused on how participants interpreted their experiences about learning as a team while engaging with the specific in-service training course, it can be said that the study was also guided by elements of phenomenological philosophy.

This study also involves elements of *pragmatism*. This worldview enables to focus on the problem and outcomes being studied and the practical implication of the research (Patton, 1990). More precisely, the pragmatism approach enables to focus on such outcomes as actions, situations and consequences of the study (Creswell, 2007) and analyse the application of the study, i.e. what works in which circumstances and what the solutions to solve the problem might be in a real life context (Patton, 1990). According to Cherryholmes (1992, p. 14), "*pragmatists agree that scientific research always occurs in social, historical, political and other contexts*". The diversity of this study (practical implementation of IE) fits well with this approach. Additionally, the pragmatism approach promotes the use of multiple methods of data collection and the analysis of data in a way that reflects both the researchers and the participants (Creswell, 2007). In the context

of this doctoral thesis, a case study methodology has also been used, which is compatible with pragmatism.

Based on methodological approach described, three qualitative studies were conducted. The overall aim of the study was to find out how specialists who train or advise schools in implementing IE understand the meaning of IE in Estonia and explore how to support the implementation of IE in the context of an in-service training course designed for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) in the Estonian context. The research questions, the focus of the studies, the participants, the data collection instruments used, the analysis methods and how these were addressed with the studies are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Overview of the RQs and studies

Research Questions	Focus of the study	Participants	Data collection instruments	Data analysis	Articles
1. How do specialists who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE understand the meaning of IE? 2. What factors do specialists who train or advise schools consider important for the effective implementation of IE?	Study 1: meaning and operationalization of IE in practice	15 specialists who train or consult schools in the implementation of IE	Individual semi-structured interviews	Qualitative inductive content analysis	Article I
An in-service training course for school teams was designed and carried out to improve the implementation of IE at participating schools					
3. How do teachers, support specialists and school leaders evaluate the in-service training course designed for school teams to improve the implementation of IE at the school level?	Study 2: designing and implementing the training course	27 team members from 4 schools; 4 school leaders, 19 teachers, 4 support specialists	Group interviews in the middle and at the end of the training course* Open-ended questionnaire after the training course*	Qualitative inductive content analysis	Article II
4. What development activities do schools carry out in implementing IE during the in-service training course?	Study 3: schools' development activities and factors affecting it	A sub-sample of Study 2: 14 team members from 2 schools; 2 school leaders, 10 teachers, 2 support specialists	Group interviews in the middle and at the end of the training course* Open-ended questionnaire after the training course* Schools' policy documents Course homework assignments Research diary	Thematic content analysis and cross-case comparison	Article III
5. What factors affect the development activities planned and carried out in the implementation of IE during the in-service training course?					

*The same data were used in Study 2 and Study

3.2 Research context

This section provides an overview of IE policy and schools' professionals requirements and tasks in implementing IE in the Estonian context in order to better understand the background against which Studies I, II and III were conducted.

3.2.1 Conceptualization and implementation of IE in the Estonian context

In Estonia, the principle of IE has been enacted in the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act since 2010. It was clearly stated that according to the principle of IE, students with SEN generally attend a regular class with their peers at their school of residence (Basic Schools and ..., 2010). The legislation was amended in 2018 and the principle of IE remained but without a clear definition. In the amended version of the abovementioned Act, it is emphasized that high-quality general education follows the principles of IE and is equally accessible to all persons, regardless of their social and economic background, nationality, gender, place of residence or special educational needs (Basic Schools and ..., 2018). The political trend of IE is described on the website of the Ministry of Education and Research as follows: *“The guiding principle of Estonian study organization is the implementation of IE. IE refers in particular to the fundamental human right to quality education”* (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2022, para 2). When referring to the conceptual context of IE, reference is made to the approach and principles of the EASNIE. From the point of view of the organization of studies, it is emphasized that the principles of IE consider the individual academic and social abilities and needs of students in the educational institution of the student's place of residence and ensure the availability of necessary support systems (ibid.). Moreover, in the Estonian Education Strategy 2021 – 2035 (Ministry of Education ..., 2021), the right to quality and inclusive education is targeted.

Literature review indicates that studies conducted by researchers on IE in Estonia (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Leijen et al., 2021; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020; Pedaste et al., 2021; 2020; Räs et al., 2016) mostly refer to internationally agreed definitions on the concept and meaning of IE based on UNESCO's definitions, the Salamanca Statement and the EASNIE position (see subchapter 1.1.1.). However, studies have indicated that teachers and heads of educational institutions in Estonia interpret the implementation possibilities of IE differently. In the school context, inclusion has been understood as learning in a regular class with peers as well as learning in a special class in a regular school (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Räs et al., 2016). Thus, regarding the concept of IE and its content, the focus is on high-quality educational opportunities, though different interpretations have remained for practical purposes. This may be explained by the fact that legislation provides schools with different implementation options for organizing studies for students with SEN, including composing special classes or groups according to students' abilities or special needs (Basic Schools and ..., 2018). Therefore, it

can be said that in Estonia, a moderate approach is used in the implementation of inclusive education in practice, as described in subchapter 2.1.3.

The definition of a student with SEN has changed from 2010 to 2018 in legislation. The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act in 2010 defined SEN on a broad spectrum, i.e. all students who needed support or different study arrangements for studying in a regular class or who studied in a special class or special schools were defined as SEN students (Basic Schools and ..., 2010). The amendments to the Act in 2018 define students with SEN as only those who, by the official decision of the out-of-school multidisciplinary team, need enhanced or special support (Basic Schools and ..., 2018). However, a three-tiered support system is applied for students who need some additional or extra support with the principle of early intervention.

- (1) The first tier of support – *general support* – provides easily accessible support for students who need some additional support from teachers or support specialists to achieve the study outcomes described in the state curriculum. The decision to apply general support is made by teachers and support specialists working at school with parental agreement.
- (2) The second tier of support – *enhanced support* – is applied to a student who, due to their permanent learning difficulty or psychological or behavioural disorder or another health condition or disability, needs services. This is recommended by an external multidisciplinary team.
- (3) At the third tier of support – *special support* – an external recommendation is also required and provided to a student who, due to their severe and permanent mental disorder, intellectual or mental disability or multiple disabilities, needs permanent combined support in the form of educational, social and/or health services (Basic Schools and ..., 2018).

Thus, assessment procedures from out-of-school specialists play a significant role in applying students' enhanced or special support. The reason for this is the fact that the state financial system for the provision of services is based on SEN students and depends on the extent of the need for support. For example, the education cost coefficient for students with SEN who need enhanced support compared to non-SEN students is 2.0; for students with SEN who need special support, it is 4.0 (Basic Schools and ..., 2018).

The following is a brief overview of how study organization has changed over the last decade for students who are officially defined as SEN by a multidisciplinary out-of-school specialist team. According to the Estonian Information System of Education Statistics, the number of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools has increased since the law enacted the principle of IE in 2010. However, with that, the number of students enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools has also increased. Statistics show that the share of students with officially defined SEN in special schools has decreased from 2.72% to 2.17% from 2010–2020, while the share of students with SEN in special classes in mainstream schools has increased from 0.99% to 2.10% (Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem, 2021). Thus, the

principle that students with SEN should study in schools of their residence has been widely accepted in Estonia, but study organization for officially defined SEN students is more often seen in small groups or in special classes. The reasons here are different. On the one hand, the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary School Act (2018) states that, in order to fulfil the goals formulated in a student's curriculum, learning support groups or level groups or special classes may be formed. On the other hand, even though the Estonian education system leaves great autonomy in the hands of local authorities and school leaders to organize compulsory education in their schools, including the provision of special needs education (Basic Schools and ..., 2018), in the study organization for students with SEN, segregated study arrangements are traditionally preferred. Furthermore, the existence of special schools has a long tradition in Estonia and very often parents prefer special schools or special classes if their child needs enhanced or special support.

A characteristic feature of the Estonian education system is the fact that there are two national curricula at the level of compulsory education: National Basic School Curriculum (Põhikooli Riiklik Õppekava, 2011) and National Basic School Simplified Curriculum (Põhikooli Lihtsustatud Riiklik ..., 2010). There are three parts in the National Basic School Simplified Curriculum: one is for students with mild learning difficulties; the other ones are for students with moderate learning difficulties and for students with severe and profound learning difficulties. These two national curricula for basic schools differ largely in terms of the content of subjects, which in turn makes it difficult to teach those SEN students who are assigned a simplified curriculum in an inclusive classroom.

3.2.2 School professionals' qualification requirements and tasks in implementation of IE in Estonia

The qualification requirements for Estonian teachers require all elementary and high school teachers to have a master's degree or a corresponding qualification and a teacher's profession as well as knowledge of the Estonian language in accordance with the requirements set out in the Language Act (Direktori, õppealajuhataja, õpetajate ..., 2022). The competence requirements of teachers are defined in the professional standard, according to which the main role of the teacher is to empower the student, to be their development partner, so that meaningful learning can take place and a learning path that opens the potential of all learners can be formed. This requires the teacher to be able to notice the individual needs of the learners, including due to their special educational needs, to apply suitable teaching methods, to adapt the teaching material if necessary and to cooperate with support specialists and other participants (Kutsestandardid: õpetaja tase 7, 2020). In addition, through practical experience and further training, the teacher can acquire additional competences in supporting a learner with special educational needs, in which three areas are distinguished: awareness of the principles of implementing IE, adaptation of learning and, counselling (Kutsestandardid: õpetaja tase 7, 2020). In the development of teacher education in

Estonia, it has been agreed that teacher professional standards are the basis of training programmes for both the teacher's initial education and their in-service training (Õpetajakoolituse raamõuded, 2019).

In the Estonian context, the qualification requirements for special pedagogues are a professional master's degree or an equivalent qualification or the profession of a special pedagogue and knowledge of the Estonian language in accordance with the requirements set out in the Language Act (Direktori, õppealajuhataja, õpetajate ..., 2022). Due to the professional competence, the task of the special pedagogue is to determine the level of the student's development and learning skills and to find out the factors affecting their development and learning needs.

The qualification requirements for a social pedagogue are at least a professional bachelor's degree or the profession of a social pedagogue and knowledge of the Estonian language in accordance with the requirements set out in the Language Act (Direktori, õppealajuhataja, õpetajate ..., 2022). The task of the social pedagogue is to assess the student's social skills and analyse the factors hindering their age-appropriate ability to act; to develop and support the student's communication skills and social competence; and to map the social and school-related problems of students that arise at school, coordinating activities for their prevention and solution. In addition, both special pedagogues and social pedagogues, according to their competences, have to advise teachers in planning and conducting the student's studies in an inclusive classroom; advise parents in supporting their child's development; and advise school heads in organizing inclusive practices (Tugispetsialistide teenuse kirjeldus ..., 2018). Like teachers, the qualification requirements of the aforementioned support specialists are established by the professional standard (Kutsestandardid: eripedagoog, tase 7, 2018; Kutsestandardid: sotsiaalpedagoog, tase 6, 2018). According to law, the availability of both specialists must be guaranteed for students at the school level if the need arises (Basic Schools and ..., 2018).

The qualification requirements for school principals are a master's degree or an equivalent qualification and management competencies (Direktori, õppealajuhataja, õpetajate ..., 2022). School leaders are expected create a learning culture and environment that supports learning and wellbeing, skilfully managing and implementing changes and upgrading the role of support specialists and their cooperation with teachers (Basic Schools and ..., 2018). The school head appoints a person whose duty is to organise cooperation between support specialists and teachers (hereinafter special educational needs coordinator (SENCO)) for the purpose of supporting the teaching and development of a learner with special educational needs. The SENCO supports and instructs a teacher in identifying special education needs and makes proposals to the teacher, parent and school head regarding further educational work, the application of measures offered by the school in support of the development of the learner or conducting further investigations, thereby cooperating with teachers and support specialists (Basic Schools and ..., 2018).

The following is an overview of the sample, data collection and analysis. Study 1 is presented separately and Studies 2 and 3 are explained together.

3.3 Sample, data collection and analysis

3.3.1 Study 1 – Understanding the meaning and operationalization of IE in the Estonian context

3.3.1.1 Sample of Study 1

Purposeful sampling was used in Study 1 because this enabled the collection of data from people who “*can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination*” (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 213) and had in-depth knowledge about particular issues (Cohen et al., 2007). In the context of this study, it was important that participants had practical experience in the implementation of IE in the Estonian school system. During the sampling process, it was considered important to include participants who had similar work experience (teacher educator and counselling experience) but at different levels of the education system. Therefore, the possible varied sample was selected to collect data from the widest range of perspectives on a topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As the aim of Study 1 was to investigate how specialists who train or consult schools in implementing IE themselves understand the meaning of IE and what factors they consider important in the implementation of IE, it was decided to select participants who had teacher educator experience, external counselling experience or in-school counselling experience in the field of study organization of students with SEN in mainstream schools. The author of this doctoral thesis contacted possible candidates and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The sample consisted of 15 specialists who had worked in the field of IE for at least five years with different experiences. More specific background data of participants are presented in **Article I**.

3.3.1.2 Data collection and analysis of Study 1

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. Fontana and Frey (2005) have pointed out that semi-structured interviews are the best way to understand other people and gather the independent thoughts of everyone. In addition, semi-structured interviews are suitable when open-ended questions may require follow-up queries (Adams, 2015).

The author of this doctoral thesis prepared the initial interview questions, which focused on two main themes: how the meaning of IE is understood in the Estonian context; and how to ensure effective implementation of IE. The initial plan for the interview was introduced and discussed with the international working group on IE (researchers from the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, the University of Oslo, and the University of Stavanger), which formed the research team in the context of this study. It was suggested that in order to understand the participants’ understanding of the meaning of IE, the interview questions of the first theme should more thoroughly focus on how the interviewees understand IE in the context of study organization of SEN students. After this discussion, the

interview questions were supplemented. For example, after the question “*How should IE be implemented in school?*” the question “*How should learning aimed at learners with SEN be implemented in the context of IE?*” was added. In the second part, there were questions about the possibilities of how to effectively implement IE. There were no suggestions added to this part of interview and questions like “*What do you think needs to be done for IE to be implemented in the classroom?*”, “*What are the day-to-day barriers to supporting all students in an inclusive classroom?*”, etc., remained the main questions. To better understand the opinions of the interviewees, they were asked to give examples of their experiences. The full interview plan is presented in **Appendix 1**.

Face-to-face interviews with specialists were conducted in 2019 by the author of this doctoral thesis. All pre-selected interviewees who met the criteria were contacted personally, the purpose of the research and the reason why they were selected was explained, permission was requested for recording, and confidentiality requirements were confirmed. The average duration of the interviews was 50 minutes. All interviews were transcribed in full to ensure that all information was preserved. The transcribed text was 219 pages (font Times New Roman, line spacing 1.5). Interview transcripts were loaded into QCMap software (qcamap.org.).

Inductive content analysis was used to analyse the results. This method allows for interpretation of the results during the process of coding and then grouping the information (Cresswell, 2012). To ensure the quality of the research, repeated coding (Yin, 2014) was done and a co-coder was involved as an analyst of the research questions. Finally, both coding and categorization decisions were discussed with the co-investigators until a consensus was reached for distinguishing the main and subcategories for both research questions.

For example, for research question 2 (What factors do specialists who train or advise schools consider important for the effective implementation of IE?) from the codes “knowledge about IE”, “special pedagogic knowledge”, “curriculum adaptation skills”, “cooperation skills”, “communication skills”, etc., the subcategory “knowledge of teachers” was formed. The main categories were then formed from the subcategories. For example, subcategories “knowledge of teachers”, “knowledge of professionals who support teachers” and “different possibilities for training” formed the main category “training needs”.

3.3.2 Study 2 and Study 3 – Designing and implementing the training course, schools' development activities

3.3.2.1 Description of the training course

The training course for school teams was developed in the context of a larger in-service teacher education programme that aimed to enhance the implementation of IE in mainstream schools. The training programme was designed based on the inclusive teacher competence requirements (European Agency for ..., 2012; Kutsestandardid: õpetaja tase 7, 2020) and the tasks of support specialists and school leaders (Basic Schools and ..., 2018; Tugispetsialistide teenuse kirjeldus, 2018). In addition, three necessary dimensions to inclusion within the school, such as producing inclusive policies, creating inclusive cultures, exploring inclusive practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), in addition to the characteristics of inclusive schools (European Agency, 2017a; Kinsella, 2020), were considered. The whole training programme, which included 60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), was developed and piloted in close cooperation between the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, which are the leading universities providing teacher training in Estonia. In addition to teachers who had to complete the entire programme (60 ECTS), courses were developed to support specialists who had the opportunity to participate in the whole programme or complete 29 ECTS. One of the courses of this long-term training programme *Inclusive Education*, with the volume 10 ECTS, was planned for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) (see **Appendix 2**). In this dissertation, the focus is on this particular course. A short overview of the training course is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Overview of the training course

Course name:	Inclusive Education
Volume: 10 ECTS	60 academic hours of contact training 200 hours of independent or group activities
Duration:	9 sessions* : 1 st teaching semester in the first year (2019) – 1 session 2 nd semester in the first year (2020) – 5 sessions 1 st semester in the second year (2020) – 2 sessions 2 nd semester in the second year (2021) – 1 session
Objectives:	The overall aim of the course is to develop positive attitudes, skills and knowledge in regard to the concept and meaning of IE and its effective implementation through inclusive school development strategies.
Description of the content of the training course:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Vision and school culture</u>: the definition and meaning of IE; diversity and social justice; inclusive school culture; indicators of inclusive schools. • <u>Legislative framework and school policy</u>: state and school policy for IE; schools policy documents and provision of support system. • <u>Learning environment and resources</u>: physical environment; personnel and financial resources. • <u>The professionalism of staff</u>: roles and competencies of school staff in implementing IE. • <u>Collaboration</u>: internal and external collaboration. • <u>Quality assurance</u>: quality assurance indicators for composing schools' strategic development plan.
Learning outcomes:	After completing the course, participants are able to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) understand the approach and implementation of IE; 2) analyse the key components of IE and their combined effect; 3) know the main models of collaborative networks and know their role in the implementation of inclusive practice; 4) be committed to the professional development of inclusive school culture and practice; 5) use their readiness and knowhow to design an inclusive school.

*One session lasted one academic day and included 6–8 academic hours of contact teaching followed by independent or group activities.

In the context of this study, the meaning of IE is based on the concept and operational definition worked out by the EASNIE (see subchapter 2.1.1). More precisely, all students, despite their age, special needs and abilities, have the right to high-quality education in a school of their residence in the same classroom with their peers for the majority of their weekly workload. At the same time, teachers or support specialists give additional support in an inclusive classroom but also individually or in a small group, if needed. Nevertheless, it is also accepted that students with very specific and profound disabilities may need extra support and therefore study opportunities in special schools or special classes. However, social inclusion must be ensured, which prepares them for an independent life.

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

Before the training course, the author of this thesis personally visited all schools with the aim to find out the schools' background information and the participants' expectations for training and enable a co-creative approach to designing the training course. Vyas et al. (2014) have pointed out that the multi-disciplinary co-creation in the design process, which involves trained professionals and members from the community with whom the project is focused, can lead to harmonious working, co-owned decisions and the conceptual inner values of a practical research framework.

The training course was conducted by two trainers: a leading trainer (the author of this thesis) from the University of Tartu and an assistant trainer from Tallinn University.

More detailed information of the content and process of the training course is presented in **Article II**.

3.3.2.2 Sample of Study 2 and Study 3

Samples of Study 2 and Study 3 are presented together because the two studies partly used the same sample. After designing a training course, it was decided to select four school teams to participate.

A purposeful study sample based on predetermined criteria in line with the research objective (Guest et al., 2006) was also used in Study 2 and Study 3. After designing the training course, the training was introduced in two Estonian regions, and four schools were offered the opportunity to participate. In the case of **Study 2**, the first selection principle was the desire of the school itself to participate in the training course and thereby improve the implementation of IE at the organizational level. However, for two schools, the recommendation to

participate in the training course was also given by the local government running these schools. The interest of the local government was intended to raise the capacities of schools that had the readiness to teach all students in their schools of residence. As the training course was designed with the aim to support schools in school-wide development activities on IE, the second selection criterion was that the training is attended as a team, including teachers, support specialists and school leaders.

Finally, the qualitative study sample consisted of the team members of the four schools that participated in the training: from each school four to six teachers, a support specialist (special teacher or social pedagogue), and a school principal or a deputy principal. The total number of participants was 27. Background data from schools and study participants are presented in **Article II**.

In Study 3, sampling was based on the case study methodology, according to which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A multiple case study was used because it allows the researcher to explore several aspects that characterize the cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the use of multiple cases provides a better understanding of why each individual case functions and how and allows deep insight into an issue or the reframing of a generalization (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Thus, schools that had a clear initiative to carry out school development activities in the field of IE at the organizational level and focused on working out a long-term development plan during the training course were chosen. The fact that the number of students (including SEN students) at the basic education level would be similar and managed by the same municipality was also a basis for selection. The last important criterion was the participation of the headmaster themselves, not the deputy principal, in the training course.

Finally, the sample was narrowed down from four schools participating in the training course to two schools in order to obtain purposeful information and build an in-depth picture of the research problem, i.e. development activities on IE carried out during the training course and factors affecting it. Thus, the sample of Study 3 consisted of two of participating schools selected as cases with 14 participants. More detailed background data from study participants are presented in **Article III**.

3.3.2.3 Data collection of Study 2 and 3

In Study 2 and 3, data were collected in different ways. Semi-structured interviews with the participants of the training course were conducted in the middle and at the end of the training course. In addition, an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the training course was conducted. These data were used in both Study 2 and 3. Additional data were collected in Study 3. More precisely, school policy documents and course home assignments were documented, and a research diary was kept. In the following, all data collection instruments and procedures are introduced.

Semi-structured group interviews were conducted twice during the training course. After the sixth session, both trainers conducted semi-structured school-based group interviews separately with all school teams in June 2020. Due to the COVID-19 emergency, interviews were held via Zoom. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) have noted that group interviews can be effective in educational research because group members have worked towards a common goal and can therefore support and complement one another. According to Arksey and Knight (1999), interviewing several people at once results in more complete and reliable information because it is possible to identify relationships between group members, e.g. how participants support, influence, complement, agree or disagree.

The purpose of the interviews was to get feedback on the current content and organization of the training in order to make modifications, if necessary. Therefore, the interview consisted of four parts, in which the opinions of the trainees were sought on:

- (1) the content of the training course (*How do you assess the necessity of the topics covered in the training course? What have been the most important topics for your school?*);
- (2) the volume of the training course (*How do you evaluate the volume of the training course? Which topics would you have liked more time for?*);
- (3) the organizational side of the training course (*How do you evaluate the organizational side of the training course? How do you evaluate the usefulness and amount of homework?*);
- (4) the team training on IE (*How do you evaluate participation in the training course as a team from your school? How do you evaluate participation in the training course with teams from other schools?*). The plan for the interview in the middle of the training course is presented in **Appendix 3**.

After the end of the training (January 2021), semi-structured group interviews were conducted again in order to gain a final assessment of the training course and to investigate what development activities the schools implemented during the training and what factors influenced the implementation of these activities. For example, it was asked: *What were the most important problems in the implementation of IE before the start of the training? What development activities have you implemented during the training course? What have been the supporting factors within the school in the implementation of development activities? What kind of support would you need from outside the school in planning further activities?* The plan for the interview at the end of the training course is presented in **Appendix 4**.

The preliminary questions of both interviews were prepared by the author of this doctoral thesis, which were then coordinated with the assisting trainer and supervisors of this doctoral thesis. The semi-structured interviews at the end of the training course were also conducted by two trainers in the Zoom environment. The participation of two trainers in the interviews made it possible to collect data

more thoroughly because the interviewers complemented each other in obtaining more detailed information. The average length of both interviews was one hour per school team.

The individual open-ended questionnaire was conducted at the end of the training course after the semi-structured interviews. The individual open-ended questionnaire as an additional method was chosen to complement the group interviews and collect individually important information, which is a usable method in qualitative study (Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2002). The questionnaire was prepared in cooperation with the author of the study and the supervisors. The open-ended questionnaire was constructed so that all participants had the opportunity to express their opinion on the role of various professionals who participated in the training course. For example, the participants of the training course had to answer the following questions: *What has been my role in the implementation of the planned development activities? What are the most important factors influencing collaborative school development activities? How can a trainer support in-school development activities in the implementation of IE?* (see **Appendix 5**).

In Study 3, additional data were collected because the use of the qualitative case study research method presumes to collect data in several ways to prove the results of the study (Yin, 1994). To explore how in-service training for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) influences schools' development activities in the implementation of IE and the factors supporting it, additional data were collected in the following stages and formats:

1. *School policy documents.* A desktop analysis of available school policy documents on IE was carried out in the beginning and at the end of the training course with the aim to map the preliminary situation and find out the final modifications. This method made it possible to understand how schools' inclusive education policies have changed and are reflected in formal documents. Documents also provide a formal framework, to which the researcher may have to relate the informal reality (Gillham, 2000). As the researcher must be aware of the purpose for which the documents were prepared, according to which rules and by whom (Mason, 2002), this study was based on documents that are mandatory for schools by law and must be publicly available. In the Estonian context, these documents are the school's development plan, the curriculum, the support system for SEN students and the internal rules of the school.
2. *Homework assignments of the training course.* The homework assignments submitted during the training course were purpose-built documents for the study, which provided an additional opportunity to get answers to the research questions. According to Mason (2002), document data collection allows the researcher to obtain answers to research questions from ontological and epistemological positions. In the context of this study, it was important to consider that the development activities of IE in schools include both the phenomenon or aspects of social organization and the process itself. In addition, Gillham (2000) has pointed out that this method makes it possible

to keep track of what the case study participants *said* and what they actually *did*. Yin (1994) also points out that for case studies, the most important use of documents is confirming and expanding evidence from other sources. Therefore, during the training, the school teams had to map and analyse the current situation regarding the topics covered during the training (e.g. inclusive school culture, inclusive environment and resources, the role of various specialists and the need for training) and define the areas that need development in both the short-term and long-term perspective.

3. *Researcher's diary*. Keeping a researcher's diary is considered an integral part of the research, supporting the design, process and results of the entire study. In addition, reading the researcher's diary data supports the novice researcher especially in the research process and helps to reflect on the results of the research in a more open and honest way (Engin, 2011). The researcher took notes throughout the training process and analysed what happened during the training, e.g. which methods were successfully used, how school teams worked, which topics were important and which should have been paid more attention to. For example, an extract from the researcher's diary: *In the process of analysing the inclusive school culture, some teachers remained passive. In the following trainings, more attention must be paid to ensuring that all team members are actively involved in group work (21.11.2019).*

In conclusion, all data were collected during and after the training course (see **Appendix 6**).

3.3.2.4 Data analysis of Study 2

In Study 2, data were analysed using qualitative inductive content analysis in the same manner as described in Study 1. The transcribed interviews and open-ended questionnaires (115 pages, font Times New Roman, line spacing 1.5) were uploaded to the web application QCAMap and the author of this study marked the meaningful items and formulated codes. Then, the co-interviewer made some additional codes in the codebook. After the initial analysis, the interviewers specified the names of the codes and the subcategories and categories formed on their basis by agreement. In the last stage, the supervisors of this doctoral thesis were also involved in the coding process and the final subcategories and main categories were coordinated. For example, regarding RQ 3. (*How do teachers, support specialists and school leaders evaluate the in-service training course designed for school teams to improve the implementation of IE at the school level?*) six subcategories emerged: “necessity of all topics”, “comprehensive approach”, “optimal values”, “more in-depth look at the schools’ curriculum”, “separate approach to supporting students at the secondary level of education”, “more information about effective practice at the international level”, which in turn formed a main category “content and volume of the training”.

3.3.2.5 Data analysis of Study 3

In Study 3, the form of the embedded analysis of different units was used (Yin, 1994). More precisely, qualitative thematic analysis was used for data analysis. The qualitative thematic analysis method of data analysis enables the researcher to describe the meaning of qualitative data systematically and guided by rules, but in a flexible way (Schreier, 2012). In this study, thematic analysis based on the main topics and expected learning outcomes of the training course but also according to Vaismorandi et al. (2013) allowed common themes to arise in the data gathered.

The units of the analysis were the schools' policy document analysis in the beginning and at the end of the training course, homework assignment analysis throughout the training course, semi-structured interviews in the middle and at the end of the training course, open-ended questionnaires at the end of the training course and the research diary. Thus, the preliminary situation, process and outcomes of schools' developmental activities and the supporting or hindering factors in the field of IE were followed and analysed.

The data analysis procedure of Study 3 consisted of three phases.

Preparation phase. The aim of the preparation phase was to prepare all collected data for qualitative exploratory case analysis. According to Braun & Clark (2006), familiarising the data is crucial in this phase. Therefore, all existing data (semi-structured interviews, schools' policy documents, homework assignments of the training course, open-ended questionnaires and notes of the research diary) were documented separately by schools. The total volume of the data was 110 pages in the first case and 108 pages in the second case.

Case by case analysis phase. In the second phase, qualitative thematic analysis was conducted separately by case. All documented materials were repeatedly read case by case again with the aim to select the meaning units by RQ 4 (*What development activities do schools carry out in implementing IE during the in-service training course?*) and RQ 5 (*What factors affect the development activities planned and carried out in the implementation of IE during the in-service training course?*). More specifically, condensed meaning units were coded separately by case. The list of codes included the name of the code, a description and examples of the meaning units. The author of this dissertation made initial notes on ideas in regard to the grouping of sub-themes and main themes. The sub-themes and main themes that emerged were discussed with the supervisor and some changes were made. For example, in the case of RQ 4 (*What development activities do schools carry out in implementing IE during the in-service training course?*), from the initially defined main topics "school political documents", "supporting students" and "supporting teachers", it was decided to form one main topic "structural change". To describe the factors that affected school development activities (RQ 5), the sub-themes "efficient cooperation between members of the training team", "cooperation with all teachers at the school", "out-of-school cooperation" and "cooperation with other schools" formed a main theme "collaboration".

Multiple case analysis phase. In the final phase, the cross-case analysis was conducted using qualitative meta-analysis synthesis to compare and synthesize themes and sub-themes, with a triangulation of findings across cases to support the validity of the study (Mays & Pope, 2000). The focus was on pattern establishment and generalisations. At the end of this phase, the analysis found out the similarities and differences of the cases and the main results were framed to present the results as an in-depth portrait of the cases (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The results of the cross-case analysis are presented in **Article III**.

3.4 Ethical issues

With an aim to protect participants' autonomy, privacy and justice (Creswell, 2007), the principles of ethics were followed during all phases of all studies.

According to good research guidelines for Estonian researchers (Hea Teadustava, 2017), the purpose of the study and the data that would be collected, used and stored at the beginning of the study were explained to all participants. It was also confirmed that all data are treated confidentially and that the data collected on paper or in digital form are kept secure. It was stated that participation in the study was voluntary; all participants had the right to withdraw from the study before the end without inconvenient consequences. It was clarified that all data will be used for scientific purposes only and the results will be presented in generalized form, following all the requirements of the ethical study, which do not allow participants to be identified. All participants agreed to the terms and gave their written informed consent.

Before the interviews, the consent of participants for recording was asked. It was explained that all names and sensitive data that are identifiable will be removed and replaced with codes. While conducting group interviews, we considered that ethical issues may arise related to confidentiality, in particular from the point of view of the interviewees (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Therefore, good confidentiality practice was explained to the interviewees before the group interviews. More precisely, it was clarified that a variety of personal opinions are expected and accepted, and participants were asked not to discuss the personal information shared during the interview with others. In addition, the interview questions did not address sensitive personal information.

3.5 Researcher's reflection

In qualitative research, the researcher plays an important role to ensure the reliability of the study. According to Cresswell and Poth (2018) researchers' past experiences, biases, positions and perspectives may influence the conduct of the study and the interpretation of the results. Below, the personal position of the author of this study is described and impartiality is explained.

Throughout my professional experience, I have been involved in the study organization of students with SEN. Having graduated from the University of Tartu and receiving professional qualifications as a special pedagogue and speech therapist, I started working in a special school. Twenty years working in the school allowed me to experience the role of both teacher and school leader. Working with students and great colleagues, these were the best years of my life. However, as a school leader for many years, my team and I faced several challenges. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was a need to carry out both cultural and structural changes in Estonian schools. This gave me the opportunity to experience the complexity of change management. When conducting the training for this study, I relied on my experience and tried to treat all school teams with respect, considering their specific characteristics and various needs for development activities. This in turn made it possible to develop reliable and open relationships between me as a trainer of the course and the trainees. I perceived this most clearly during the interviews, when the members of the school teams gave honest and diverse feedback on the training course.

Another no less important aspect from the time I worked in the special school was experiencing prejudiced attitudes towards students with SEN, both from the community and from other schools and seeing how easily children with different abilities and needs are segregated. It changed my way of thinking and shaped my belief in the importance of the principles of IE. Although, while conducting the study, I realized that changing people's attitudes towards IE and their understanding of the meaning of IE is not an easy task. So, I tried to maintain that I am not a person who preaches a truth that others must immediately accept. I hope this view helped to collect data and interpret the results in a reliable way.

Another important period (17 years) in my professional career has been working in the Ministry of Education and Research. Working in different positions during these years, my main responsibility has been developing the educational organization of students with SEN in regular schools. This allowed better familiarize myself with the problems, needs and possibilities of schools in teaching all children together and realize that the implementation of IE is a long journey considering national education traditions and cultural backgrounds. Building the learning communities in which professionals from schools, local governments and the state are involved therefore seemed to be the most important factor. My own learning experience of IE took place during the ten years I spent as an Estonian representative of the Agency of Special Needs and Inclusive Education. These years formed my knowledge and a broad picture of the multifaceted factors of IE and the connection between them in the meaningful implementation of IE. Sharing experiences with colleagues from the international community and realizing that other countries face similar challenges gave me the strength to continue dealing with this complicated topic. I have analysed how this period of my life may have affected this study. My biggest concern at the beginning of the training course was, having been an educational policy-maker for many years, whether I would be able to see all the practical aspects that schools face and whether I would be taken seriously as a trainer. To be sure that the training course

developed for school teams met the expectations of participating schools' staff, I organized meetings with them before the training. I found the following extract from my researcher's diary: *"Today I had my first meeting with one of the school's team members who will participate in the training course. To my surprise, their expectations for the training coincided with the planned topics and learning outcomes of the training course. Although this school has a very experienced and recognized support specialist, I felt their openness and trust to work with me during the next one and a half years."*

Finally, working at the University of Tartu has influenced me most as a researcher. I started my work at the university about five years ago, in 2018. It was very fortunate timing because the leading professors at the Institute of Education had set out to improve the quality of teacher training courses in the field of IE, and I was honoured to be invited to join the team. So, my life-long learning continued, and I must admit that the beginning was difficult. I considered myself an expert on IE, but a science-based approach to the topic required a lot of work with scientific articles, research methods and more. In addition to my academic doctoral studies, an inclusive education working group, which included experts from the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, the University of Stavanger and the University of Oslo, supported me a lot in conducting my research. I was able to receive constructive and valuable feedback at all stages (designing the study, data collection, data analysis) of the study. As I had the opportunity to share my study results and the problems that arose repeatedly among the working group members, potential problematic issues were always discussed in depth to avoid my personal attitudes and opinions when conducting the study and interpreting the results. For example, I adjusted my approach to and the design of the interview plan in Study 1 as it was based on my former personal experience in regard to what the schools' expectations for the training course on IE might be. This process provided a broader and more reliable basis for the study.

The fact that a colleague from Tallinn University participated in the training as a co-trainer increased my self-confidence and the reliability of the study. In-depth and open discussions with her before and after each training session gave me good feedback on both the successes and bottlenecks that should be paid more attention to in further trainings. The presence of two trainers made it possible to contribute more effectively to various group activities in the training course, which in turn has influenced me when conducting my initial teacher training courses at the university. In addition, conducting group interviews in the middle and at the end of the training, as well as coding the gathered data, increased the reliability of the interpretation of the results of the study.

In conclusion, on the one hand, I believe that my long-term involvement with the topic of IE has led to extensive knowledge-based input in conducting the study and interpreting the results. On the other hand, I have tried to follow good research practices and can say that my own experience, attitudes and opinions did not negatively affect the study.

4 RESULTS

This section provides an overview of the main results to the research questions of this study. A more comprehensive overview of the research results is presented in Articles I–III.

4.1 Study 1 – Meaning and operationalization of IE and the factors considered important by specialists who train or advise schools on IE

The aim of Study 1 was to seek answers to the first and second research questions of the dissertation, i.e. how do professionals who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE understand the meaning of IE and what factors do they consider important for the effective implementation of IE? Fifteen specialists were interviewed; the presentation of the main results of the study follows the aforementioned research questions.

4.1.1 Understanding the meaning of IE by specialists who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE

Interpreting the concept of IE, the interviewees based their answers on the general principle that all students must have the right to receive high-quality education according to their abilities. However, differences appeared in the ways to create these opportunities, i.e. in the placement of students by type of school and class. More specifically, the meaning of IE was understood as the study of students with SEN in special classes in their schools of residence, study with their peers in regular classes, and study regardless of school type. The following is an overview of the approaches.

The study of students with SEN in special classes in their schools of residence. The meaning of IE was understood to mean that all students must have the opportunity to study in the regular school of their residence. It was hereby not considered important that students with SEN should study with their peers in the same classroom. The interviewees emphasized that those learners who have been recommended by the out-of-school counselling team to have enhanced or special support should study in a special class or special group. At the same time, it was considered important that students studying in special classes have opportunities for socialization. These opportunities were primarily seen through participation in joint events, but the opinion that students with SEN could study certain subjects such as music education, art education and physical education in an inclusive classroom with their peers, if possible, was also expressed.

The study of SEN students with their peers in regular classes. Some of the interviewees interpreted IE as teaching all students together in one classroom, where opportunities are created for all learners considering their development

potential. IE was also interpreted as an education system for all, where every learner can develop their academic and social skills alongside others. The opinion that the inclusion of children with SEN should be taken as the norm, where everyone has the same rights and opportunities, was expressed. At the same time, it was pointed out that such an approach requires a change in the way of thinking as well as a change in the education system as a whole. Moreover, specialists with this view expressed the opinion that the understanding of the concept of IE and the importance of its implementation should be kept more in focus at the societal level. Participants of the study highlighted that the implementation of IE principles affects all students, not only students with SEN, and inclusive educational organization benefits everyone, including students without SEN. It was emphasized that in interpreting IE, the focus is only on learners with SEN and on diagnosis-based learning organization but the 'whole picture' is not often seen. Here, it was emphasized that all students may have certain special needs during their studies, and everyone has the right to be included. However, for learners with profound multiple disabilities who need special care due to their physical and mental abilities, it was considered appropriate to organize learning in small groups or special classes. Although, social inclusion was considered important for this target group.

Study regardless of school type. IE was also understood as simply participating in the education system and creating opportunities for learning according to abilities, regardless of the type of school. It was considered most important that access to education was guaranteed for everyone and that parents were given freedom of choice as to the type of school in which to place their child. Interviewees emphasized that all learners must receive education that meets their needs, and this is what IE is all about. The type of class or school they attend depends on their needs and is irrelevant in the context of what IE means. The opinion that so-called abilities-based classes could be placed in special schools for students who, due to milder learning difficulties, would need general support, thereby turning the special school into an inclusive school, also emerged.

In conclusion, the interviewed professionals who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE do not have a common understanding of the meaning of IE, i.e. the meaning of IE was understood as the study of students with SEN in special classes in their schools of residence, study with their peers in regular classes, and study regardless of school type.

4.1.2 Factors considered important for the implementation of IE by specialists who train or advise schools

In the effective implementation of IE, several factors were highlighted, which work in mutual interaction. In the following, an overview of the factors considered most important by the specialists who advise or train teachers in the implementation of IE in the Estonian context is presented based on the following main categories: training needs; availability of resources; supporting and motivating teachers; and cooperation.

Training needs. As one of the important factors in the implementation of IE, the interviewees emphasized the need for teacher training to ensure the availability of the necessary competencies when working in an inclusive classroom. It was considered important for teachers to have knowledge of the nature and meaning of IE as well as basic knowledge of the specifics of special needs, including special pedagogical knowledge on how to adapt the curriculum, differentiate learning, prepare an individual curriculum or behaviour support plan, adapt learning materials, and more. In addition, it was emphasized that working in a diverse classroom requires teachers to have good communication skills, the ability to build relationships between students and time management and self-reflection skills. Therefore, the topics covered in the initial and in-service training of teachers were seen in a complex way, considering several aspects.

In addition to the need to train teachers, it was pointed out that other professionals working in the school also need training on IE. It was highlighted that support specialists need appropriate knowledge on how to advise and support teachers in an inclusive school. The training of school leaders on IE was also considered important because they are responsible for shaping an inclusive school culture, ensuring the availability of necessary resources and facilitating collaborative teamwork. In addition, the need for training of parents was seen. It was emphasized that training parents is challenging and requires finding attractive training opportunities because parents are not particularly interested and active in participating in training organized after their work time.

Describing the training needs of different parties, interviewees emphasized the existence of different training opportunities. They pointed out the improvement needs for both the initial training and the in-service training of teachers. In addition, universities were seen to play an important role in creating a variety of training opportunities. Moreover, the opinion was that long-term and systematic in-service training on the topic of IE should be developed at universities, which would comprehensively cover all the necessary topics considering the specific needs of the schools.

Availability of resources. The availability of the necessary resources was also considered a prerequisite for the effective implementation of IE. The most important factor was human resources and their rational application. The interviewees discussed that since there are not enough support specialists in Estonian schools who deal with students with SEN individually or in groups, they could consider changing their role in such a way as to support teachers in coping in an inclusive classroom.

The interviewees highlighted the presence of the necessary learning environment as a factor influencing the implementation of IE. The lack of space was emphasized in particular; it should be possible to carry out various therapies or part-time individual and group work for students with SEN. Some of the interviewees found that various alternative teaching materials are needed. However, the others were of the opinion that the possibilities for educational materials and digital solutions have been increasing in recent years, and this is not a very big problem. The too large number of students in the class was also seen as an obstacle

regarding the learning environment. It was proposed that the number of students in the class should be reduced if students with SEN are included. Alternatively, a reduction in the teacher's workload was seen when working in an inclusive classroom.

Supporting and motivating teachers. Professionals who train or advise teachers found that teachers who work in inclusive classrooms are often left alone with their problems. At this point, the role of the school management in creating supportive teamwork, organizing appropriate work arrangements and motivating teachers was emphasized. It was highlighted that it would be necessary to implement a mentoring system for beginning teachers. The interviewees also pointed out that teachers need supervision opportunities to avoid burnout and increase their professionalism. Greater availability of specialists from out-of-school counselling teams in solving particularly complex situations was considered as one of the ways to offer greater support to teachers. In addition, the opinion was expressed that those teachers who do well in the inclusive classroom should be recognized more at the school, local government and state levels.

Cooperation. Cooperation, both inside and outside the school, was seen as a very important factor in the effective implementation of IE. In the case of in-school cooperation, priority was given to cooperation between the teachers themselves as well as equal cooperation relationships with support specialists. It was considered necessary to implement a regular co-vision system in schools to share the experiences of best practices in an inclusive classroom. The interviewees believed cooperation with parents should also be enhanced in order to find the best ways to support the child's development and interests. Specialists of child protection and counselling centres were also highlighted as parties to cooperation outside of school, while the necessity of cooperation between schools, local governments and the state was also emphasized. Thus, it can be said that the factors affecting the implementation of IE were seen as a complex topic, where training opportunities, availability of resources, opportunities for supporting teachers and cooperation between parties should be increased.

To sum up, the results of the first study revealed that although specialists who train or advise schools in the implementation of IE understood the operational meaning of IE differently, describing the factors affecting the implementation of IE was based on the assumption that SEN students study in the school of their residence (see Figure 3).

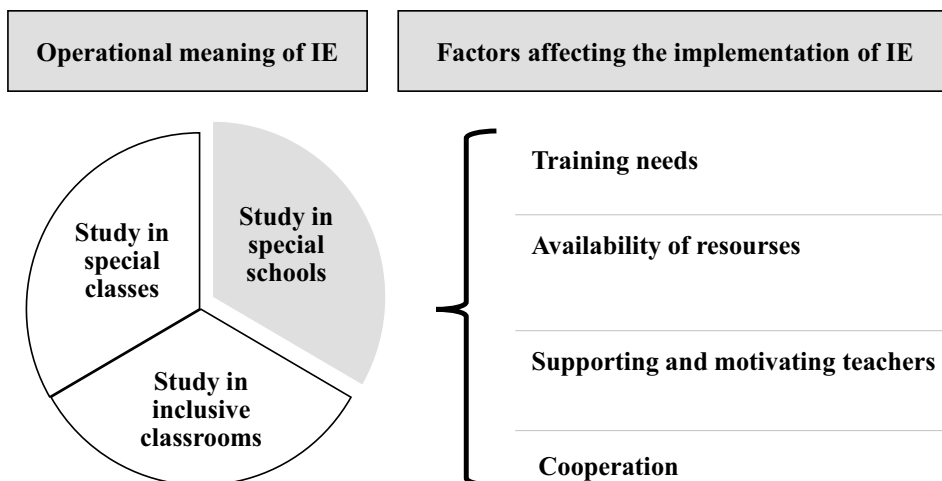


Figure 3. Understanding the meaning of IE and factors affecting the implementation of IE

Thus, Study 1 provided an input to design an in-service training course for all school professionals with the aim to harmonize the meaning of IE and focus on key factors for the meaningful implementation of IE at the school level.

4.2 Study 2 – Designing and implementing the training course

The aim of the Study 2 was to design and implement an in-service training course for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) on IE and explore how participants experienced learning as a team in this course. A description of the training course is presented in subsection 3.3.2.1 and more precisely in Article II.

Semi-structured group interviews were carried out in the middle and at the end of the training course separately with four school teams who participated in the training course to find answers to RQ 3: “How do teachers, support specialists and school leaders evaluate the in-service training course designed for school teams to improve the implementation of IE at the school level?” The main results are presented in the following.

4.2.1 Participants’ evaluation of the training course

Analysis of the data collected formed two main categories: “content and volume of the training course” and “organizational side of the training course”, including valuable aspects and suggestions made by participants for the further development of an in-service training course for school teams.

Content and volume of the training course. According to participants, all topics covered in the training course were considered important. Interviewees

highlighted that the discussion of the topics of the training course helped to create a systemic overall picture of what IE means and what must be taken into account in the school's development activities in order to organize meaningful implementation of IE. At the same time, it was pointed out that the topic of IE had not been covered sufficiently, nor had it been related to real school practice in the initial training of teachers. Although the participating schools had different expectations regarding various specific areas that needed development activities in their schools, the team members of all schools considered it valuable that the topics of the training course were covered in a complex way. This in turn helped to create a comprehensive picture of all necessary development activities from the point of view of inclusive organization as a whole.

The participants of the training valued coverage of the topic of IE policy-making within the school, considering the national legislative background and ensuring the wellbeing of learners and school staff. The school team members recognized that the school's policy documents, such as the student support system and the school's curriculum, mirrored the legislation and were not described in the context of their schools' real practice. During the interpretation of various topics, including analysis of the self-assessment questions conducted among all school staff, bottlenecks emerged, for which the members of the school teams tried to find solutions in both the short-term and the long-term. For example, the system of providing support to learners and the development conversations with students and parents were changed in such a way that the roles and responsibilities of all parties were clearly understood. For the purpose of long-term development activities, the training needs of school staff, the improvement of cooperation with the community, and the improvement needs of the learning environment were mapped. It was considered most important that during the training course, all topics considered important for the successful implementation of IE were dealt with in a coherent manner. The volume of training and the time spent on each topic were also considered optimal.

However, the trainees made suggestions for the further development of the training course. Since a school's curriculum is one of the most important political documents in the everyday activities of the school and needs continuous development in a rapidly changing world, the participants expressed the opinion that this document could have been analysed even more thoroughly. It was also suggested that the topic of supporting SEN students in the upper grade levels (grades 7 to 9) could have been covered separately during the training course because different problems arise at the upper grade levels. It also turned out that participants would have been interested in studying international good practices in more detail.

Organizational side of the training course. Feedback was also collected from the participants on the organizational aspect of the training course. It was highlighted that the teaching methods of the training were balanced and interconnected. The members of the school teams were satisfied that it was possible to actively participate in the lectures and initiate discussions on issues of interest to the participants. When going through the theoretical framework, several points

of view emerged that were not intended before. This, in turn, created a good background against which to continue with practical work in groups. It was considered important that the theoretical part was always followed by practical group work that was related to the topic and aimed at the further development activities of the school. This approach also made completing the homework assignments of the training course easier because the initial ideas had been mapped out during the training. Therefore, the practical approach in conducting the training course was highly appreciated.

The participants highlighted the use of several forms of group work, where they worked with their own school's team, but also had discussions with teams from other schools and worked in groups according to staff position. This made it possible to create a broader picture and thereby provided good practical input for the development activities of all schools. At the same time, it was emphasized that there is often not enough time to listen to the thoughts of others at school; in the training course, however, having the time to listen to different opinions and thus find the best possible solutions for schools' development activities was valued.

Participating in the training with their own school's team was considered very important and it was emphasized that there is no other way to deal with the topic of IE. The teachers pointed out that participating in the training course with other professionals from their school was very important. It was emphasized that the current trainings, which have been created only for teachers as the key persons in the implementation of IE, do not create the opportunity to see a broader picture of the meaning of IE and thus do not have such a great impact on the school as a whole. Participating in the training as a team, it was highlighted that a sense of responsibility arises towards the members of one's group as well as towards the school collective. Since the design of an inclusive educational organization is a very complex and long-term process, it was recognized that supporting one another and maintaining motivation is very important when taking the role of a leading team in this process. A long-term training course helps to achieve this.

The organization of the training in such a way that teams from four schools participated was also evaluated positively. It was highlighted that getting to know a variety of approaches and perspectives allowed participants to analyse their own school's situation from a new perspective and make changes in those areas that have seemed to work well so far. According to the participants, the participation of four schools was optimal; it enabled mutual communication, sharing of practical experiences and the emergence of positive synergy. It was found that the sharing of different practices provided the support and encouragement needed to deal with the most problematic issues and to search for solutions. At the same time, the participants were pleased that the participating schools respected one another's autonomy in solving certain situations differently depending on the specifics of the school. The opinion was expressed that a training course based only on one school might not have been as effective.

On the organizational side of the training, suggestions were made that could be considered in future trainings. Since good synergy had been created between

the participating schools during the training, the opportunity to visit the participating schools to see how one or the other situation was implemented in practice was posited. Visiting special schools and learning from their experiences was also considered important to provide sufficient support for students with SEN in inclusive placements. The interviewees pointed out that in the context of IE, common values play the most important role; therefore, the training could have included even more case-based tasks to mind-set discussions.

Although the planned training course offered the possibility of individual counselling by trainers for school teams or the entire school staff, the restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 emergency made it difficult to implement this activity of the training course. Only one school used the opportunity for individual counselling for all school staff on how to seek solutions for emerging problems and plan school-wide development activities. At the end of the training, other schools admitted that such individual counselling would have been very necessary and, in the future, it should definitely be planned as a mandatory part of the training course. Participants emphasized that schools are experiencing difficulties with students with behaviour problems and that cooperation with specialists outside the school (e.g. child protection specialists) is often a serious challenge. Therefore, it was suggested that experts from outside the school could have been involved in addressing the topics of collaboration.

In conclusion, participants were generally satisfied with the content, volume and organizational structure of the training, but valuable suggestions were also made for further improvement of the training. In addition, during the in-service training course, schools carried out several development activities on IE and pointed out factors that influenced this process, which is the focus of Study 3.

4.3 Study 3 – Development activities on IE carried out by schools and factors affecting it

The aim of Study 3 was to find out how the in-service training course for school teams influenced schools' development activities in the implementation of IE at the school level and what factors affected it. A case study methodology was used and two out of four schools participating in the training course were selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in the middle and at the end of the training course, an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the training course, document analysis, home assignments of the training course and the research diary.

Study 3 sought answers to RQ 4 “What development activities do schools carry out in implementing IE designed for school teams during the in-service training course?” and RQ 5 “What factors affect the development activities planned and carried out in the implementation of IE during the in-service training course?”. Study results in the form of a case-by-case analysis and a cross-case analysis are thoroughly described in **Article III**. The main results of the cross-case analysis are presented below.

4.3.1 Cross-case analysis

In the following, the similarities and differences between the two cases are compared in terms of the activities that were implemented during the training course and the factors that influenced these development activities according to the main themes distinguished in the analysis.

4.3.1.1 Similarities and differences between the two cases in development activities carried out during the in-service training course

Analysis of data formed two main themes: shaping school culture, and structural changes.

Shaping school culture. The results of the comparative analysis of the cases indicated that the schools approached the concept of IE and shaping inclusive school culture somewhat differently. In the first case, a clear goal was set to develop the school culture following the principles of IE. Therefore, at the beginning of the training course, discussions took place both among the team members and in the wider community about the meaning of IE and the values of the school. The vision and values of the school were clearly formulated, which were the basis for planning all further development activities. According to the principles of IE, it followed that students with SEN should study together with their peers in the same class as much as possible. In the second case, the previously formulated vision and values were followed, which, according to the trainees, followed the principles of IE. However, during the training, analysing the indicators of inclusive school culture, it was found that the meaningful implementation of IE has not always worked. Therefore, it was decided to define the principles of IE more clearly in the school's policy documents and to communicate this among other participants related to the school. Moreover, the aim was to reduce the number of special classes in the school.

In both cases, one of the important priorities was to create a safe school environment. Evidence-based behavioural programmes were implemented in both schools to ensure students' safety. Additionally, a peer-support programme was implemented for those students who had adaptation difficulties or learning problems in the first case. In the second case, attention was paid to teachers' welfare. In order to have an immediate and safe opportunity to share emerging problems, one person was chosen from the teachers whose task was to mediate any emerging concerns to the management.

Structural change. Both schools were engaged in organizing and updating the school's political documents (curriculum, support system, strategic development plan of the school) in order to have more concrete and effective instructions for all parties to implement the principles of IE. However, the goals and activities in this regard were different. In the first case, the goal was to prepare a strategic development plan for the school by the end of the training course, which was achieved. In addition, other political documents regulating the work of the school

were changed. During the training, it became clear that the development conversations conducted with students and parents were chaotic and did not work well. Therefore, it was decided to develop guiding materials that supports all parties in the preparation and conducting phase. According to the teachers who participated in the training course, they were very satisfied with these materials. In addition, the school's curriculum was thoroughly analysed and it was decided to supplement it considering that the support system for students of different abilities and interests would be clearly described.

In the second case, the members of the team who participated in the training course also considered the curriculum to be the primary and most important document in need of changes because the system of providing support for students with SEN was not in line with practical needs. At the end of the training, the participants recognized that during the process of updating the curriculum, it became clear that this document would need continuous improvement. Another thoroughly updated document was the school's rules of procedure, which specified the rules of good behaviour for all stakeholders. Regarding the school's strategic development plan, updating the document was not under focus during the training course. However, the current situation and areas in need of development were analysed and mapped.

4.3.1.2 Similarities and differences between the two cases regarding factors affecting school development activities on IE

Cross-case data analysis of factors affecting school development activities formed six main themes: leadership; commitment and contribution; collaboration; system-wide approach; resources; and external expertise, which are described below.

Leadership. The leadership of the school's development activities was organized differently in the two cases. In the first case, the headmaster consciously decided to appoint a support specialist as the leader of development activities, who also performed the tasks of the SENCO in the school. On the one hand, this decision was based on the opinion of the school head that this specialist had good knowledge of the values and principles of IE. On the other hand, she had the personality traits as well as analytical skills and abilities to create and lead a team. The school leader herself was a member of the team throughout the process, encouraging and supporting all participants.

In the second case, the head of the school decided that a team made up of different specialists should cooperatively lead the development activities of IE; no specific leader was appointed. A team member who felt stronger in a specific topic covered in the training course took the leading role in planning various activities. The school leader was involved in the planning of development activities in the phase when the situation was mapped and improvement proposals were defined. At the same time, the school leader herself was involved in the development of teachers' training needs and career model. In both cases, the team members who participated in the training course highlighted that the involvement of the teachers in the whole process of planning development activities helped to

shape these teachers into leaders among other teachers. This in turn influenced the formation of inclusive values among other teachers as well.

Commitment and contribution. In both cases, all team members who participated in the training course were committed to contributing to the school's development activities. However, the schools had set different goals. In the first case, both the planning of immediate changes and the preparation of a long-term strategic school development plan were intensively dealt with. In the second case, a choice was made to implement immediate changes, and activities were mapped out to focus on in the future and to be used as a basis for preparing the school's long-term development plan. In both cases, the trainees acknowledged that they all took responsibility to contribute to activities that would support teachers, students and parents in implementing an inclusive school culture and everyday inclusive classroom practice. However, it was highlighted that the involvement of all school staff and other parties related to the school is a big challenge and a time-consuming process.

Collaboration. In both cases, the team members who participated in the training course considered the collaboration between participants in the designing and implementation of an IE policy to be very important. It was emphasized that participating in the training as a team promoted the emergence of good cooperative relations at the school level. The well-functioning cooperation of the school team also encouraged other teachers at the school to collaborate in order to improve the involvement of SEN students and the implementation of the developed support system. However, it was pointed out that the development of cooperation between all teachers will remain a challenge in the future. The need to involve parents and the wider community more than before in the planning of the school's development activities in the field of IE was also seen.

The cooperation established with other schools that participated in the training course was highly valued. First, it was highlighted that during the training, the sharing of experiences of both common and unique problems enriched the programme and gave many ideas for further development activities. Second, the opinion was expressed that the existence and operation of such cooperation networks could be implemented at the state or local government level in the future.

System-wide approach. In both cases, the schools engaged in planning and implementing development activities in the field of IE in a way that first included self-assessment in all important areas. Activities were then planned and carried out both in terms of shaping an inclusive culture and in terms of structural changes, which were reflected in the school's policy documents. The participants of the training course considered it important to link theory with practice and the integrated treatment of various topics, taking into consideration the local and national education policy. This helped to create a broad-based comprehensive picture of the activities and needs to be developed in the near future. The schools' team members highlighted as an important aspect that the focus was on the well-being and academic success of all learners.

Resources. The availability of the necessary resources, both human and financial, was considered important in both cases. The schools appreciated that with

the support of the local governments, they were able to get financial resources to improve the school's physical environment as well as to hire additional support specialists. In both cases, time as a resource was considered a critical factor. During the training, an unexpected situation arose in connection with the COVID-19 crisis, and the schools had to reshape their entire work organization, which was very time-consuming. This, in turn, also affected the time rescheduling of the homework given during the training. However, in the first case, the school team successfully coped with it. Weekly meetings on Zoom were planned and homework was submitted on time. In the second case, the participants admitted that sometimes they were not able plan their time and meet the deadlines for submitting homework.

External expertise. In both cases, the training participants considered it important that external support and expertise is important for a topic as complex as inclusive school development activity. It was highlighted that the structure of the training, which discussed and analysed various topics and linked theory with practice, enabled schools to see the broader picture of their development needs. At the same time, it was considered important that educators consider the uniqueness of schools and leave them sufficient autonomy in planning and implementing their development activities. At the end of the training, in the first case, it was concluded that there could have been more individual counselling; in the second case, it was stressed that further cooperation between trainers and schools could have been planned as follow-up activities. In addition, the team members of both schools found that although the specialists of the regional counselling centres are the closest everyday experts outside the school, they do not always receive the expected support from them in terms of how to deal with students with special needs in an inclusive classroom.

The results of Study 3 showed that although micro-level (school level) development activities were carried out during the training, the development activities were also influenced by the meso-level and macro-level (community and state level) approaches to the implementation of IE. Here, it was emphasized that three dimensions – culture, policy and practice – must be firmly in focus when mapping development needs and planning activities. At the same time, there are several factors that influence the entire development process and must be dealt with at the school, local government and state levels. Based on theoretical background (chapter 2) and the results of Study 3, the figure below (Figure 4) summarizes the main conceptual approach: how the different levels, dimensions and factors are interlinked and influence school development activities in the implementation of IE.

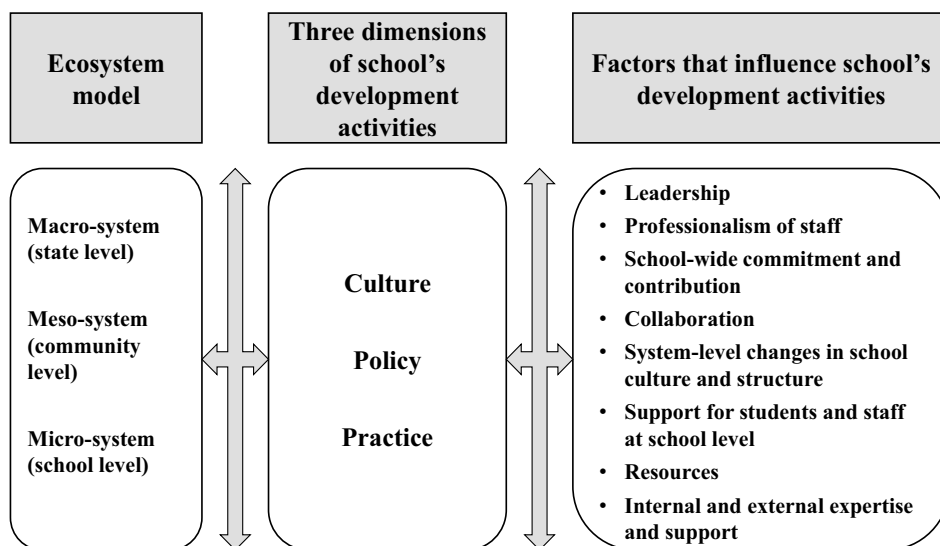


Figure 4. Dimensions of school's development activities and factors that influence them

To sum up this chapter, Study 1 proved the need for training on IE for all professionals working at the school, considering the formation of common understandings about the meaning of IE and the factors influencing the implementation of IE in the Estonian context. Study 2 demonstrated that the in-service team training designed, which addresses various key topics at the school level in the field of IE, supports the development of a common understanding of the meaning of IE at the school level and the planning and implementation of self-development activities for IE. Finally, Study 3 indicated that in-service training for school teams supports the self-development activities of schools both in the formation of an inclusive school culture and in the implementation of structural changes. It also pointed out the important factors influencing schools' self-development activities in the Estonian context.

5 DISCUSSION

The aim of this doctoral thesis was to find out how specialists who train or advise schools in implementing IE understand the meaning of IE and how to support the implementation of IE in the context of an in-service training course designed for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders). The results of three conducted studies revealed the need for clarification as to the meaning and operationalization of IE and for supporting schools through in-service training for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) in order to implement IE in everyday practice in a coherent manner considering the factors affecting it in the Estonian context. In the following section, the key findings are discussed considering the previous conceptual and empirical studies on the topic of IE. Thereafter, the conclusions, implications and limitations of the study are provided.

5.1 Discussion of the key findings

In the following two subchapters, the key findings are provided, taking into consideration the overall aim of the study. Firstly, the main findings about the understanding the meaning and operationalization of IE are presented. Secondly, supporting schools in implementing IE through in-service training course for school teams is discussed.

5.1.1 Understanding the meaning and operationalization of IE in Estonian context

In terms of educational policy, IE has been a leading principle since 2010 in general education schools in Estonia (Basic Schools and ..., 2010). The most important positive impact has been the fact that awareness of the principle of IE and the basic right of SEN students to study in a school of their residence with their peers has increased. However, the results of the current study revealed that the meaning and operationalization of IE is understood differently among specialists who train or consult schools in implementing IE (Study 1). Previous studies conducted in Estonia (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Räs et al., 2016) indicated the same results among teachers and school leaders. The main common feature of the understanding of the meaning of IE as high-quality learning opportunities for all learners was stressed by all participants of the study, but several approaches to the implementation of IE appeared. More precisely, the operationalization of the concept of IE varied from suggesting that SEN students study in schools of their residence in mainstream classes, in special classes as well in special schools. These varied understandings affect the content of the initial and in-service training courses held by universities and the ways in which schools are advised to create learning opportunities for students with and without SEN. Therefore, discussions on the meaning of IE are needed, which in turn would ensure that the initial and in-

service training of teachers and the counselling of schools in the implementation of IE takes place on a uniform basis.

Definitions and meaning of IE. The main widespread and common understanding of the meaning of IE is that all students, despite their educational needs or disabilities, study in the school of their residence with peers for most of their weekly workload and receive high-quality learning instruction and support according to their needs (Alquraini, 2012; Schuelka, 2018). This principle is followed by the membership countries of the EASNIE, including Estonia. In addition to this assumption, the operational meaning of IE has been agreed on between member states. More precisely, officially defined students with SEN are considered to be in an inclusive setting if they study at least 80% of their weekly load in the same classroom as their peers (European Agency for ..., 2022b). The results of the current study revealed that some specialists who train or advise schools on IE understood the meaning of IE in line with this approach, i.e. *inclusion for all students*. However, there were also different perceptions of the meaning of IE among these specialists.

The common understanding of the meaning of IE and its implementation has proven difficult both internationally and in Estonia. The reasons here may differ. First, the meaning of IE has been defined internationally with different emphases. To ensure high-quality education for all target groups, including students at risk of being excluded from education and learners with disabilities, definitions have been adapted at different times. The focus has been on different aspects of the implementation of IE, such as the need to change legislation, reforms of the education system, teaching methods, flexible curriculum, etc. (UN, 2016; UNESCO, 2005, 2009). The operational definition of IE has been given less attention. This, in turn, has created a situation where researchers still claim that there is no unified definition and understanding of the meaning of IE (Haug, 2017; Magnusson, 2019; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Second, Meijer and Watkins (2016) have pointed out that the legislative framework, the language used and the conceptions held by policy-makers and practitioners do not support a common understanding of the meaning of IE. The results of the current study proved that the same aspects have influenced the understanding of the meaning of IE in Estonia as well.

Policy and legislation. The political statements of the meaning of IE and the definition of SEN students have also changed during recent years in Estonia. In the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act of 2010, it was defined that according to the principle of IE, students with SEN usually study in a mainstream class of their school of residence. Students with SEN were described on a broad spectrum, i.e. all students who needed to make changes or adjustments in the work plan drawn up by a teacher to work with a class were defined as SEN students. At the same time, numerous diagnosis-based options for creating special classes were listed (Basic Schools and ..., 2010). Therefore, regarding the target group of SEN learners, the meaning of IE is based on a “broad definition” in the Estonian context (see subchapter 2.1.2). Such an approach requires very complex system-wide changes in the education system and schools’ everyday practices (Haug, 2017). As a result, even though the number of students with SEN in regular

schools has increased in Estonia, learning opportunities in special classes remained on a large scale (Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem, 2021; Räs et al., 2016). Therefore, regardless of the fact that the operational definition of IE was clearly defined, the principle of IE applied only to students with milder special needs. For students with specific disabilities, however, segregated study arrangements remained prevalent. Thus, it is justified for the participants of the current study to have understood the meaning of IE as the placement of SEN students in a regular school but in a segregated setting. Consequently, this contradiction in the legislation does not promote the development of a common understanding of the meaning of IE, nor its implementation in practice.

In 2018, the legislation regarding the educational organization of students with SEN was changed greatly. The principle of IE has remained, but on the organizational side, only high-quality education for all is emphasized (Basic Schools and ..., 2018). In terms of educational policy, the EASNIE's vision (European Agency for ..., 2022a) for inclusive education has been followed, but from the practical side, the focus is primarily on the availability of support services, ability-based learning and social inclusion (Haridus- ja teadusministeerium, 2022, para 3). The definition of SEN students has also changed. According to the current legislation, a student is considered a SEN student if they have been advised to implement enhanced or special support by the out-of-school multidisciplinary counselling team. Legislation provides several implementation options for schools in organizing studies for students with SEN, including composing special classes or groups according to students' abilities or special needs (Basic Schools and ..., 2018). On the one hand, emphasizing high-quality education for all, a "broad definition" to IE has remained; on the other hand, however, marginalizing SEN students according to a "narrow definition" of IE (Arduin, 2015; Haug, 2017) raises the question for whom and in what practical way the principles of IE are intended. Moreover, a moderate approach to the implementation of IE and study organization for SEN students, i.e. special education settings have remained for specific target groups of SEN students, is characteristic in Estonia, as in many other countries (see European Agency for ..., 2022b; Entrich, 2021). However, this study revealed surprisingly that study in special schools was understood as the meaning of IE by some specialists who train or consult schools on IE. This in turn points to the fact that the principle of IE has remained unclear until now and the operational meaning of IE has not been in focus.

Therefore, debates among target groups on the possibility of implementing an IE policy have risen in Estonia. More precisely, there are two strands of understanding of IE in society: inclusion for some, and inclusion for all. According to Leijen et.al. (2021), the idea of "inclusion for some" represents the idea that students with SEN have the right to the high-quality education, which can be achieved by specially trained staff in a special environment. The idea of "inclusion for all" expresses the idea that all students despite their needs or disabilities should have the opportunity to learn together with the aim to ensure their right to be served by society in the same way as all other citizens. These two opposing discourses have been addressed internationally, with scholars having initiated a discussion on the

limits of inclusion. Hornby (2015) argues that special settings for some students with SEN temporarily or all the time at school are justified to protect their human and moral rights. Since no country has achieved full inclusion (European Agency for ..., 2022b), this opinion must be accepted. However, it is important that this approach does not result in segregation of SEN students whose best interests should be protected by an inclusive placement. Thus, there should be a focus on educating as many children as possible in mainstream schools in an inclusive setting, but different placement options must be available for students with exceptional disabilities.

Complexity of the meaning of IE. Since the meaningful implementation of IE is a complicated and multifaceted process (Mitchell, 2015), the meaning of IE and its implementation should be approached in a complex manner, considering both *philosophical and practical aspects* (see Nelis & Pedaste, 2020). In this context, it is very difficult to formulate it as a definition that would cover all aspects of the meaningful implementation of IE and be comprehensible to all parties. Schuelka et al. (2020) have also pointed out that repeatedly defining the meaning of IE does not serve as much practical purpose than might be supposed. Therefore, in the meaningful implementation of the operational concept of IE, more attention should be paid to those characteristics that ensure equal opportunities for the academic and social inclusion of all learners. Moreover, national education policy and legislation should be in line with this approach.

In conclusion, the results of this doctoral study indicated the need to harmonize the understanding of the meaning of IE and pay more attention to the meaningful implementation of the operational definition of IE with the aim to protect the best interests of SEN students to be educated in inclusive settings. More precisely, the focus should be on discussions of the meaning and importance of IE. This, in turn, would ensure that specialists who train or advise schools in implementing IE deal with this topic according to common understandings, and that through both pre-service teacher training and in-service training courses, common understandings of IE and its practical implementation spread among all professionals in schools. The need for changes in state policy and legislation may thereby emerge from a practical perspective.

Although the primary prerequisite for the implementation of IE is a common and shared understanding of the meaning of IE, organizing inclusive schooling in practice is challenging for schools. Ensuring high-quality education for all students requires building learning communities, and schools need support in this regard. One possibility is to conduct a long-term in-service training course for school teams involving all key professionals (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) at the school level. This approach is described below.

5.1.2 Supporting schools in implementing IE through an in-service training course for school teams

To increase the capacity of schools to implement IE, the self-development activities of schools with a team of different professionals plays an important role (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for ..., 2022c; Kinsella, 2020). This in turn requires collective professional learning, considering the complexity of the whole school's approach. The results of the current study revealed that the in-service training course designed for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) contributed to shaping cultural and structural changes at the school level, which are important for the meaningful implementation of IE. However, several internal and external factors that affected the self-development activities of schools emerged. Below, these aspects are discussed.

Shaping school culture. The starting point of the inclusive development process is *shared vision and values* at the organizational and community levels, as the culture of the school affects the wellbeing of all parties involved (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). As one of the main goals of the in-service training course designed for school teams was to raise school staff awareness of the concept and meaning of IE, covering the first topic of the training course (vision and school culture) indicated that the most difficult task was creating a common understanding of the meaning and benefits of IE. Eredicts (2018) explains that people's beliefs towards the principles of IE are affected by both internal and external factors. Examples of internal factors include previous experience and contact with learners or people different from others, common opinions, and myths as well as knowledge of evidence-based studies, human rights and social justice. External factors are primarily influenced by national education policy and legislation, but also by the level of development of society. Woodcock and Hardy (2017) emphasize that changing cultural practice involves challenging patterns. Therefore, when addressing the topic of an inclusive school culture in a training course, it is important to conduct mind-set discussions about why we strive for inclusivity and how it affects all learners, school staff, members of the community and, ultimately, society. On the one hand, it is important that the inclusion of all learners enables learners with SEN and disabilities to have equal opportunities to cope as members of society (Leijen et al., 2021). On the other hand, the UNESCO (2020) document stresses that the practice of teaching methods that meet the needs of all learners benefits all learners and thereby promotes the development of a non-discriminatory society. However, this process has proved difficult, both in Estonia and in many other countries (European Agency for ..., 2022b; Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important that the meaning of IE is clearly articulated at both national and organisational levels (Cameron, 2017; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). In this regard, it should be borne in mind that the shaping of an inclusive culture is a continuous and time-consuming process, not something merely described on paper.

The results of this study revealed that schools would succeed in implementing IE if they set *specific goals* for building an inclusive school culture and made a

dedicated effort to achieve their aims by involving all stakeholders. In Estonian schools, it is characteristic for the vision and mission of the school to be formulated in a value-based manner, which fits the principles of IE. Therefore, they confidently identify themselves as inclusive schools, and discussions on inclusive school culture are given little attention. When schools are supported in mapping the current situation in the context of the application of inclusive school culture, it often appears that inclusion does not apply to all students. As described in the previous subsection, it is common practice that for students with SEN opportunities to study in the school of their residence have been created, but they are often placed in special groups or special classes. Black-Hawkins and Florian (2021) have pointed out that this tendency is also characteristic of many other countries. Moreover, according to the legislation in Estonia, the organization of learning in a special class or special school is often recommended by external multidisciplinary advisory teams, and with the consent of the parent, schools are obliged to implement this decision. Therefore, officially defined SEN students do not have sufficient access to inclusive educational arrangements. Addressing the characteristics of inclusive school culture and sharing and discussing these aspects with stakeholders inside and outside of the school during the training course are crucial. In this context, it is important to pay attention to how to involve all school staff and members of the wider community in the shaping common values and beliefs. On the one hand, it is necessary to harmonize perceptions of the school, the local government and state parties in how the learning organization of SEN learners should take place in the context of IE and how it should be reflected in political documents. On the other hand, the practical implementation recommendations given by external multidisciplinary counselling teams must also be consistent with this.

However, the *leadership and the role of a school leader* became evident in the current study. More precisely, if the head of the school had a positive attitude towards and vision of IE, encouraged the team to discuss the values of IE and communicated this outside the school, it affected all other aspects of inclusive development at the school level. Several previous studies have also highlighted that school leaders should take the leading role in shaping a positive attitude towards IE and be innovators in implementing inclusive education in everyday practice (Pedaste et al., 2021; Skoglund & Stäcker, 2016; Urton et al., 2014). Therefore, the values, beliefs and perceptions of education leaders in terms of IE have a major impact on how other stakeholders view inclusion (Al-Mahdy & Amam, 2017; Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016). Teachers and other school staff have a justified expectation that school leaders must be responsible for designing a school culture based on inclusive values and attitudes, in addition to ensuring the wellbeing of learners, teachers, parents and all staff at the school level.

Thus, focusing on shaping an inclusive school culture and its implementation in practice is the most important topic throughout the in-service training course on IE for school teams. However, the development activities of an inclusive school also include several structural changes at the school level.

Improving school structure. If the general philosophy of the educational institution regarding the inclusion of all learners is defined and clearly formulated, the focus should be on how it is implemented in practice at the organizational level. Schuelka (2018) has pointed out that a well-designed IE implementation strategy is one of the key elements for successful inclusion. The implementation of an IE policy in practice is reflected primarily in the strategic documents of the educational institution, which in the Estonian context are the long-term *strategic development plan* and the *school's curriculum for all students*. The results of Study 2 and Study 3 revealed that at the beginning of the training course, the school's policy documents, especially the curriculum, were not in line with the principles of IE. First, the principles of IE were not reflected in this document. Second, the description of students' support systems mirrored the provisions of the law and the opportunities for IE were largely only available to students who needed general support or had milder learning difficulties. Moreover, it remained unclear how the entire support system works (e.g. whom to contact with problems, who is responsible for what, under what conditions one or another support system is implemented, how cooperation between stakeholders takes place). Therefore, after analysing the real situation during the training course, the schools' curricula were renewed, and according to participants of school teams, the activities of the training course supported them in paying attention to any bottlenecks that emerged and required further improvement. As an important observation, it was highlighted that the development of the curriculum should support the development of the culture of an inclusive organisation. Kinsella (2020) has also emphasized that the achievements of learners with SEN depend primarily on the extent to which inclusive culture has been considered in the development of the organisation.

However, participants of the study admitted that more time should be planned for school curriculum development activities during the training course. As Estonia has two national curricula in compulsory education – National Basic School Curriculum (Põhikooli Riiklik Õppekava, 2011) and National Simplified Curriculum (Põhikooli Lihtsustatud Riiklik ..., 2010)—less attention was paid to how to include students who need enhanced or special support and how this could have been reflected in the school's general curriculum. According to analyses conducted by Jürimäe (2017), these two national curricula for basic schools differ largely in terms of the general competences, which in turn does not guarantee equal treatment or equal rights to education. Moreover, these two national curricula differ in terms of content of subjects, number of hours per week in subjects and learning outcomes, which, on the one hand, limits the development potential of SEN students, and on the other hand, makes it difficult to teach SEN students who are assigned a simplified curriculum in an inclusive classroom. The existence of a flexible curriculum that considers student potential has been highlighted in many political documents as an important characteristic of IE (European Agency for ..., 2017a, 2017b; UNESCO, 2020). As composing individual learning plans or curricula is a very common practice and stated by the law in Estonia, the need for two curricula should be revisited. In any case, discussions are needed to find

out how these two curricula could be more integrated. This, in turn, would help to better link the viewpoints of general pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy and special pedagogy, which is very important in the context of the implementation of IE.

The results of this study indicated that in order to support the self-development activities of IE via the in-service training course, it is important to deal with the other key characteristics of an inclusive school, i.e. *learning environment and resources; the professionalism of staff; collaboration; and quality assurance*, thereby influencing changes in the organizational structure as a whole. Participants of the study emphasized that covering all topics in a systematic and cyclical way, linking theory and practice, provided good input for short-term and long-term development activities. For example, during the training course, school documentation was improved in such a way that it corresponds to the principles of IE, the practice of providing support to all students was enhanced, thematic trainings were conducted for school staff and programmes were implemented to ensure the safety of both students and teachers. At the same time, using various self-assessment tools, the school's strengths and areas in need of development were mapped, which in turn provided input for setting goals to renew a long-term strategic development plan. In addition, members of the school teams considered it important that during the training course an understanding was formed that further self-development activities should include the school as a whole. Since the meaningful implementation of inclusive education is a long-term process rather than a constant phenomenon (UN, 2016; Schuelka, 2018), the formation of readiness for the continuous self-development activities of participating schools through the in-service training course can be considered one of the important results of the training course.

The findings of the study proved that before planning the development activities on IE and during this implementation, it is important that an *evidence-based analysis* is carried out in cooperation with the internal and external partners of the schools. In recent years, it has been stressed that in addition to quantitative tools that measure access to education, more attention should be paid to quality indicators (Kinsella, 2020; Schuelka, 2018). Using several self-assessment tools (Index for Inclusion (2002), questionnaires worked out by the EASNIE (2017a), etc.) during the training course offered more of a system-thinking approach and set up improvement areas for the school as a whole. According to the participants of the study, the quality indicators set at the state level do not pay sufficient attention to the effectiveness of the implementation of IE in Estonia. The focus is on monitoring whether and to what extent the availability of support specialists has been ensured to officially defined students with SEN (Haridussilm, 2022), but quality indicators that show the effectiveness of the whole school system on IE, the wellbeing of all learners, academic and social inclusion, etc. have not been considered important enough. Thus, the training course supported the formation of a broader picture of the nature and performance indicators of IE among participating schools' teams. It can be concluded that schools should have different evidence-based measurement tools available that aid them in mapping the current situation in the implementation of IE and supporting all learners in the best

possible way. Moreover, in the document of Education Strategy 2021–3035 (Ministry of Education ..., 2021), the need for ensuring the coherence of external and internal evaluations with one another as one of the main challenges has been emphasized. In terms of implementation of the policy of IE, attention should be paid to developing quality indicators that show the effectiveness of IE and gathering evidence-based data for evaluating the achievements of IE policy goals at the institutional level as well as the performance of IE policy at the national level.

The fact that the training course was designed for school teams where different key professionals (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) at the school level had the possibility to participate was considered very valuable. The importance of the *collaborative contribution* of different school level professionals to the implementation of IE in practice has been highlighted in many studies (Hansen et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2017; Juma et al., 2017; Pavlović Babića et al., 2018). Herewith, Kinsella (2020) has pointed out that the learning organisation approach allows the achievement of the desired direction – becoming a school that is more inclusive. Moreover, recent projects of the EASNIE (European Agency for ..., 2022c) have widened the profile for inclusive professional learning for teachers and emphasized that particular attention should be paid to growing the collaborative work-based learning of different professionals. Shifting the emphasis to collective professional learning increases team agency, which in turn may have broader impact on implementing IE. So far, it is hard to find evidence of how learning together in school teams with different professionals affects the whole school approach to improvement of schools in terms of IE and the wellbeing of all stakeholders. The results of this study proved that a training course designed for school teams gives all professionals motivation to contribute to school development activities and enhance the formation of collective agency. Teachers who participated in the study highlighted that existing initial and in-service training courses only for teachers do not provide a bigger picture of the meaningful implementation of IE and adequately support teachers to cope in an inclusive classroom. The importance of collaborative learning has also been emphasized in several studies (see e.g. European Agency for ..., 2022c; Forlin & Sin, 2017; Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Therefore, in the future, more attention should be paid to the content of teacher training and flexible organizational options, including long-term in-service training courses for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders). Here, it is important to consider the factors that influence the development activities of schools.

Factors affecting schools' development activities on IE. The results of the study revealed several internal and external factors that influenced schools' self-development activities in the field of IE. The changes planned and carried out during the in-service training course related to both school policy and school structure were greatly influenced by *leadership*. The role and responsibility of school leaders in the implementation of IE has been emphasized by many studies in recent years (Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018; Amin & Yasin, 2018; European Agency for ..., 2019b, 2022c; Khaleel et al., 2021). Although none of the school leaders who participated in the training took a leading role in school development

activities on IE, their participation in the training course proved important. The study participants acknowledged that the school leader as a member of the team encouraged and motivated the other members of the school team to contribute to planning and implementing development activities at the school level. School principals themselves saw their role in communicating the philosophy of IE, enhancing collaboration between stakeholders and ensuring financial and human resources and the professional development of teachers. This approach to the role of school leader has been emphasized by many scholars (Ainscow, 2020; Cohen, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2017). A combination of leading styles that have been proven effective in successful inclusive practices also appeared in this study. More precisely, school leaders inspired other team members by shaping school culture and planning structural changes, which is characteristic of the transformative leadership style (see also Day et al., 2016). They also used the distributed leadership style, focusing on developing people and extending leadership to teachers and other school staff members (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Jones & Harris, 2016). In addition, school leaders of this study admitted that they feel responsible for completing the curriculum and achieving all students' learning outcomes, which refers to the instructional management style (Gumus et al., 2018; Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2015).

However, the results of the study clearly indicated that better results were achieved if the school leader appointed a specific person to lead the entire development process. For example, in this case, it was possible to thoroughly map the current situation and define short-term and long-term goals and development activities. As a result, there was an opportunity to start implementing many structural changes and prepare a long-term strategic development plan for further activities, which were in line with the principles of an inclusive school. Nevertheless, leadership in the development of inclusive schools at the local government level was considered important. Participants of the study pointed out that implementation of IE principles has been largely an initiative of schools themselves. Therefore, local government officials should take responsibility and the lead position in spreading the understanding that all schools in their area need to be inclusive and provide opportunities for teaching all students in their living area.

The *availability of resources* (human and financial resources) turned out to be another important factor affecting schools' development activities on IE. Results of Study 3 proved that schools participating in the in-service training course for school teams received the additional resources to improve their learning environment and hire more support specialists, which supported students, parents and teachers in inclusive practice. However, participants of the study stressed that state-level IE policy and financial allocation do not provide these possibilities sufficiently to design an inclusive education system. Although the state budget has significantly increased since 2018 with the aim to provide enhanced support or special support for students with SEN, the funding system does not take into account regional specificities in the Estonian context. This has created a situation where larger local governments receive financial support to create opportunities for special education in special classes or special schools, and this does not

encourage the implementation of IE. Statistics from the Estonian Education Information System (2021) indicate that the network of special schools in larger local governments has remained and does not show a trend of a decreased number of students at these schools. At the same time, smaller local authorities are struggling to ensure the implementation of the necessary support for SEN students, regardless of whether the support is provided in a segregated or inclusive manner. Therefore, the national funding system supporting IE should have measures to ensure that local governments and schools have incentives to implement IE. Moreover, studies conducted in Estonia (e.g. Pedaste et al., 2021) have shown that school leaders' perceptions towards inclusive education are connected to the support available for students with SEN.

The participants of the study admitted that the *collaborative relationships* formed during the training influenced the effectiveness of cooperation among the entire school staff and thus also the planning and implementation of development activities on IE. However, it was highlighted that cooperation with parents and the whole community needs to be improved. Therefore, when planning future team-based trainings, more attention could be paid to this topic and the activities planned to better support schools in this area through the training course.

In addition, participation in the training course alongside other school teams helped to create inter-school collaboration, which in turn enhanced the schools' self-development activities by sharing experiences and learning from one another. The importance and effectiveness of inter-school learning communities have been pointed out in several other studies (see Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Kinsella, 2020). However, the participants of the training course recognized the lack of commitment and contribution from the local government and at the state level in supporting schools in the implementation of IE. Thus, more attention should be paid to the creation of networks of inclusive schools at the local level, involving representatives of all sectors of the education system (state and local level politicians, schools professionals, parents, scholars from universities, etc.). Learning and collaborating would help to develop a shared understanding of the concept of IE and, through a system-wide approach, create an inclusive education system in the context of their own country, in which all parties know their role and responsibilities (see Ainscow, 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; Kinsella, 2020; Schuelka & Engsig, 2020). This, in turn, would make it possible to increase the quality of external expertise, which schools consider important for the implementation of effective inclusive school practice.

In conclusion, this study revealed that in order to apply the principles of IE in a meaningful way, attention must be paid to several aspects (see Figure 5). First, a common understanding of the meaning of IE is crucial. Both national, local and inclusive school education policies depend on the conceptual and operational meaning of IE, which are closely related. Second, when planning and implementing cultural and structural changes to IE at the school level, it is important to employ a school-wide approach. This requires developing the professionalism of the entire school staff. Schools need external support during this process; the in-service training course for school teams offers a good opportunity for this.

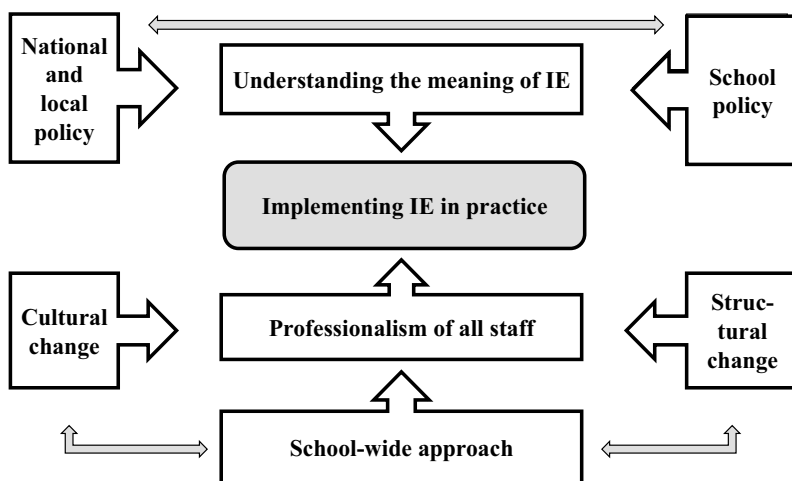


Figure 5. Aspects of implementing IE in practice

In addition, various factors affecting the successful implementation of IE must be considered, the most important of which are leadership, the availability of necessary resources and their effective use, and collaboration at different levels.

5.2 Limitations and further research

Although the results of this doctoral thesis provide insight into how specialists who train or advise schools in implementing IE understand the meaning of IE and how to support the implementation of IE in the context of an in-service training course designed for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) in the Estonian context, this study also has some limitations.

More precisely, the sample size of the first study did not allow us to sufficiently identify the perceptions of IE of the specialists who train and advise schools, who have different experiences and work at different levels of the education system, and thus analyse the emergence of bottlenecks more thoroughly. In addition, the results of the study are based on experiences where the schools were highly motivated to develop an inclusive organization and the members of the team consisted of professionals who participated in the training course and worked as a united team. Therefore, it is not known how the training would have been evaluated or what impact it would have had on the schools' self-development activities in the field of IE if the relationships between the people participating in the training course had not been so cooperative.

The COVID-19 emergency can also be considered one of the limitations. This situation meant that half of the training sessions were held via Zoom and it was not possible to organize schools' individual counselling sessions, as was planned at the beginning of the training course. Individual school visits would increase the effectiveness of training in the school as a whole. Furthermore, observation

of schools could have been used as an additional data collection method. This would have made it possible to obtain more information to triangulate the analysis of the results.

Some further research needs also emerged. First, in the future, the impact of the training course on the development of the understanding of the meaning of IE, attitudes towards IE, teachers' self-efficacy and collective agency could be investigated using quantitative and qualitative methods. Using a mixed method would give a comprehensive study result. Second, a longitudinal examination on how the development activities implemented in the in-service training course for school teams influence the social wellbeing and academic achievements of all students (SEN and non-SEN students) and the satisfaction of parents is needed. Finally, this study and the aforementioned research needs could be conducted in schools of different sizes, in different regions and with a different share of students with various support needs. All of these aspects would make it possible to obtain a broader overview of how to better support the meaningful implementation of IE in the Estonian context and plan changes in teachers' initial and in-service training courses on IE.

5.3 Conclusions and Implications

The results of this doctoral theses provide some conclusions and implications regarding the shaping of a common understanding of the meaning of IE and supporting schools in implementing IE in practice.

First, this study highlighted the bottlenecks that should be paid attention to in the national education policy, including changes in legislation to create common understandings of the concept of IE, and the support required in order to implement IE in a meaningful way. Second, the in-service training designed and implemented for school teams (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) is a good practical example of how to support the development activities of an inclusive school and the key factors to consider in this process. Third, the results of the current study have provided good input for the development of the content of initial and in-service teacher training courses in the field of IE. More specifically, in addition to developing teachers' special pedagogical knowledge, more attention should be paid to the meaning of IE and its importance in the creation of equal opportunities for all learners in the education system, considering all key characteristics of IE.

Below, implications and recommendations are proposed to improve the capacity of the education system in the implementation of IE.

Implications

Education policy and legislation

- 1) Since the concept of inclusive education is formulated and understood in several ways and with different emphasis in Estonian and international political documents (Basic Schools and ..., 2010, 2018; UNESCO, 2005, 2009), this study clearly showed that more attention should be paid than before to the operationalization of the concept of IE when forming common perceptions on the meaning of IE. More specifically, this study indicated that the operational meaning of IE (teaching all students together in one classroom for most of the teaching time and offering SEN students need-based support individually or in a group) should be more in focus. Therefore, in addition to establishing the principle of IE in the national education policy, it is necessary to define how it is realized in practice more clearly and comprehensibly.
- 2) Much attention has been paid to definitions surrounding learners' needs and the meaning of IE based on the categorization of students, which considers their compensatory measures underpinned by a medical model (European Agency for, 2022d). The marginalization of SEN students, their definition in legislation and the provision of diagnosis-based learning conditions have not supported the implementation of the principles of IE in Estonia, nor in many other European countries (European Agency for ..., 2022c). Implementation of IE includes all learners, both officially defined SEN students and non-SEN students (European Agency for ..., 2022a; UNESCO, 2005, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to avoid labelling students, and a systematic focus should be placed on a human rights-based approach. This means empowering the entire education system to ensure equal opportunities for high-quality education and social inclusion for all learners. In achieving the goal set in the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education ..., 2021), to ensure a personalized learning path for all students, SEN learners should be treated on an equal basis with all other learners and more flexible learning opportunities should be created for them as well. As a first step, it is important to bring the legislation framework into line with the principles of IE. More specifically, the regulation of segregated study arrangements for officially defined SEN students should be reduced. It is relevant to analyse how the national curriculum supports equal rights for education for all students and to consider composing a national curriculum that considers the differences in the development potential of all learners.
- 3) To be sure that education policy and legislation meet the meaningful implementation of IE, consistently gathering and analysing evidence-based data for evaluating the effectiveness of the implementation of IE, i.e. the well-being of all learners and their academic and social inclusion, is essential. Evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive and special settings from the perspectives of the short-term and long-term aims is crucial. This requires working

out national-level quality indicators considering all characteristics of IE. Both quantitative and qualitative metrics are important here.

Leadership and collaboration as key features in implementing IE at the school level

- 1) To support schools in the meaningful implementation of IE and with the aim to reduce any form of exclusion, it is necessary to initiate social debates about the purpose of IE, for whom it should be applied, why it is important and how it should be implemented. As the implementation of IE is a long-term and continuous process of empowering the education system (UN, 2016), peoples' previous experience may affect their attitudes and prejudices towards the effectiveness of IE, thus discussions involving all stakeholders in society are important. One of the primary prerequisites in shaping a shared understanding and the values of IE is leadership (Mitchell, 2015; Schuelka et al., 2018). It is important that leadership takes place in all sectors related to education. More specifically, in addition to in-school leadership, it is equally important that both national and local government leadership take place with clearly defined goals and performance indicators that measure the effectiveness of meaningful inclusion. Otherwise, the implementation of the principles of IE may remain merely a political slogan, and the equal rights of all learners to high-quality education in an inclusive setting, which should ensure their further participation in society, will not be achieved.
- 2) The results of this study highlighted that schools need external support and expertise in planning and implementing self-development activities on IE, teaching all students in inclusive classroom and ensuring the necessary resources. The best way to understand the needs of schools is the creation of learning communities dealing with IE topics, involving participants of schools, the local and state level and universities. This would help to develop a shared understanding of the meaning of IE and contribute to system-wide changes in the education system. Moreover, it would allow the creation of the best proven practices both at the organizational level and in the education system. Evidence-based research in the context of their own country reduces doubts surrounding the impossibility of the implementation of IE and extends inclusion to a larger target group than before. In addition, closer co-operation between mainstream schools and special schools is essential, as it promotes the formation of special schools as resource centres with the aim to provide external counselling services for mainstream schoolteachers.
- 3) The importance of collaborative learning in the implementation of IE has been emphasized in several studies (European Agency for ..., 2022c, Lyons et al., 2016). The long-term in-service training course designed and implemented for school teams, in which various professionals at the school level (teachers, support specialists, school leaders) participated, showed that this is a good way to support schools in planning and implementing school-wide

and system-wide development activities on IE. Therefore, to enhance the systematic self-development activities on IE in schools, and to increase the professionalism of all specialists working in the school, systematic and regular team training courses funded by national or local governments should be made more widely available.

Developing initial and in-service training courses on IE

- 1) In the implementation of IE, the teacher is undoubtedly the key person; high expectations are set for them, which are described in the competence model of the inclusive teacher (European Agency for 2012, 2022c) and in the Estonian context in the teacher's professional standard (Kutsestandardid: tase 7, 2020). Therefore, the development of initial and in-service training for teachers has been in focus in recent years. The in-service training course developed and implemented for school teams provided good input for the further development of the initial teacher training courses on IE. More precisely, before developing teachers' special pedagogical competencies, which is relatively common in teacher training, it is important to develop an understanding of the meaning and importance of IE, positive attitudes to meet the needs of all learners as well as readiness for comprehensive cooperation. This creates a basis for building the competencies of an inclusive teacher, primarily taking into consideration the principles of inclusive pedagogy. The professional training of special educators must follow these same principles. This is the way to better link general pedagogy and special pedagogy and thereby bring these two discourses closer together in an inclusive classroom and inclusive school.
- 2) In addition to enhancing cooperation between teachers and support specialists, which has been highlighted in several studies in recent years (Florian, 2019; Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020), it is important that school leaders are involved in collaborative learning on IE (Amin & Yasin, 2018; Carter & Abavi, 2018; Khaleel et al., 2021). This way, it is possible to increase the capacity of the whole school in the implementation of IE. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the role of school principals and their training in the implementation of IE. It is important that school principals are more aware than before of the principles of IE, the key factors for its meaningful implementation and the importance of their lead role in shaping an inclusive school culture and structure. This allows principals to make more informed decisions on the study organization of SEN students and hold more informed negotiations with all parties in shaping inclusive schools.
- 3) The results of this study indicated that training opportunities for heterogeneous groups (different school-level professionals, different school teams) helps to shape a broader picture of the key components of IE that should be considered in the development activities of schools. Moreover, several researchers have emphasized that teachers are left without adequate support at

the organizational level, and this makes it difficult to implement inclusive classroom practice (Juma et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2020). Therefore, more opportunities should be provided to the in-service training courses for school teams on IE where different professionals learn together. This would enable the more efficient implementation of cultural and structural changes at the school level, which in turn would support teachers in co-teaching all learners in an inclusive classroom. Like inclusive classroom practice, co-teaching heterogeneous groups in in-service training courses on IE provides added value and enriches the learning experience of all parties.

All of these practical implications are important in the context of Estonia, but they can also be considered in other countries with a similar educational policy background.

In addition, the main scientific implication of this thesis concerns the concept of IE and empirical research on team-based training courses for supporting the implementation of IE. Firstly, although previous studies have pointed out confusion regarding the concept of IE and its multiple interpretations, previous studies have not elaborated clearly on the need to focus on more the precise operationalisation of the concept of IE. The results of this study show that besides general conceptualisations of IE, researchers should offer more precise guidelines regarding the operationalisation of the IE concept. Secondly, although school-wide approach and team-based trainings are known professional development forms in educational literature, a limited number of studies have utilised a team-based long-term training course for enhancing the effect of IE in schools. The empirical findings of this study are therefore a valuable contribution to the research field. Finally, the main methodological implication of the current study concerns participants' involvement in designing the team-based training course.

In conclusion, IE is a multifaceted process influenced by the attitudes and values of society members and school professionals (teachers, support specialists, school leaders). Therefore, it is essential that we act collaboratively in this field more than ever, supporting the development of each child in the best way and meaningfully avoiding any form of exclusion, and that the decisions made at every level are evidence-based and supported by empirical research.

SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Kaasava hariduse tähendus ja kaasava hariduse rakendamise toetamine täienduskoolituse kaudu Eesti kontekstis

Kaasav haridus ja selle tähenduslik rakendamine on viimastel aastakümnetel olnud aktuaalne teema nii rahvusvaheliselt kui ka Eestis. Kaasava hariduse rakendamine on osutunud keeruliseks paljudes maades, sest see eeldab põhjalikke muutusi nii mõtteviisis kui ka hariduskorralduses (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020). Paljudes uuringutes on rõhutatud, et esmaseks takistuseks on sageli ühise arusaama puudumine kaasava hariduse tähendusest (Cameron, 2017; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). Põhjusena võib siin välja tuua asjaolu, et kaasava hariduse mõistet on erinevates rahvusvahelistes dokumentides defineeritud erineval viisil (vt nt UN, 2016; UNESCO, 1944, 2005, 2009). Kuna kaasava hariduse rakendamine on väga mitmetahuline ja keerukas protsess (Mitchell, 2015), siis on aegade vältel nendes definitsioonides olnud ka erinevad rõhuasetused nii sihtrühma osas, kellele kaasav haridus suunatud on, kui ka hariduskorralduse erinevates aspektides (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Haug, 2017). Lisaks tõstavad Meijer ja Watkins (2016) esile, et ühise arusaama kujundamist kaasavast haridusest mõjutavad ka sellised tegurid nagu riiklik hariduspoliitika ja seadusandlus. Siiski, kõige levinum lähenemine kaasavale haridusele on arusaam, et kõik õppijad olenemata nende erinevustest või vajadustest õpivad koos eakaaslastega samas klassiruumis oma elukohajärgses koolis ja neile tagatakse kvaliteetsed ning toetatud võimalused õpitulemuste saavutamiseks, arvestades igaühe arengupotentsiaali (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

Eestis on kaasava hariduse põhimõtte seadusandluse tasandil sätestatud alates 2010. aastast, mille kohaselt erivajadusega õppija õpib üldjuhul tavakooli tavaklassis koos eakaaslastega (Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumi ..., 2010). Alates seaduse jõustumisest on erivajadustega õppijate arv tavakoolides tõusnud, kuid samas on tõusnud ka tavakooli eriklassides õppivate õpilaste arv (Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem, 2021). Seega, kaasava hariduse ideoloogia rakendumine praktikas on jäänud siiski suurel määral segregeerivaks õppekorralduseks. Veelgi enam, Eestis läbiviidud uuringud (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Räs *et al.*, 2016) osundavad, et suhtumised kaasavasse haridusse ja arusaamad kaasava hariduse mõistest varieeruvad koolis töötavate õpetajate ja koolijuhid seas. Ühiste arusaamade kujundamisel on suur roll spetsialistidel, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel. Siiani ei ole uuritud, kuidas nimetatud spetsialistid ise kaasava hariduse põhimõtteid tõlgendavad ja milliseid faktoreid nad peavad oluliseks kaasava hariduse rakendamisel Eesti kontekstis.

Kuigi võtmeisikuks kaasava hariduse rakendamisel on kooli tasandil õpetaja, on paljudes uuringutes rõhutatud, et kaasava hariduse rakendamise edukus sõltub kogu kooli kui organisatsiooni võimekuse suurendamisest (Ainscow, 2020; Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018; Schuelka & Engsig, 2020). Siinjuures on esmatähtsaks peetud koolikultuuri kujundamist, mis põhineb ühistel arusaamadatel kaasava hariduse olemusest ja tähtsusest ning jagatud väärtustel kõikide laste õigusest olla

nii akadeemiliselt kui ka sotsiaalselt kaasatud oma elukohajärgses koolis (Eredics, 2018; Kinsella, 2018; Woodcook & Hardy, 2017). Kaasava koolikultuuri rakendamise eeldab aga ka struktuursete tegurite olemasolu ja arendamist organisatsiooni tasandil, milleks on eeskätt ressursid ning toe võimalused kõikidele osalistele (Markina, 2020; Schuelka, 2018). Ainscow (2020) on rõhutanud, et nii kultuuriliste kui ka struktuursete muutuste kavandamisel ja elluviimisel on võtmetähtsus koolide enesearendustegevusel. Siinjuures vajavad koolid nõustamist, et tõsta koolis töötavate spetsialistide professionaalsust muutuste kujundamisel (Kinsella, 2020).

Kooli tasandi olulisimateks spetsialistideks kaasava hariduse rakendamisel on õpetajad, tugispetsialistid ja koolijuhid (European Agency for ..., 2019a, 2019b, 2022c; Ricci et al., 2020). Nimetatud spetsialistide osatähtsusele ja rolli muutustele on viimastel aastatel pööratud suurt tähelepanu (European Agency for ..., 2022c). Siinjuures on esile tõstetud kõikide nende spetsialistide omavahelise koostöö tõhustamise vajadust (Hansen et al., 2020). Veelgi enam, kaasava hariduse erinevate tunnusjoonte rakendamise tõhustamisel on peetud oluliseks koolipõhiste meeskondlike koolitusprogrammide väljatöötamist ja elluviimist (Bjornsrud & Nilsen, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2017; Juma et al., 2017). Kuigi Eesti kontekstis on õpetajate kaasava hariduse teemaline esma- ja täienduskoolitus olnud viimastel aastatel fookuses, siis puuduvad tõendid selle kohta, kuidas toetada koole pika-ajalise täienduskoolituse kaudu koolide meeskondadele, kuhu on kaasatud õpetajad, tugispetsialistid ja koolijuhid. Eelnevast tulenevalt on käesoleva doktoritöö eesmärgiks uurida, kuidas spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel mõistavad kaasava hariduse tähendust ja kuidas toetada koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel koolide meeskondadele (õpetajad, tugispetsialistid, koolijuhid) disainitud täienduskoolituse kaudu Eesti kontekstis. Tulenevalt töö eesmärgist sõnastati viis uurimisküsimust:

1. Kuidas spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel, mõistavad kaasava hariduse tähendust?
2. Milliseid tegureid peavad spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole, oluliseks kaasava hariduse tulemuslikul rakendamisel?
3. Kuidas õpetajad, tugispetsialistid ja koolijuhid hindavad disainitud täienduskoolituse kursust kooli meeskondadele, et parendada kaasava hariduse rakendamist kooli tasandil?
4. Milliseid arendustegevusi kaasava hariduse rakendamisel viivad koolid ellu täienduskoolituse jooksul?
5. Millised tegurid mõjutavad koolide kavandatud ja elluviidud arendustegevusi täienduskoolituse jooksul?

Uurimisküsimustele vastuse saamiseks viidi läbi kolm empiirilist uuringut. Esimeses uuringus (uurimisküsimused 1 ja 2; Artikkel I) osalesid 15 spetsialisti, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel. Andmeid koguti poolstruktureeritud intervjuudega. Teise uuringu (uurimisküsimus 3; Artikkel II)

valimi moodustasid nelja kooli meeskonna liikmed (õpetajad, tugispetsialistid, koolijuhid), kes osalesid pika-ajalisel kaasava hariduse teemalisel täiendus-koolituskursusel, mille kogumaht oli 10 EAP. Valimi suuruseks oli 27 osalejat, igast koolist 4–6 õpetajat, tugispetsialist ja koolidirektor või õppejuht. Andmete kogumiseks kasutati poolstruktureeritud intervjuusid koolituse keskel ja ka koolituse lõpus iga kooli meeskonnaga eraldi. Lisaks pidid kõik koolitusel osalejad täitma kirjalikult avatud vastustega küsimustiku. Nii esimese kui ka teise uuringu puhul analüüsiti andmeid kvalitatiivse induktiivse sisuanalüüsi meetodil. Kolmanda, juhtumiuuringu puhul (uurimisküsimused 4 ja 5; Artikkel III) vähendati valimit kahele koolile ja valimi suuruseks oli 14 koolitusel osalejat. Teises uuringus kogutud andmeid (poolstruktureeritud intervjuud koolituse keskel ja lõpus, avatud vastustega kirjalik küsimustik) kasutati ka kolmanda uuringu puhul. Lisaks koguti täiendavaid andmeid järgmiste andmekogumisinstrumentidega: kooli poliitilised dokumendid (õppekava, toe osutamise süsteem, kooli strateegiline arengukava), koolituse jooksul antud kodused ülesanded ja uurijapäevik. Andmeid analüüsiti kvalitatiivse temaatilise analüüsi meetodil.

Esimese uurimisküsimuse (*Kuidas spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel, mõistavad kaasava hariduse tähendust?*) tulemused näitasid, et spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel, mõistavad kaasava hariduse tähendust ja selle rakendamise viise erinevalt. Olulise tunnusjoonena rõhutasid kõik uuritavad kõrge-kvaliteedilise haridusvõimaluse kättesaadavust kõikidele õpilastele, kuid sarnaselt varem õpetajate ja koolijuhtide seas läbiviidud uuringutega (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Räs et al., 2016) mõisteti kaasava hariduse rakenduslikku poolt erinevalt. Täpsemalt, kaasavat haridust operatsionaliseeriti nii kõikide õpilaste koosõppena tavakooli tavaklassis, õppena tavakooli eriklassides kui ka õppena erikoolides. Erinevad käsitlused kaasava hariduse praktilisest olemusest spetsialistide seas, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel, avaldavad omakorda mõju õpetajatele läbiviidavate esma- ja täienduskoolituste sisule ja seeläbi on kaasava hariduse alane koolitus või koolide nõustamine Eesti kontekstis ebaühtlane.

Teise uurimisküsimuse (*Milliseid tegureid peavad spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole, oluliseks kaasava hariduse tulemuslikul rakendamisel?*) raames selgus, et spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel, peavad kaasava hariduse rakendamisel kõige olulisemateks teguriteks koolitusvajadust, ressursside kättesaadavust, õpetajate toetamist ja motiveerimist ning koostööd erinevate osaliste vahel. Koolitusvajaduse osas tõsteti esile, et lisaks õpetajate koolitamisele vajavad koolitust ka teised koolis töötavad spetsialistid (tugispetsialistid ja koolijuhid). Erinevate osaliste koolitusvajaduse kirjeldamisel rõhutati mitmekesiste koolitusvõimaluste olemasolu vajadust. Kusjuures, oldi arvamusel, et ülikoolide juures tuleks välja töötada pikaajaline ja süsteemne kaasava hariduse teemaline täienduskoolitus, mis komplekselt kataks kõik vajalikud teemad. Seega, ka Eesti kontekstis tunti vajadust senisest paindlikumate ja kaasava hariduse rakendamisele fokusseeritud koolituskursuste loomise järele.

Lähtudes kolmandast uurimisküsimusest (*Kuidas õpetajad, tugispetsialistid ja koolijuhid hindavad disainitud täienduskoolituse kursust kooli meeskondadele, et parendada kaasava hariduse rakendamist kooli tasandil?*) võib väita, et õpetajatele, tugispetsialistidele ja koolijuhtidele disainitud pika-ajalise kaasava hariduse teemalise koolituskursuse (10 EAP) mahtu ja organisatoorse külge hindasid koolituses osalenud koolide meeskondade liikmed positiivselt. Koolitusel osalenud meeskonnad väärtustasid, et koolituse jooksul oli võimalik komplekselt tegelda koolisese kaasava hariduspoliitika kujundamisega, arvestades sealjuures riiklikku seadusandlikku tausta, õppijate heaolu tagamist ning lastevanemate rahulolu. Rõhutati, et juba teoreetilise raamistiku läbimise käigus kerkisid esile vaatekohad, millele varem ei olnud mõeldud ning see omakorda lõi hea fooni kaasava hariduse olemuse lahtimõtestamisel ning osundas vajalikele arendustegevustele kooli kui organisatsiooni tasandil. Lisaks väärtustati võimalust koolitusel osalemiseks meeskonnana, kuhu olid kaasatud erinevad koolis töötavad spetsialistid (õpetajad, tugispetsialistid, koolijuhid). Koolituse korraldust viisil, et osalevad nelja erineva kooli meeskonnad, hinnati samuti positiivselt. Tõsteti esile, et teistmoodi lähenemiste ja vaatenurkadega tutvumine võimaldab ka oma kooli olukorda analüüsida teistsuguse perspektiiviga ja teha muudatusi ka nendes valdkondades, mis seni on tundunud hästi toimivat. Siiski, tehti väärtuslikke ettepanekuid koolituse edasiseks parendamiseks. Nii osundati, et kooli õppekava kui kooli olulisima poliitilise dokumendiga oleks koolituse jooksul võinud isegi rohkem tegelda, et see oleks senisest enam tervikuna vastavuses kaasava hariduse põhimõtetega. Seda eriti olukorras, kus põhihariduse tasemel peavad koolid järgima kahte riiklikku õppekava, Põhikooli Riiklik Õppekava (2011) ja Põhikooli Lihtsustatud Riiklik Õppekava (2010). Lisaks toodi veel välja, et rohkem oleks võinud olla mõtteviisi kujundavaid diskussioone, koolid oleksid soovinud koolituse jooksul individuaalset nõustamist ning koostöö edendamise eesmärgil oleksid võinud osadel koolitussessioonidel osaleda ka koolivälised spetsialistid (nt lastekaitsetöötajad).

Neljandale uurimisküsimusele (*Milliseid arendustegevusi kaasava hariduse rakendamisel viivad koolid ellu täienduskoolituse jooksul?*) vastuste saamiseks läbiviidud juhtumiuuringu tulemused näitasid, et meeskondlik täienduskoolitus toetab kooli tasandil nii kultuuriliste kui ka struktuursete arendustegevuste kavandamist ja elluviimist. Kahe kooli võrdlevast analüüsist selgus, et koolituse jooksul läheneti kaasava hariduse mõiste lahtimõtestamisele ja väärtuste sõnastamisele erinevalt. Esimesel juhul toimusid koolituse alguses arutelud kõikide osalistega ja otsustati kujundada koolist kaasava hariduse põhimõtteid järgiv kool, kus eriklasse ei moodustata. Teise juhtumi puhul järgiti varem sõnastatud visiooni ja väärtusi, mis koolitatavate arvates järgis kaasava hariduse põhimõtteid. Koolituse jooksul otsustati aga kaasava hariduse tähendus kooli dokumentides selgemalt sõnastada ja seda kooliga seotud osalistele kommunikeerida. Mõlemal juhul pöörati suurt tähelepanu ja viidi läbi tegevusi turvalise keskkonna kujundamisega nii õpilastele kui ka õpetajatele. Struktuursete muutuste osas tegelesid mõlemad koolid oma dokumentide (õppekava, toe osutamise süsteem, kooli arengukava)

korrastamise ja uuendamiseks selleks, et kaasava hariduse põhimõtete rakendamiseks oleksid kõikidele osapooltele konkreetsemad toimivad juhised. Siiski, eesmärgid ja tegevused selles osas olid erinevad. Esimese juhtumi puhul oli seatud sihiks, et koolituse lõpuks on koostatud kooli arengukava ja see eesmärk ka saavutati. Teise juhtumi puhul kooli arengukava koostamisega otseselt ei tegeldud, analüüsiti hetkeolukorda ja arendamist vajavaid valdkondi, et peale koolitust hakata tegelema kooli arengukava uuendamisega.

Viienda uurimisküsimuse (*Millised tegurid mõjutavad koolide kavandatud ja elluviidud arendustegevusi täienduskoolituse jooksul*) tulemustest selgus, et olulisimad tegurid koolide enesearendustegevuste kavandamisel ja elluviimisel kaasava hariduse valdkonnas olid eestvedamine, pühendumus, koostöö, kogu süsteemi hõlmav lähenemine, ressursid ja väline ekspertiis. Paremaid tulemusi saavutati juhul, kui kogu protsessi oli määratud eestvedama konkreetne isik, kusjuures koolijuht oli aktiivne töörühma liige. Koolitavad tajusid, et lisaks nende endi pühendumusele kaasava kooli kujundamisel oleksid nad soovinud suuremat riigi ja kohaliku omavalitsuse poolset panust kaasava hariduskorralduse rakendamisel kooli igapäevaelus. Selleks, et kooliarendustegevustele läheneda süsteemi-ülevalt, tunnetati vajadust ka suuremaks koostööks nii koolisiselt kui ka kooliväliselt. Samuti rõhutati ressursside (ajaline, inim- ja finantsressurss) ja välise ekspertiisi olemasolu vajadust.

Kirjeldatud tulemused võimaldavad anda soovitusi kaasava haridussüsteemi võimestamiseks Eesti kontekstis. Kuna kaasavat haridust on nii rahvusvaheliselt kui ka Eestis defineeritud erineval viisil, siis see on loonud olukorra, kus selle rakenduslikku tähendust mõistetakse siiani erinevalt. Ühiste arusaamade puudumine isegi spetsialistide seas, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole kaasava hariduse rakendamisel, ei taga õpetajate ja koolide kui organisatsioonide ühtlast ettevalmistust kõikide õppijate tähendusliku koosõppe korraldamisel. Seega, kaasava hariduse operatsionaliseeritud mõistele tuleks rohkem tähelepanu pöörata, algatada ühiskondlikke debatte, kellele ja milleks kaasav haridus oluline on ning viia seadusandlus kooskõlla kaasava hariduse põhimõtetega. See omakorda tagaks, et spetsialistid, kes koolitavad või nõustavad koole, käsitleksid kaasava hariduse teemat ühiste arusaamade kohaselt ning seeläbi aitaksid kaasava hariduse rakenduslikku tähendust levitada kõikide kõikide haridussüsteemis töötavate spetsialistide seas. Siiski, oluline on arvestada asjaoluga, et kaasava hariduse rakendamine on mitmetahuline protsess ja hõlmab kogu kooli tasandi arendustegevusi.

Kuna üha enam rõhutatakse koostöise õppimise tähtsust ja koolide enesearendustegevusi kaasava hariduse rakendamisel (Ainscow, 2020; Sharma et al., 2018; Ricci et al., 2020), siis pika-ajalised meeskondlikud täienduskoolitused, kus osalevad kooli tasandi erinevad professionaalid (õpetajad, tugispetsialistid, koolijuhid) toetavad kogu kooli lähenemist süsteemi-üleste arendustegevuste kavandamisel ja elluviimisel. Täienduskoolituse võimaluste loomine heterogeensetele gruppidele (kooli tasandi erinevad professionaalid, erinevad koolide meeskonnad) võimaldab luua laiemat pilti kaasava hariduse võtmekomponentidest, mida arvestada koolide enesearendustegevustes ja viia ellu nii kultuurilisi kui ka

struktuurseid muutusi organisatsiooni tasandil. Siiski, kaasava hariduse rakendamine on pikaajaline ja pidev haridussüsteemi võimendamise protsess (UN, 2016) ja selleks, et toetada kogu süsteemi hõlmavaid muutusi kooli tasandil, on samavõrd oluline, et nii riiklikul kui kohaliku omavalitsuse tasandil toimuks kaasava hariduse põhimõtte rakendamisel eestvedamine ühiselt määratletud sihiseadega ja tulemusindikaatoritega, mis mõõdavad tähendusliku kaasamise tulemuslikkust.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview plan of Study 1

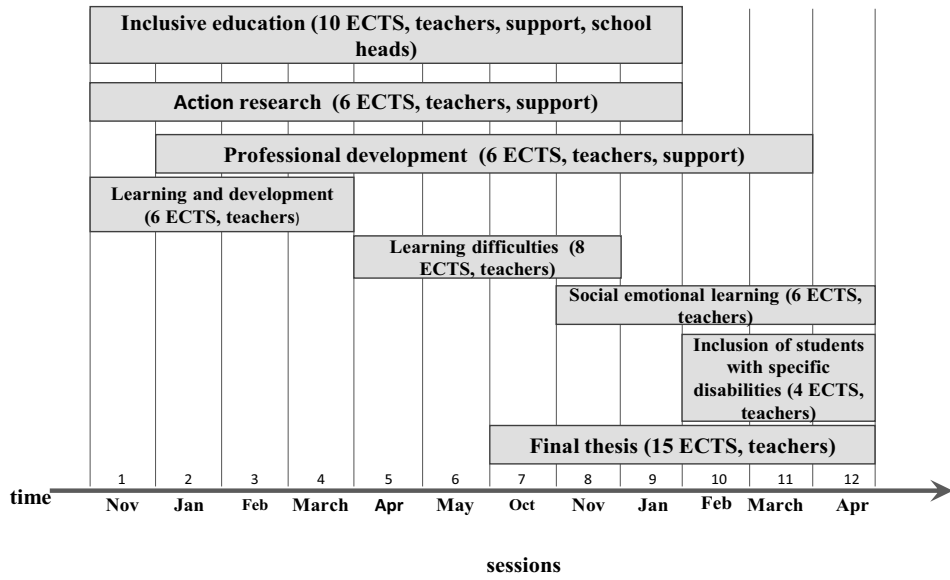
1. How do specialists who train or advice schools in the implementation of IE understand the meaning of IE?

- 1.1. What does IE mean to you?
- 1.2. What does education of a learner with SEN mean to you?
- 1.3. How does IE differ from education aimed at learners with special needs?
- 1.4. How should IE be implemented in school?
- 1.5. How should learning aimed at learners with SEN be implemented in the context of IE?
- 1.6. What could be the benefits of IE for both students with special needs and students without SEN?

2. What factors do specialists who train or advice schools consider important for the effective implementation of IE?

- 2.1. What do you think needs to be done for IE to be implemented in the classroom?
- 2.2. What are the main needs of teachers to better implement IE?
- 2.3. In your opinion, what kind of teacher competencies (knowledge and skills) are important in implementing the practice of IE?
- 2.4. What or who has the most influence on the acquisition of teachers' competences in the implementation of IE practices?
- 2.5. What available resources could teachers use to support all children?
- 2.6. What are the day-to-day barriers to supporting all children in an inclusive classroom?
- 2.7. What should be done (state, local government, school level) that teachers are competent to implement IE practices?

Appendix 2. Overview of the training programme



Appendix 3. Interview plan in the middle of the training course

How do teachers, support specialists and school leaders evaluate the in-service training course designed for school teams to improve the implementation of IE at the school level?

1. What are the opinions of the school team about the content of the training?

- 1.1. How do you assess the necessity of the topics covered in the training course?
- 1.2. What have been the most important topics for your school?
- 1.3. What other topics do you think are necessary?

2. What are the opinions of the school team about the volume of the training course?

- 2.1. How do you evaluate the volume of the training course?
- 2.2. Which topics would you have liked more time for?
- 2.3. What topics did we spend too much time?

3. What are the opinions of the school team about the organization of the training?

- 3.1. How do you evaluate the organizational side of the training course (once a month for a whole day)?
- 3.2. How do you evaluate the structure of the training days – lecture vs. group work?
- 3.3. How do you evaluate the usefulness and amount of the home assignments?
- 3.4. What are the suggestions to make the training course more practical?

4. What are the opinions of the school team about team training on IE?

- 4.1. How do you evaluate the participation in the training course as a team of your school with different professionals?
- 4.2. What are the advantages of team-based training course?
- 4.3. What are the disadvantages of team-based training course?
- 4.4. How do you evaluate participation in the training course with teams from other schools?
- 4.5. What should be the principles of school teams' selection when planning the training course?

What else would you like to add?

Appendix 4. Interview plan after the end of the training course

1. What development activities do schools carry out in implementing IE during the in-service training course?

- 1.1. What were the most important problems in the implementation of IE before the start of the training?
- 1.2. What development activities on IE have you implemented in the school during the training course?
- 1.3. How have you achieved these activities?
- 1.4. How has the school's development activities affected common understandings of IE?
- 1.5. How has the school's development activities affected the school's culture in implementing the principles of IE?
- 1.6. What other changes do you plan to implement?
- 1.7. How do you plan to implement further changes?

2. What factors affect the development activities planned and carried out in implementing IE during the in-service training course?

- 2.1. What have been the supporting factors within the school in the implementation of development activities?
- 2.2. What have been the hindering factors within the school?
- 2.3. How can the obstacles within the school be overcome?
- 2.4. What have been the barriers outside of school?
- 2.5. How could out of school hindering factors be overcome?
- 2.6. What kind of support would you need from outside the school in planning further activities?
- 2.7. Which activities would you have needed more the training course support for? What kind of support?

3. Summary interview questions

- 3.1. What is your overall opinion about the need for team training course on IE?
- 3.2. How do you evaluate the necessity of the topics covered in the training course?
- 3.3. What are the suggestions for conducting further training courses for school teams?

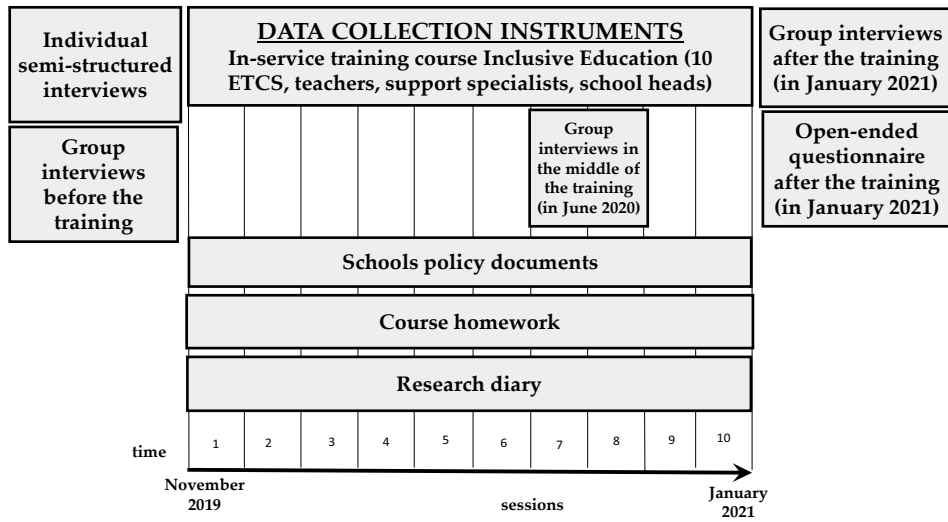
Appendix 5. Individual open-ended questionnaire

Background information

Profession (teacher, support specialist or school leader):

1. What has been my role in the planning of the school's development activities within the team in-service training course? Give examples.
2. What has been my role in the implementation of the planned development activities?
3. What are the most important factors influencing learning as a team?
4. What are the most important factors influencing collaborative school development activities?
5. What are the expectations for the trainer?
6. What knowledge and skills does the trainer need when conducting a training course for school teams?
7. What kind of personality traits must a trainer have?
8. How can a trainer support in-school development activities in the implementation of IE?
9. What else would you like to add about the training course?

Appendix 6. Data collection instruments



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