








Fostering Psychological Readiness in Student Educators for Working in Inclusive Groups at the Preschool Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was how the volunteer internship programme fosters psychological readiness in graduate student educators for working in inclusive groups at the preschool institutions. The study relies on quantitative methods to measure the dependent variables in the sampled group of participants before (pre-test) and after (post-test) a treatment. The qualitative method such as the focus-group semi-structured interview was used to validate the data yielded from the above measurements. The students' efficacy in inclusive practices and resilience were the variables for the study. The volunteer internship programme for the student preschool teachers was effective and brought both tangible and intangible benefits to the students. Due to participation in the programme, the students boosted their professional competence, personal strength, and social efficacy with their colleagues and peers. The study contributed to the existing research in terms of the integrated use of influences on the students' psychological readiness. The psychological readiness to work with the inclusive children was regarded as the element of student teachers' self-efficacy which was supposed to be trained using certain educational strategies. It also added to the research on the ways of training (teacher) students' resilience and best practices of teacher support and using internships to make the student teachers familiar with the repertoire of inclusive teaching and adapt them to the inclusive environment.

Keywords: Preschool higher education, Graduate student educators, Psychological readiness, Inclusive groups, Preschool institutions.

1. Introduction

Training the student educators to be ready to work in inclusive groups at the preschool institutions complies with the Action Plan (2019-2025) developed to implement Montenegro Inclusive Education Strategy for 2019-2025 [1] seen as a follow-up document to the UNESCO Salamanca Statement [2] outlining principles, policies, and practice in special needs education. In this regard, a lack of psychological readiness in educators seems to be the greatest issue when implementing the strategy. The behavior of the children, especially the preschool ones, with disabilities or disorders often cause burnout to educators, their disinterest in the job, and can be the reason to leave the job. The psychological readiness is closely related to the resilience as 'readiness' is defined as the performance of functions and pursuing excellence through meeting challenges [3, 4] and 'psychological readiness' is referred to as the awareness and the ability to withstand the stress and difficulties. In this regard, psychological readiness might be addressed as a set of four overlapping components such as emotional, reflexive, cognitive, and axiological [5]. Viewing the psychological readiness of the preschool student educators for working in the inclusive environment as a complex pedagogical and psychological phenomenon that combines teacher professional self-efficacy and resilience, this study intended to create the programme that could bring benefits to the students in both their professional competence and personal strength.

2. Literature Review

Having examined the relevant literature, it was found that psychological readiness is commonly referred to as the set of processes related to mental, motivational, emotional, and selective activity [6]. This fits the overall didactic purposes as the preschool teachers are expected to regulate children's behaviours in an integrated manner. Moreover, according to [7] the indicator of the effectiveness of the education process is the ones motivation. It is commonly the result of the students' achievements in their cognitive activity. The motivation, which then turns into positive thoughts, raises the children's emotional state. In this regard, the teachers' psychological readiness can also be defined as their ability and skills to create the environment that motivates the children achieve adequate results in their studies and to assess the effectiveness of this environment [4, 6]. Thus, it is crucial to train the student teachers' self-efficacy for the inclusive practices seen as a component of the psychological readiness to work in the inclusive preschool environment [7-10]. Besides, the students' resilience is an indispensable part of psychological readiness as well [11-13]. However, the system of teachers'-to-be professional training, in particular those who are supposed to work in inclusive classes is inefficient as it is disintegrated. It does not provide the student teachers with the on-job opportunities so that the graduates could try out their teaching skills the framed conditions before the graduates are hired. All of these make this study feasible as the volunteer internship programme is intended to develop the psychological readiness of the pre-service teachers who are trained to work with the preschool students with special needs.

The purpose of the study was how the volunteer internship programme fosters psychological readiness in graduate student educators for working in inclusive groups at the preschool institutions. The research questions were as follows: 1) to identify how the volunteer internship programme addresses the students' efficacy for inclusive practices and their resilience, and 2) to identify how the students perceived the volunteer internship programme.

The research hypotheses were set as follows:

H0: There is no dependence of the students' efficacy for inclusive practices and their resilience on the involvement of the sampled students into the volunteer internship programme.

H1: There is the dependence of the students' efficacy for inclusive practices and their resilience on the involvement of the sampled students into the volunteer internship programme.

3. Methods

The study relies on quantitative methods to measure the dependent variables in the sampled group of participants before (pre-test) and after (post-test) a treatment. The qualitative method such as the focus-group semi-structured interview was used to validate the data yielded from the above measurements [14]. The students' efficacy to work in the inclusive settings and the resilience comprising the domains such as vision, composure, tenacity, reasoning, collaboration, and physiological health were used as the variables for the study.

3.1. Research Design

The study was a quasi-experimental research of convergent type utilising a one-group pre-test-post-test design to monitor the variables [15, 16]. This was a three-phased study lasting from September 2018 to the end of February 2020. It involved preparatory, pre-intervention, and post-intervention stages. During the preparation stage, the relevant literature and best practices were examined; the theoretical framework and the internship guide were designed. The agreements with the host privately-owned kindergartens were signed. The approval from the Board of Academics to run the projects was obtained. At the intervention stage, sampling was conducted and the sampled students were instructed to work in preschool inclusive groups. The pre-test measurements of the variables were made. The internship programme was run under the supervision of the mentors. At the post-intervention stage, post-test measurements were made followed by administering the focus group interview. The data were consolidated and processed (see Figure 1 that presents the research flow).

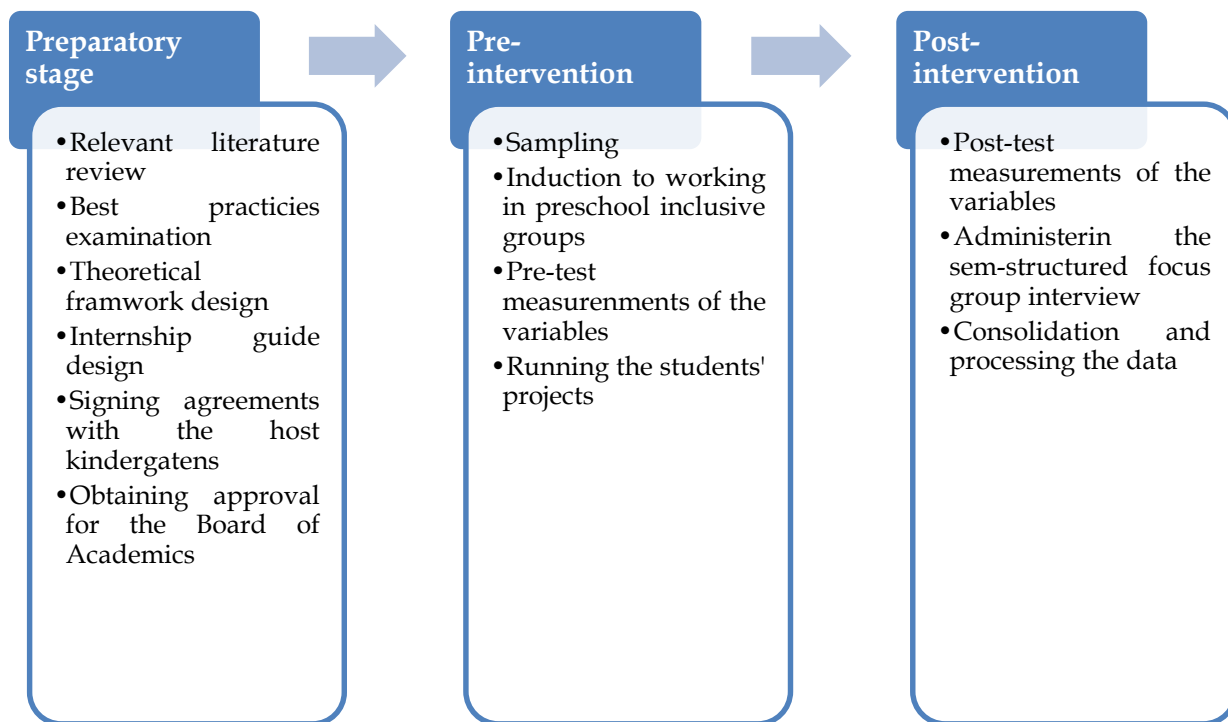


Figure 1. Research flow

3.2. The Outline of the Volunteer Internship Programme

The programme relied on a flexible schedule. However, the students were expected to attend the host kindergarten every working day and stay there for at least two hours in full view of children. The programme included two modules such as first, induction training on inclusion in the preschool environment, specifically, second, the internship which was split into three periods: i) observation and adaptation; ii) assistance; iii) autonomous teaching (observed or assisted by the mentor). Throughout the induction training, the invited teachers shared their experience, engaged the students in the analysis of the situations. As the surveillance system is a prerequisite in some kindergartens, the students watched live videos and analysed the children's behaviours, discussed in groups, and worked out their solutions to surmount some difficulties related to children and their parents. At the internship stage, the students were supposed to train their observational and reflection skills, socialising skills, assistance skills like helping the children in the class and outdoors, and teaching skills for the inclusive preschool environment. Additionally, the sampled students installed and used the Driven Resilience App. This App was intended to build up the students' confidence as teachers, to train the students to manage their stress, increase their motivation, and proactively address challenges.

3.3. Sampling

The convenience sampling method was utilised to select 37 graduate students from the population of 93 students seeking a Master's degree in Preschool education at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University. They were assigned to do their internship in one of 8 kindergartens in Kyiv, Ukraine. The sampled group was considered mutually homogeneous because the students obtained education in the same field of specialism [17]. The consolidated additional characteristics of the sampled group are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The characteristics of the sampled students

Characteristic		n (%)	p-value
Gender	Males	4 (10.81)	0.1081
	Females	33 (89.19)	
Mode of study	Full-time	17 (45.94)	0.101
	Extra-mural	20 (54.06)	
Age	22-23	12 (32.43)	0.172
	23-24	25 (67.57)	
Mean grades (ECTS)	Males	79.12%	0.219
	Females	83.71%	

The sampling method was chosen because it fitted the objectives of the project that was implemented in this study and it was recommended by [18] as it allowed unsystematically recruiting individuals to participate in the study.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the sampled students before the study to address the issues of privacy and anonymity. The students were informed about the inappropriateness of any offensive or discriminatory behaviours or verbalised formulations expressed towards the children. The respondents were also informed about the voluntary involvement in the intervention.

3.5. Instruments

The variables were measured using the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices Scale (TEIPS) and Predictive 6-Factor Resilience Scale-16-items (PR6).

The TEIPS relies on 18 items that are split into three sections such as the respondents' ability to apply the educational strategies to promote inclusion, the respondents' ability to manage students' behaviour in the classroom and the respondents' awareness and ability to cooperate with parents, their colleagues and other professionals. The validity of the instrument was performed through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test. This was intended to evaluate the exploratory factor analysis (EFA). A value for the factor load that was greater than 0.45 was considered sufficient. The obtained mean value for the factor loading was 0.68 which was considered "good" [19]. The scale relied on the six-point Likert scale (1 meant 'total disagreement' up to 6 meaning 'total agreement'). The score 1 and 2 (under 4) meant the low level of efficacy (ability), the scores 3 to 4 (under 5) meant the moderate level of efficacy (ability), and the scores between 5 and 6 were interpreted as the high level of efficacy (ability).

The Predictive 6-Factor Resilience Scale (16 items) was chosen because it is based on the neurobiological underpinnings of resilience and the theorised relationship with health hygiene factors [20, 21]. The PR6 is intended to measure resilience comprehensively. The scale covers interrelated domains such as self-efficacy and goal-setting which are categorised as a vision; emotional regulation and the ability to recognise, interpret, and act on internal action clues and physical indicators that are classified as a composure; determination and self-assurance which are classified as a tenacity; higher cognitive characteristics such as solving the problem, creativity, and thriving which go under the reasoning abilities domain; psychosocial interaction which includes humor, context, secure attachment, and support networks to be used as a platform for collaboration; and a physiological health domain. The scale uses the 5-point Likert scale (1 means not at all like me (most negative), 2 means 'a bit like me', 3 corresponds to 'somewhat like me,' 4 means 'often like me,' and 5 is 'very much like me' (most positive).) The scale was validated by the developers and showed high internal consistency (0.9372) [21]. For the above reason, the PR6 was chosen as an effective measurement and assessment tool that fits the purpose of this research.

Semi-structured Focus-group Interview Questionnaire

The interview relied on 5 open-ended questions. The questions were arranged to correspond to the questioning stage-wise approach. Those questions were for opening the interview, for transitioning to the core of the interview and for ending it. The respondents were randomly selected to volunteer in the interview. To cope with the biasing effect, the interviews were administered by three members of the Ukrainian NGO of "Association of Pre-school Educators". The focus group interview was administered as recommended by [22]. The interviewees' responses were recorded, transcribed, and translated in English. The answers were then rated and coded. IBM SPSS Statistics software was used to process the data. A p-value of less than 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$) was considered statistically significant.

1. What are your overall impressions of participation in the volunteer internship programme?
2. What caused those positive or negative feelings?
3. Could you evaluate the usefulness of the programme in terms of addressing your professional efficacy for inclusive practices and your resilience? Explain your reasons.
4. Would you recommend this programme to your peers? Why?
5. What would you suggest doing so that this programme was more beneficial to the students? Explain your reasons.

4. Results

Overall, the differences in students' pre-test and post-test measurements revealed that the volunteer internship programme can foster psychological readiness in graduate student educators for working in inclusive groups at the preschool institutions. The above was supported by the data yielded from the TEIPS and PR6-based measurements. The scores suggest that the students' efficacy for inclusive practices and their resilience enhanced due to involving them in the volunteer internship programme. Additionally, the students' perceptions of the volunteer internship programme were generally positive. Below the quantitative data drawn from pre-test and post-test measurements and the qualitative data are presented separately.

4.1. Quantitative Data

The pre-test and post-test values yielded from the TEIPS are presented in Table 2. The scale (TEIPS) comprises three components such as instructive strategies for the inclusion purpose, classroom management and teacher's commitment to cooperation.

Table 2. The pre-test and post-test values yielded from the TEIPS

Scale component	Median		SD		Probability and the Normal Distribution	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Instructive strategies for the inclusion purpose	4	4.6	1.59	1.31	0.028	0.0029
Classroom management	2.7	3.9	2.27	1.97	0.175	0.064
Teacher's commitment to cooperation	3.1	4.7	2.31	1.73	0.143	0.015

The positive change can be observed in all the components when comparing the pre-test and post-test values for Median. This indicated that there was an improvement in the inclusion instructive skills of the sampled EG students and the latter showed improvement in their awareness of establishing collaborative relationship with parents, children's relatives, colleagues and other professionals. The results of the measurements based on the PR6-based scale that was administered prior to and when the intervention was completed are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The pre-test and post-test values yielded from the PR6-based scale

Item	Mean*		SD		Variance, σ^2	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Q1	3.27	4.11	0.89	0.87	0.81	0.64
Q2	3.37	3.67	0.48	0.49	0.24	0.71
Q3	3.89	4.23	0.97	0.96	0.96	0.97
Q4	3.51	3.93	1.43	1.09	2.05	1.04
Q5	3.29	4.21	1.21	0.74	1.10	0.56
Q6	2.91	4.01	0.83	1.00	0.69	1.01
Q7	3.41	4.91	0.46	0.49	0.09	0.30
Q8	3.33	3.86	0.91	0.88	0.95	0.92
Q9	2.94	3.78	0.82	1.01	1.01	1.21
Q10	3.29	4.42	0.91	0.89	0.64	0.80
Q11	3.71	4.76	0.90	0.64	0.81	0.41
Q12	3.55	4.31	1.02	0.78	1.05	0.61
Q13	3.23	4.16	0.97	0.83	0.96	0.69
Q14	2.86	3.34	1.37	0.80	1.89	0.64
Q15	3.57	4.66	0.66	0.67	0.44	0.45
Q16	3.81	4.72	0.87	0.45	0.76	0.21

Note: M^{*} results from the Likert 5-point scale.

The mean scores for the question items also showed a positive which proved that the intervention increased students' resilience.

The results of the consolidated analyses of the mean scores drawn from both scales using the T-Test Calculator for two independent means proved that the change in both variables was statistically significant at $p < .05$. The t-value is -6.82232 . The p-value is $< .00001$. The consolidated results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. T-test results relying on data drawn from both scales

Stage	M	SS	t – value	p – value
Before intervention	3.35	2.29	-6.82232	$p < .00001$
After the intervention	4.23	3.28		

4.2. *The results of the Semi-Structured Focus-Group interview (n=7)*

The purpose of the interview was to validate the results of the above measurements. Seven students from the sampled group were randomly hired to respond to the questions below.

Question 1. Five students reported that they benefited both professionally and personally from the programme. Two students confessed that this programme had appeared to be a challenge to them.

Question 2. Five students were pleased with doing a lot of creative work, with feeling themselves needed and with the enhancement of their self-worth. Two students responded that they would leave the project at the early stage if it was not a part of their curriculum.

Question 3. Three students reported that the programme was a valuable contribution to their professional growth and job experience. Two students appreciated creative activities. Two respondents experienced problems with deadlines and stress-resistance. Students' major reasons were related to up-to-dating teaching skills and enhancing their networking contacts.

Question 4. All the respondents answered that they would become the referees for the programme as it was a curriculum extension that shaped the overall professional background of the respondents.

Question 5. Four students suggested more training in dealing with inclusions. Two students proposed to involve more practitioners in the training process on inclusion. Two students advised prolonging the programme to make the adaptation period of both students and children to each other longer.

4.3. *Limitations of the Study*

The limitations of this study are related to the age of the participants in the experiment, their occupational background, and experience of working with the inclusive children.

5. Discussion

The study attempted to identify how the volunteer internship programme addresses the students' efficacy for inclusive practices and their resilience, and how the students perceived the volunteer internship programme. It was found that the positive change occurred in all the components when comparing the pre-test and post-test values for Median. This indicated that there was an improvement in the inclusion instructive skills of the sampled EG students and the latter showed improvement in their awareness of establishing collaborative relationship with parents, children's relatives, colleagues and other professionals. The t-test results based on the TEIPS and PR6 scales that are expressed as mean values increased by 0.88 points after the intervention (see Table 4). This proves that the volunteer internship programme fosters the students' psychological readiness for working in inclusive groups at preschool institutions.

The novelty of the study lies in the integrated use of influences on the students' psychological readiness and in using a volunteer basis for running the internship programme, which suggested that the students were motivated by default to participate in it. The estimation concerning students' motivation towards the volunteer work contradicted the conclusions of [23] that the students are mainly not interested or motivated to do the volunteer work and extracurricular activities. However, the results of the semi-structured focus-group interview proved the opposite. The interviewees reported that they benefited both professionally and personally from the programme. They enhanced their self-worth, appreciated creative activities, up-to-dated their teaching skills, and enhanced their networking contacts.

This study goes in line with the previous research and best practices in the field of inclusive education at the preschool institutions and contributes to the study of the problem of fostering the psychological readiness of student educators for working in preschool inclusive groups. First, the study broadened previous studies revealing the training strategies that are employed to train self-efficacy of the pre-service teachers to work with the inclusive preschoolers. The above teachers' capacity is considered an element of their psychological readiness to work in the preschool environment of the inclusive type [7-10]. Second, it enhanced the ways of training (teacher) students' resilience [11-13]. Third, this study contributed best practices of teacher support and using internships to make the student teachers familiar with the repertoire of inclusive teaching and adapt them to the inclusive environment [24-26].

6. Conclusion

The volunteer internship programme for the student preschool teachers fosters psychological readiness in graduate student educators for working in inclusive groups at the preschool institutions. It can bring both tangible and intangible benefits to the students as it addresses the students' efficacy for inclusive practices and their resilience, and the students' perception of the programme is positive. Due to participation in the programme, the students boosted their professional competence, personal strength, and social efficacy with their colleagues and peers. The study contributed to the existing research in terms of the integrated use of influences on the students' psychological readiness, and implementation of the training strategies to improve the self-efficacy of the pre-service teachers to be used in the inclusive practices. It also added to the research on the ways of training (teacher) students' resilience and

best practices of teacher support and using internships to make the student teachers familiar with the repertoire of inclusive teaching and adapt them to the inclusive environment. The study implies that there is still the students' need for more thorough training in dealing with inclusions. Further studies to address the methods of training students in inclusion are needed.

7. Recommendations

Since inclusive environment causes increased stress, the student teachers should be trained to improve their resilience. It would increase efficiency of the programme if more practitioners were involved in the training process on inclusion. Besides, it would be more beneficial to the students if the programme was prolonged as the adaptation of both students and children to each other should be longer.

8. Conflicts of Interest

The authors claim no conflicts of interest that are associated with this study.

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