

Life Changing: Results of a Qualitative Study on the Project Inclusive Education

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Abstract

The German Institute for Inclusive Education (affiliated to the Christian Albrechts University in Kiel and in partnership with the Drachensee Foundation) tackles, worldwide unique, the social isolation of people with intellectual disabilities via qualifying them in full-time over three years to be fully paid lecturers at universities. Participants have been diagnosed with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities. The group of currently more than 30 participants is diverse and includes further diagnoses such as autism, trisomy 21, speech and physical impairments. All of them worked in a sheltered workshop before, which is a requirement to apply for participating. The qualification includes four theoretical modules (education system, participation, inclusion and techniques of educational work) and a practical module (teaching experiences in universities). The qualification participants learn how to educate students without intellectual disabilities on the life realities of people with intellectual disabilities in all areas of life. This paper presents the results of qualitative interviews with four participants who just finished their qualification with two leading questions: How do you appraise your personal and professional development after participating on the qualification? What kind of changes regarding your personal life do you expect after transitioning from working in a sheltered workshop to the regular labour market? Main results include the gaining of an unexpected amount of social capital, increased self-confidence, development of educational skills, and a pleasant anticipation of a massive increase of self-determination.

Keywords: inclusion, disability, education

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Introduction

The German Institute for Inclusive Education (affiliated to the Christian Albrechts University in Kiel and in partnership with the Drachensee Foundation) provides a worldwide unique concept: people with intellectual disabilities – former employees of sheltered workshops for disabled people (Werkstätten für behinderte Menschen) – complete a three-year full-time qualification to become university lecturers.

Participants have been diagnosed with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities. The group of currently more than 30 participants is diverse and includes e.g. further diagnoses such as autism, trisomy 21, speech and physical impairments. Within the qualification, the participants learn through a modularised programme how to deliver high quality educational services, such as lectures, seminars or workshops, for university students without intellectual disabilities. Over the course of the qualification, their workplaces in the workshops for disabled people are kept free, so that an immediate return is possible at any time if one qualification participant wants to do so. So far, nobody made use of that. After the qualification, the trained people with intellectual disabilities work fully paid as educational specialists at universities. They provide educational services on a high level and receive an appropriate salary for their work. Therefore, the project tackles the high percentage of unemployment amongst people with intellectual disabilities.

The qualification consists of five modules. The first module is on employment, learning, the labour market and the education system; the second module focuses on participation, normality and involvement, society, politics and legislation, support services and the individual current situation of each participant; within the third module – which takes place at semester two, four and five – the qualification attendees develop their educational skills in real teaching scenarios in different universities; the fourth module runs consistently from start to finish and is on methods, tools and techniques of educational work. Overall, this well-founded training enables the so-called educational specialists to provide high quality educational services. Different course formats are possible: They can e.g. offer lectures, workshops or full-semester seminars (van Essen, 2017).

The content of the teaching of the people with intellectual disabilities focuses on the general aspects of life, such as education, work, leisure, culture and health. The life-realities of the university students without intellectual disabilities and individuals living with intellectual disabilities are significantly different – an aspect which does become known repeatedly during the teaching sessions. This does not surprise as people with intellectual disabilities in Germany are systematically excluded. In preschool settings, about 70 percent of children with disabilities are still growing up together with children without disabilities, e.g. in institutions like the Kindergarten (Klemm, 2015). However, only about 12 percent of pupils with intellectual disabilities attend mainstream schools, whereas the remaining 88 percent learn in special schools. More than 90 percent of former pupils of special schools transition to sheltered workshops (BMAS, 2008). Moreover, less than one percent change from sheltered workshops to employments on the regular labour market (Becker, 2017): "In Germany there is practically no permeability from sheltered workshops for disabled people to the general labour market" (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes, 2013, p. 17). About 60 percent of adults with intellectual disabilities live with their parents

(Groß, 2014) and the majority of the rest lives in residential facilities (Teilhabebericht, 2016). Ultimately, these specialised settings over the whole lifespan lead to a minimum of contacts between people without intellectual disabilities – except for people who work in these settings, e.g. as intellectual disability nurses (Heilerziehungspfleger) or special educators (Heilpädagoge) – and people with intellectual disabilities.

The confrontation with people with intellectual disabilities as university lectures enables the university students to gain a valuable change of perspective, development of a more inclusion-orientated attitude and expanded knowledge on disability and inclusion (Krämer & Zimmermann, 2018).

Also for the university, there are benefits. During the qualification and especially afterwards the work of the educational specialists with learning disabilities becomes an essential factor of a region's university landscape. The lectures, seminars and workshops are an integral part of the universities' curricula in different courses of study. Thus, the project drives forward a region's approaches on inclusivity, equality and diversity awareness.

As for the participants of the qualification, in this paper findings of a qualitative study by the author on the perspectives of the participants are presented. Four participants (three male and one female) were interviewed right at the end of their qualification. At that time, they already knew that their jobs on the first labour market were secured and the interviews happened right before their transition. The average duration of the interviews was 37 minutes and they took place in the qualification facilities the participants were very familiar with. The two leading questions were: How do you appraise your personal and professional development after participating on the qualification? What kind of changes regarding your personal life do you expect after transitioning from working in a sheltered workshop to the regular labour market? The semi-structured interviews were analysed by qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2000).

Conclusion

The qualitative content analysis resulted in the five main categories educational skills, self-confidence, social capital and self-determination. The findings are illustrated by quotations of one participant.

All interviewees reported an intense development of educational skills, which enables them to deliver high quality educational services in different formats. Whilst they know that they do not replace scientific lectures of university professors, they are very aware of their exceptional expertise of experienced people: "We have unique knowledge that nobody else has and we are experts on what it is like to live with a disability. With this knowledge, we can break down prejudices and defeat barriers. Also, this is how we are raising awareness in our society" (I2, l. 73-74). The experience of using services for people with disabilities and of living in a society that is not designed for people with intellectual disability combined with an advanced set of educational skills enables the qualification participants to reach the university students in an unprecedented way – and they are aware of their unique position and want to make use of it: "So sometimes I have the feeling that (...) the students, who

have never been in contact [with disabled people] are kind of disabled as well through fear and inexperience. However, you can de-disable yourself. That's what we are doing with our seminars" (I2, l. 115-117). All interviewees told the interviewer about developing educational skills that enabled them to have impacts on the university students similar to the quoted one. This was a process though, since the participants – who used to learn, live and work in specialised contexts before – were quite stressed and insecure when they started to gain teaching experiences in real university settings at the beginning of their qualification.

At the end of the three years though, they look back at a steady improvement of self-confidence: "That I'm, for example, able to speak more fluid in front of other people; that I feel more self-assured and confident. (...) Through the self-confidence that I gained in the project I am now able (...) to approach other people more openly" (I2, l. 325-327). This is an effect of the trust in the development-capability of the participants, which is a fundamental principle of the project. Whilst all of the interviewees made experiences of labelling processes and therefore of a lack of trust in their capabilities before, one pivotal idea of the Institute of Inclusive Education is to think that everyone is capable of personal and professional development. This did not only pay off with respect to educational skills and self-confidence.

All interviewees also extended their social capital in an unexpected amount. Before the qualification, typically for people with intellectual disabilities most of their contacts were colleagues of the sheltered workshops, family and professionals of the disability services system (Behindertenhilfe). In the course of the qualification though, they have met – among others – professors, university students and project sponsors; they also attended at conferences and further training session; they promoted the project all over Germany (and in the UK). The Institute of Inclusive Education is supported by a networking forum made up of administration, politics, self-help associations, universities and technical schools, as well as people with disabilities. This illustrates how radical the qualification participation already changed the shapes of the participants' life. The attendee describes it as follows: "Because I surpassed myself I am able to talk differently with other people (...). Three years ago, it was very different. These three years have totally changed me" (I2, l. 361-364).

Furthermore, the qualification enables a very unusual career step: the transition from employment in a sheltered workshop for disabled people to the general labour market. The resulting changes offer new opportunities for the educational professionals. These changes especially imply new possibilities of living a self-determined life. They are much less dependent of disability services and have more options of deciding what kind of a life style they wish to live, as they earn enough money to do so: "That means we can be more independent; we are not as tied up as before and (...) we can live our lives in a more free and self-determined way" (I2, l. 272-274).

This result of a more self-determined life is characteristic for the whole project. "Nothing about us without us!", this guiding principle of the international disability movement is consistently pursued through the qualification. The institute's approach is linked to at least three articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The right to education (article 24) is strengthened in particular by the provision of a high-quality qualification. Raising awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities (article 8) takes place through the unique nature of university

teaching through lectures with intellectual disabilities. In addition, the very few employment opportunities on the general labour market (article 27) are being expanded.

Inclusion, understood as a systemic structural approach, integrates the broad social context of diversity. That is why inclusion-oriented innovations have to break through traditional thought patterns and question the often overly clear focus on homogeneous group constructions. In their new roles as teachers, people with intellectual disabilities are given access to an educational world in which up to now – if at all – they have primarily operated as research objects and not as educating subjects. The starting point of the Institute of Inclusive Education is to recognize the disability experience as valuable expertise. The strength of the project is in particular that the experience of living with a disability can be used as valuable expertise for everyone. The project's levels of impact are multiple. The overall vision of an inclusive society – which no longer needs the additional term 'inclusive' – is also recognizable in the interviewee's words: "I would like it to be more common that you don't see the disability of the person, but what distinguishes the person themselves. (...) That it becomes a matter of course one day (...) that you don't need the term inclusion anymore – that it's simply there" (I2, l. 448-452).

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