Chapter 3

Inclusion, Intercultural Education, and Universal Design for Learning in Initial Teacher Training:
Perceptions of Students of Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Initial teacher training must accept the challenge of diversity from an inclusive and intercultural approach by incorporating universal design for learning (UDL) into the preparation of future teachers. The aim of this study is to discover the perception of UDL, inclusion, and intercultural education of early childhood education degree students at Universitat Jaume I (Spain). It is a descriptive, qualitative study in which 23 students participated through focus groups and individual and group interviews. The results show difficulties in defining the concepts and seeing them applied in university teaching. In conclusion, there is a need to extend the presence and focus on inclusion and intercultural education in university study plans and teaching, with greater student involvement and improved communication and teaching coordination, in order to introduce UDL as a transversal principle.

INTRODUCTION

UNESCO has recently published a teaching needs assessment to implement inclusive education. The report concludes that most of the teachers interviewed perceive their performance as good with regard to implementing inclusive education based on beliefs, knowledge, and actions. However, they consider that they need a better understanding of a) the characteristics of students with some kind of disability (e.g., hearing, visual, intellectual or physical disabilities, autism spectrum, high abilities, etc.), b) curricular adjustments, educational strategies, and technological applications, and c) early intervention in students' emotional problems (Sandoval, 2023). The literature on the need to incorporate the issue of diversity and inclusion into teacher training programmes is extensive. In Australia, for instance, the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* include references to diversity, such as getting to know students and how they learn, and refer to students from different linguistic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds (AITSL, 2017). However, despite the growing interest in teacher training, studies in different countries (USA, Canada, Korea, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, and France) continue to show that, for many teachers, including the newly graduated, groups of students labelled generically as "diverse" still present a considerable challenge (Rowan et al., 2020). Therefore, within the framework of higher education, enhancing more inclusive and intercultural education is a priority challenge. It is not only about making changes to the curriculum and teaching, but also to the roles of teaching staff and to initial teacher training programmes. Moreover, universities have committed to meeting sustainable development goals (SDGs) before 2030, leaving no one behind, to generate an unstoppable movement that will boost the transformations required (Salvador & Vargas, 2023). To this end they are called to integrate an inclusive and intercultural approach to their educational policies and programmes. Specifically with SDGs 4 and 10, on inclusive education and reducing inequality, universities can foster initiatives so that their members can work towards acknowledging and celebrating diversity in university policies.

Curricular training within the field of Design for All and a raft of educational policies have in recent years been driven by the most important international bodies, such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations. This idea not only takes into consideration the social group of people with disabilities, but refers to society as a whole and the relations of each individual with the rest of their environment. In the Spanish university setting, since 2014, Crue Universidades Españolas have promoted a project on curricular training in Design for All, in several areas of knowledge. In recent times, universal design for learning (UDL) has become a model for reformulating education by providing a conceptual framework and tools to analyse and assess curricular designs and educational practices. It also helps identify

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