

## Implementation of Equal Opportunities for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Pre-School Education Institution

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### ABSTRACT

With the entry into force of the principles of democracy in modern society, inclusive education that means the right of all people to education, ensuring the presence, participation and progress and, above all, equal opportunities of all pupils, is becoming important. There are more and more children in the country who are being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, but their fate is determined not by the disorder itself, but by psychological, social and pedagogical rehabilitation. It is necessary to provide a child with special educational needs with the opportunity to use the services of specialists, help one constructively so that (s)he becomes as involved in the life of society as possible, could develop one's personality and improve spiritually (*Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030" 2012*). The aim is to reveal teachers' attitude about the possibilities of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder in the pre-school education institution. To achieve the aim, a qualitative study using an in-depth interview method, was conducted. The qualitative content analysis was used to process the research data. The findings of the research revealed that teachers believe that opportunities to ensure equal rights for children with autism are limited: it is difficult to ensure the safety of children; teachers do not have assistants; premises are not fully adapted; it is hard to change the established negative attitude of other people. Nevertheless, teachers provide individualized education opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder; provide them with appropriate and safe means of education; create a separate space in the group, communicate and cooperate with children's parents, thus ensuring more effective education; involve the child in social activities.

*Keywords:* autism spectrum disorder, children with special educational needs, inclusive education, pre-school education institution

## Introduction

Like other European countries, Lithuania has joined international treaties that declare basic social, economic, civil and political human rights. A child, as every member of our society, is the holder of all human rights. *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006), *UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (1994), *the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the provisions of other international treaties and agreements provide for the rights of children with special educational needs (hereinafter: SEN). All of the mentioned documents are based on the principle of non-discrimination and the concept of positive obligations assumed by the state towards these children. *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) obliges countries to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels that is accessible to SEN children and that educational services are of high quality and adapted to the individual educational needs of each person, making it possible to get free education in the general education system.

With the establishment of democratic principles in the modern society, the inclusion of SEN children in society becomes very important. At the same time, the number of children diagnosed with autism is increasing in the country. Autism is the third most common childhood disorder after intellectual disability and language disorder (Zager et al., 2016). According to Aleksienė (2016), statistical data from various countries show that autism is diagnosed more and more often, children with this disorder are born in various families regardless of parents' education, social status or race. East et al. (2008) note that autism is a multifaceted development disorder, and since 1980, the idea of the autism spectrum disorder has been widely recognized. According to Sicile-Kira (2014), Mikulėnaitė et al. (2004), Robledo et al. (2005), Jokubaitienė et al. (2019), autism is diagnosed four times more often in boys, but girls suffer from a more severe form of this disorder. As stated by Lesinskienė et al. (2002), autism covers many areas of mental functioning and severely impairs the child's development and social adaptation, therefore autism is classified as a group of multifaceted disorders. Multifaceted developmental disorders are manifested by qualitative impairments in social interaction and communication as well as limited, stereotyped and repetitive nature of interests and activities.

The fate of children with autism spectrum disorder (hereinafter: ASD) is determined not by the disorder itself, but by psychological, social, and pedagogical rehabilitation. It is necessary to provide a child with ASD with an opportunity to use the services of specialists, help one constructively so that the child becomes as involved in the life of society as possible, could develop one's personality and improve spiritually. Many authors (Lesinskienė et al., 2002; Ivoškuvienė, et al., 2002; Frith, 2003; Mikulėnaitė et al., 2004; Robledo et al., 2005; East, et al.,

2008; Notbohm, 2012; Гилберг et al., 2013; Zager et al., 2016; Aleksienė, 2016) claim that such involvement is caused by:

- 1) social environment. ASD children have difficulty in understanding social situations, thus they often get confused or agitated when interacting with other people. It is difficult for ASD children to understand the behaviour of others, the meaning of the skills they have and are developing. They often fail to apply the things they learn in one environment in another similar situation. They mechanically perform tasks, do not understand the meaning of activities and experiences they have had. ASD children do not recognize the same people in other environments. They do not realize that the same person can be in a different place. Therefore, it is extremely important to determine whether the child really recognizes other people;
- 2) communication difficulties. Children find it difficult to understand both verbal and non-verbal communication and use communication tools such as eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and body language;
- 3) disorders of thought and imagination. Already at an early age it is noticeable that the child's playful and imaginative activities are disrupted. Children with ASD like a routine that helps them understand their surroundings, thus even the smallest changes can cause them great stress. ASD children may find it difficult to adapt in the pre-school education institution, as they are often characterized by hand flapping, rocking or spinning in circles; increased sensitivity to noise, smells, touch or visual stimuli; tendency to self-harm; aggressive behaviour; hyperactivity; strange posture or gait; unexplained fears or phobias.

According to Prokopčik (2012), the child is vulnerable and needs special assistance to be able to exercise one's rights. When making decisions that affect the child's life, the child's interests must be taken into account first. The interests of parents, society and the state must not be considered superior. *The Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) states that the child has the right to education. One has the right to free education, parents and other persons responsible for one's upbringing must take care of the child's well-being. The child must be given the conditions to play and to grow and develop while playing. Society must not prevent the child from exercising this right. *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) also emphasizes that every child must be given equal opportunities to develop their abilities. It is noted that internal rules of the educational institution cannot violate the rights and dignity of the child. Republic of Lithuania *Law on the Amendment of the Law on Equal Treatment* (2020) emphasizes that equal treatment of people must be established and implemented regardless of one's gender, race, nationality, citizenship, language, origin, social status, disability, ethnicity, etc. The Lithuania's progress strategy "*Lithuania 2030*" (2012) indicates that the task of a solidary society is to ensure the availability of pre-school

education institutions for child care. The *Strategy* emphasizes that too little attention is paid to individual education, which is so important for the child with an autism spectrum disorder, and it could not only enable acquisition of basic knowledge, but also create conditions for providing higher abilities.

As noted by many researchers (Ališauskas et al., 2011; Ryann et al., 2012; Giedrienė, 2015; Iacono et al., 2016; Thiemann-Bourque et al., 2016; Ewing et al., 2017; Crispel et al., 2019; Braslauskienė et al., 2021), inclusive education is a universal right, but in order to implement it, it is necessary to formulate a policy aimed at providing quality education and equal opportunity services to every citizen. Educational institutions must be equipped with the necessary financial, human, educational services and technical resources. According to the authors, the following conditions are necessary for successful inclusion: a flexible education system; diversity must be valued; all obstacles must be removed (the environment, curriculum and materials must be adapted, sceptic attitudes must disappear, there should be enough equipment, socialization and communication conditions should be improved, the availability of oral and other means of communication); assistance provided to teachers; there must be team work; strong leadership in educational institutions; harmony must prevail among children; there must be collaboration between parents, professionals and volunteers.

Sufficiently abundant scientific research allows to claim that considerable attention is paid to the implementation of inclusive education of SEN children in educational institutions, but it is noticeable that the aspects of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with ASD in a pre-school education institution are not widely presented and analysed. Accordingly, the scientific problem of the following research is: what are the features of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder in a pre-school education institution? The aim of the work is to reveal the features of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder in a pre-school education institution. Work methods: analysis of scientific literature and documents, qualitative research (semi-structured interview), qualitative data (content) analysis.

## Methodology

In order to reveal features of ensuring equal opportunities for children with ASD in a pre-school education institution, a qualitative research method was chosen. The research data were collected by applying the *semi-structured interview instrument*, when the interview questions are formulated in advance and there is a possibility to freely change their order, ask follow-up questions, thus obtaining more detailed structured data, while the interview remains informal, and takes place in the form of conversation (Bitinas et al., 2008). According to Kardelis

(2017), even though the interview method of data collection takes longer than the questionnaire survey method, it provides wider opportunities to get to know the subjects in more depth, clarify their answers, and ensure the completeness of the data. The choice of the *semi-structured interview* was determined by the flexibility, immediacy of this method and the possibility to use additional questions by taking into account the answers of the informants. It should be noted that the limitations of qualitative research are associated with the inevitable subjectivity in qualitative research (Luobikienė, 2011; Hesse-Biber et al., 2011; Bitinas, 2013). Therefore, even though the planning and conducting of the qualitative research met the requirements necessary for this type of research, the generalization of the research findings was limited by the small number of research participants. It is the data of qualitative research that are unique and specific only to the individuals who participated in a specific research.

The qualitative research was conducted in the period from December 2021 to March 2022. Criterion selection was used to select participants. There were 2 essential criteria for selecting informants: experience of an educator/educational support specialist (at least 3 years of work experience) in working with children with ASD and work in an educational institution that implements inclusive education. First of all, it was necessary to contact the administration of the institution that indicated pre-school teachers and educational support specialists, who have been working with children with ASD in the educational institution for at least 3 years. During the interview, 6 pre-school teachers (hereinafter: PT) and 5 educational support specialists (hereinafter: ESS) working in pre-school education institutions of Klaipėda city and Klaipėda district were interviewed. The questionnaire was formulated by taking into account the criteria for the selection of informants and assuming that these specific informants will communicate and express their opinions during the interview. All research participants are women. During the interview, the following topics were selected: what are the features of ensuring equal opportunities for children with ASD in a pre-school education institution; what is the organization of educational support in a pre-school education institution. The duration of the conversation with each research participant was 45 minutes. After informing the informant about the use of the recording equipment and after obtaining one's verbal consent, the conversation was recorded on a dictaphone.

Research data were collected in accordance with the aim and tasks of the research. The collected data were transcribed (rewritten) and analysed. Data analysis was carried out in the following order (Cohen et al., 2007; Kardelis, 2017; Žydzūnaitė et al., 2017): writing down analytical notes while analysing the data, which, according to the aforementioned authors, promote analytic thinking and stimulate insight; afterwards, following this categorization was carried out (certain categories were distinguished and defined to facilitate the comparison of

the elements belonging to them). While working with the text, first the primary categories were created, then they were reviewed, refined, subcategories were distinguished, and statements illustrating them were presented. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics: benevolence, respect for the dignity of the person, the right to receive accurate information, justice (Žydžiūnaitė et al., 2017). Taking into account the general principles of research ethics, each research participant was free to decide on the participation in the research. The subjects were also assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the received information. After the research report was prepared, the informants were offered to familiarize with it. Informants did not submit any comments.

## Research findings

### Data analysis of the opinion of pre-school teachers about the features of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder in an educational institution

An insight into the features of ensuring equal opportunities for children in a pre-school education institution was provided during the research. The informants were asked: *“what difficulties did you face before admitting a child with ASD to the group, which opportunities for children are ensured and which ones are violated, it was clarified what are the opportunities and preventive means in order to ensure those equal opportunities for them”*. The obtained information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Features of ensuring equal opportunities in a pre-school education institution

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Difficulties	No	5
	Yes	1
Enforceable rights	Independence	4
	Freedom	4
	Right to education	3
	Child's wishes	2
	Respect and dignity	1
Violated rights	Safety	2
	Respect	2
	Freedom	2
Opportunities	Limited	4
	Ample, great	2
	Preventive means	6

The data presented in Table 1 show that the majority (5 informants) indicated that there were no difficulties with the admission of a child with ASD to the group: *there were no difficulties from the management's side (...) at first, nobody mentioned the child's diagnosis (...) came to us, since nursery (...) there was nothing against (...) I think not (...) the director admits all (...)*. 1 informant stated that there were difficulties: *the parents of some children weren't satisfied (...) the parents are afraid that their children might be harmed (...) an aggressive girl would bite, kick, scream, and parents would say that she doesn't belong here (...) there are complaints from parents (...)*. Scientific literature shows that the attitude of both educators and parents of other children towards a different child still remain negative, though the situation is improving. The following is also confirmed by the answers of the informants, because only 1 out of 6 informants said that it was difficult for an ASD child to get admitted the group.

The assessment of equal opportunities for children with ASD in a pre-school education institution revealed that PT take the utmost account of ensuring of the child's independence, freedom and the right to education: *efforts are made to realize all rights of the child, to ensure equal opportunities (...) not ignored (...) if [s] he wants a separate space – one has it (...) we allow one to do what [s]he likes, but at the same time include education (...) complete freedom (...) we're not in the old days just to stand and tell (...) does what [s]he wants, carries out one's favourite activities (...) I let one wash one's hands, make one's bed, eat independently (...) all rights are ensured, we strive for equal opportunities, like for other children (...) he like cosiness, collects his favourite toys and stays alone, in the place designated for him (...) we try to understand what the child wants from his position, look (...) he participates in music, listens (...) We make sure that [s]he always has what to do (...) if he is engaged in inappropriate activities, I direct him elsewhere in a "nice form" (...) I let him dress himself if he wants to (...)*. It should also not be forgotten that the child has the right to respect and dignity as well as free expression (display) of one's wishes.

The informants were also asked about violations of the rights and equal opportunities of these children. PT have singled out only the rights that are sometimes violated, i.e. safety, respect and freedom: *it's impossible to look after him all day long so that the environment or facilities wouldn't cause him any danger (...) so that everyone around would respond respectfully to such children (...) it's not uncommon to hear that this child doesn't belong here (...) if you let one do what [s]he wants, [s] he'll be dragging all day (...) we ask the ergo-therapist to take one out (...) the child is excluded from the celebration (...) I don't invite one to some activities, because he eats playdough for example (...) we used "force", we often had to say: "you go", "go do it", because [s]he didn't do anything by oneself (...) sometimes we don't take one outside, because there are only two of us (...) we sometimes force one to do educational exercises, because [s]he oneself doesn't want to (...) we have to force one to learn (...) we encourage to move, even though one doesn't want to (...) can't keep*

*pace with one outside, doesn't stay within the territory (...) one eats grass, eats dirt, eats tree branches (...).*

It can be seen from the data presented in Table 1 that the assurance of equal opportunities for children with ASD to participate in various activities is limited: *a lot of funds are needed (...) inappropriate attitude of people (...) not enough employees (...) little space (...) otherwise restricted, you can't always go out in public (...) a PT assistant is needed (...).* 2 informants indicated that it is possible to ensure equal opportunities for these children, if one wishes to: *the possibilities are great, as there aren't many children in the group (...) can pay enough attention (...) if the educator wishes to, then opportunities are definitely available (...).*

All informants who participated in the research stated that they take preventive measures in order to ensure equal opportunities. The preventive measures of each PT are very different, but the most popular is conversation: *conversations both with children and with parents or institution employees (...) conversations with parents/children (...) we celebrate Autism Day in our institution on the 2nd of April (...) we carry out the "I am Different" campaign (...) we distribute leaflets with various information to parents (...) we only talk (...) we don't allow other children to mock (...) try to explain (...) work with the parents of that child (...) situation management by the educator, getting ahead of things (...) we go to the city library, take part in all kinds of presentations there (...) we also involve these children in cultural activities (...) participate in dances (...) we have sponsors (...).* PT could apply more diverse preventive measures, develop informal activities, thus ensuring social participation of these children.

The summary of the PT responses allows to claim that it is sometimes still difficult for a child with ASD to be admitted to a group where only children with normal development are educated. The reason for this is usually the reluctance and fear of the parents of other children that their offspring will have to study together with a "different" child. The situation is often complicated by the fact that a child with ASD is aggressive/self-aggressive. Most of the time, PT try to ensure equal opportunities of the child to independence, freedom as well as education, but often they do not have these opportunities. The findings of the research reveal that pre-school education institutions lack employees in the groups, where children with ASD are educated. The analysis of the informants' answers allows to claim that equal opportunities for children with ASD in pre-school education institution are limited.

In order to ensure equal opportunities for children with ASD in pre-school education institution, it is crucial to find out what support they need to make this happen. The informants were asked: *"what kind of help do they currently need, what kind of communication method do they choose when communicating with the parents of a child with ASD, and what are the opportunities for inclusive education for these children"*. The data are presented in Table 2.



Table 2. Organization of assistance in a pre-school education institution

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Assistance to educators	Physical	5
	Educational	5
	Financial	4
	Psychological	3
Ways of communicating with parents of a child with ASD	Individually	6
	Telephone conversations	3
	Social networks	1
Opportunities for inclusive education	Limited	3
	Ample	3
	Promotion of inclusive education	3
	Selection of special institutions/groups	3

According to the informants' answers, PT most need educational, physical and financial assistance: *in order not to stay in the same place, but to improve in this field (...) when outside, a second person is needed, because it's very difficult when you're alone (...) I make a lot of different tools myself (...) I usually pay the expenses of seminars, conferences myself (...) one person is needed, especially during educational activities and when going outside (...) falls down, doesn't want to go to a group, or cannot "tear one off" from the swing (...) an assistant is needed (...) there is lack of seminars, because there are few of them (...) just try to catch seminars, because they just appear and immediately no more places are left (...) I would like to have more practical seminars (...).*

When speaking about the importance of cooperation with parents, all informants emphasized that it is very important to communicate and cooperate with the child's parents. Informants emphasize that it would be impossible to achieve anything without parents. PT often turn to parents themselves in order to find out what parents do, how they behave in one or another situation at home. Most of the time PT prefer individual and phone conversations: *we usually communicate individually (...) phone conversations (...) individually with everyone (...) we communicate face to face all the time (...) via wired connection (...) I invite them to see how the child behaves in the kindergarten (...) to activities for them to observe (...).*

Research conducted by researchers has shown that educators with a positive approach help children with SEN to successfully enter educational institutions, form positive mutual relationships, educational strategies, and a suitable environment for the inclusion of these children. As claimed by Braslauskienė et al. (2021), all of the following not only reduces the child's disability at the social level, but at the same time expands one's activity area where confidence matures

not only in oneself, but also in society. Informants' answers allow to conclude that the attitude towards the inclusion of these children is not yet positive, and therefore the inclusion process is not successful. The data presented in Table 2 show that 3 informants claim that it is better for these children to attend special institutions or groups: *while the teacher is busy, [s]he gets into such mischief (...) because it's too hard for the educator (...) because they are given more freedom in special institutions (...) if they don't want to sleep – they may not go to sleep (...) they would have all the conditions for education there (...) for the safety of other children (...) other children are afraid and suffer, because most attention is paid to one (...) if they don't have awareness, one will be better there (...)*. There are PT who believe that inclusion should be promoted: *must be educated with children of normal development, because they are not sick (...) special institutions are not necessary (...) children of normal development have to understand that there are also "different" children (...) autistic children learn by examples they see (...) their inappropriate behaviour can be corrected and it will get better over time (...) if the child is stronger, then it's good – one is improving (...)*.

The possibilities for inclusion depend very much on the attitude of a person. According to some PT, there are all possibilities for inclusions, all that is needed is wish: *everything depends on the teacher (...) in kindergarten the possibilities for inclusion are much easier than in school, because children accept more easily (...) there will always be possibilities for inclusion, all you need is wish (...) there are possibilities (...)*. Others are convinced that possibilities for inclusion are very limited: *parents of other children are very disappointed (...) there's lack of specialists (...) children are cruel, it's very difficult for them to accept (...)*.

Having summarized PT answers it can be claimed that educators try to ensure equal opportunities for children with ASD, but the assurance of all opportunities for them is limited, because informants lack educational, physical and financial support.

### **Data analysis of the opinion of educational support specialists about the features of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder in an educational institution**

When discussing the features of ensuring equal opportunities for children, informants were asked: *"were there any difficulties regarding the admission of a child with ASD to the institution? Which equal opportunities of the child are realized and which ones are violated? What are the opportunities and preventive measures to ensure those equal opportunities for them?"* The data are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 3, the child's opportunities are usually already violated when there is reluctance to admit the child to an educational institution.

Table 3. Features of ensuring equal opportunities in a pre-school education institution

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Difficulties	No	3
	Yes	2
Enforceable rights	Safety	5
	Right to education	4
	Right to equality	3
	Independence	3
	Receiving of help	2
Violated rights	Lack of specialists	1
	Exclusion from admission to an educational institution	1
	Bullying/ right to dignity	1
	Rejection	1
	Separation/isolation	1
	Freedom	1
Opportunities	All opportunities	3
	Limited opportunities	2
	Preventive measures	5

According to 2 informants, there were difficulties regarding the admission of the child to a pre-school education institution: *the biggest problem is the lack of preparation of specialists (...) lack of competence of the group educators in teaching these children (...) lack of knowledge about the applied methods and ways (...) specialists often get scared and avoid such learners (...) the director's reluctance to admit the child in the absence of a suitable specialist in the kindergarten (...) depends very much on parents, how they accept this news, if they do not accept the situation, then they blame the institution (...)*. 3 informants stated that there were no difficulties: *there were no (...) willingly admit (...) there were no difficulties (...)*. The answers of ESS revealed that the difficulties in admitting the child arise not only from the reluctance of other children's parents, as stated by PT, but also from the lack of suitable specialists or the lack of competences of existing specialists and teachers, and the fear of working with these children.

When discussing the opportunities of the child with ASD that are implemented in an educational institution, informants distinguished safety: *safety is ensured (...) safer, because there are fewer children (...) safety from dangers, negative emotions, intolerance is ensured (...)*. The right to education: *the right to education, educators and a speech therapist, and a special teacher as well as a movement correction specialist work with one (...)*. The right to equality: *the child is not differentiated from others (...) can learn together with other children who don't have SEN (...)*.

Independence: *if [s]he can do something by oneself, then you don't do it for one, let one do it oneself (...). Getting help: one is rendered all services provided in the kindergarten (...). we protect one from children (...). we teach children how to deal with autistic children (...). one is provided with intensive help from a speech therapist, additional attention from teachers (...).*

On the basis of the informants' answers, several violations of the non-assurance of equal opportunities were mentioned. ESS distinguished the following cases: lack of specialists: *not enough of specialists when working with these children (...). Non-acceptance of the child: transfer of the child to another educational institution by the decision of the director (...). only children with normal development are admitted (...). Bullying: the child experiences insults (...). Rejection: the child himself is not yet able to make contact, so he is rejected (...). Separation/isolation: if the child has some kind of a seizure, then we take him to the washroom until he calms down (...). the nurse takes one out (...). Freedom: the child's freedom is slightly restricted (...). one is not allowed to go anywhere, where he wants to (...). when outside one is taught to understand the boundaries and not run anywhere (...). the child likes to crawl under the table and be there, I don't allow that (...). Even though ESS identified only single cases when equal opportunities of the child are violated, they indicated more violations than PT did.*

Informants were asked about the available opportunities in the educational institution to ensure equality for children with ASD. Only three informants emphasized that all opportunities are provided: *the child learns with other children, regardless of the fact that he is diagnosed with autism, he's not singled out from other learners (...). he is treated like other children (...). social teacher takes the child out to work separately (...). I come to groups to observe (...). if the activity causes stress to the child, the teacher's assistant takes him out (...). all opportunities are provided (...). one is allowed to bring one's own food, the teacher warms it up separately if the child doesn't want to eat kindergarten food (...).* 2 informants stated that opportunities are limited: *there's lack of competence (...). attempts to speak to the director didn't yield any results (...). the attitude of the director (...).*

However, all 5 ESS indicated that they apply preventive measures and have all the opportunities to apply them: *education of employees about such children (...). the institution started a project about children with autism syndrome in order to find out as much as possible how to help them (...). education of parents of other children (...). education of those around, for them to be more tolerant (...). team work with PT, PT assistants, music teacher (...). solutions to involve the child and encourage communication with peers (...). we often have conversations with other children (...). we prepare various reports on this topic (...). we organize open table discussions for specialists and educators from our kindergarten community (...). we share best practices (...). we invite specialists from abroad (...). we participate in various projects to get financing (...).* Similar to PT, all ESS apply preventive measures,

but the preventive measures of specialists are more varied and wider. PT place the greatest emphasis on conversations and explanations, while ESS pay more attention to dissemination of information about this issue, sharing experiences not only within the community circle of the pre-school education institution, but also much more widely, including even foreign specialists.

In order to ensure equal opportunities for children with ASD in the pre-school education institution, it was purposefully clarified what kind of help is needed to make the following happen. ESS were asked: *“what kind of help do they personally need the most? Are there opportunities for child involvement? It was clarified whether it is important to cooperate with the child’s parents, and in what ways it should be done?”* Summarized answers of the informants are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Organization of assistance in a pre-school education institution

Category	Subcategory	Number of statements
Assistance to a specialist	Educational	5
	Financial	4
Communication with the child’s parents	Important	5
	Individual conversations	5
	E-mail	1
	Social networks (Facebook)	1
Opportunities for inclusion	Yes	3
	No	2
	Promotion of inclusion	3
	Selection of a special institution/group	2

On the basis of the data in Table 4, it became clear that ESS need educational assistance the most: *educational, it’s never too much (...) I’d like not only theoretical subjects, but also practical ones, real situations, analyses (...) additional courses, seminars, conferences (...) to go to seminars, conferences that would contain practical information on how to educate these children (...) courses for specialists (...) open table discussions (...) sharing of best practices (...)*. In addition, financial assistance: *there’s a lot of new, good tools, educational games for autistic children, but all of them are not cheap (...) lack of funds (...) to acquire more diverse educational materials (...)*.

According to Ruškus (2002), partnership relations between parents of a disabled child and specialists can not only help to understand each other, but also to break down the walls of psychological detachment and social self-isolation of both specialists and parents. We must understand that parents, first of all, want to be understood. The research revealed that ESS also agree with the following, because all informants emphasized that communication and cooperation with the parents of the child are extremely important: *of course it’s important (...) working*

*cohesively, continuously with these children is very important (...) it's very important to involve the parents (...) together we get to know the child faster (...) it's very important (...) we share advice (...) it's one of the most important elements of a child's education (...) communication with parents and applying the same methods at home and in an educational institution allow to achieve comprehensive education of the child (...) I can't imagine full and productive work without parents (...). Most of the times informants, similar to PT, apply individual conversations: we communicate individually, at an agreed time (...) conversations with parents (...) we always discuss how things are going and give homework (...) we get a lot of advice from parents (...) there are constant conversations (...) an individual conversation, consultation are the best (...).*

Currently, a lot of attention is paid to the inclusion of children with SEN. The scientific literature claims that inclusion is important and benefits not only the child with ASD, but also those around one. ESS were asked: *“if they support inclusion and what opportunities are there for it in their educational institution?”* 3 informants indicated that there are opportunities: *there are opportunities, but they depend on people (...) if people are ready for it, there should be no problems (...) full inclusion (...) learn together with peers with no SEN (...).* 2 informants said that there are absolutely no opportunities for inclusion in their pre-school education institutions: *there are specialists who are against the inclusion of these children (...) there's no wish for inclusion (...).* It can be seen from the ESS statements that there are opportunities for inclusion, but they depend on the will of people. If people are in favour of the inclusion of these children, then it is not difficult to do so and the inclusion itself becomes successful, but if ESS are against the inclusion of these children, then the whole process of inclusion becomes very difficult. Therefore, ESS were asked: *“what is their opinion about inclusion? Are they for or against it?”*

3 informants spoke in favour of promoting inclusion: *such children should no longer surprise others, they are like other children (...) there's no need to be afraid of them (...) it's better when such children are brought up with children of normal development (...) a good example, the natural behaviour of children, it's good for them (...) the child will integrate into society much faster (...) will observe the behaviour, communication of other children, it's to one's benefit (...)* I don't agree that they should attend special institutions (...) *it's necessary to decide according to the need, situation, because each case is different and individual (...).* 2 informants claimed that children with ASD should attend special institutions: *only in favour of special institutions (...) they are better off there (...) they are guaranteed better conditions there (...) it's easier for the specialist (...) they would better feel the full-day regime there (...) there are often celebrations, projects in a regular kindergarten, and autistic children are afraid to change the environment (...) specialists go into more detail there (...) they learn in an adapted institution (...).*

Having summarized ESS answers, it can be stated that they manage to ensure more equal opportunities for the child compared to PT, because they work with the child individually, and, accordingly, have more opportunities. Though, not all equal opportunities of children with ASD are ensured, because ESS lack educational support. Moreover, some specialists are against the inclusion of these children, thus their equal opportunities cannot be fully ensured.

## Discussion

The features of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with ASD in a pre-school education institution are relevant as well as a field of research with theoretical and practical significance. Jokubaitienė et al. (2019), reviewing the activities of the Lithuanian Autism Association *Lietaus vaikai (Rain Children)*, singled out the main problems that need to be solved in Lithuania when it comes to providing support to children with ASD:

- 1) early diagnosis is not ensured;
- 2) necessary therapy is not applied, there is lack of unified medical services;
- 3) inflexible, non-inclusive education system for SEN children.

Pre-school education institutions are unable to ensure equal opportunities for children with ASD.

One of the conditions of successful inclusive education is a positive public attitude towards the education of children with SEN. Inclusive education affects many groups of people: educators, heads of the school, parents of children, children themselves and others. The results of the study conducted by Jankevičienė (2013) revealed that future teachers generally (67%) support the concept of inclusive education of children with SEN, a quarter (25%) did not have an opinion on the matter. The qualitative study carried out by the authors of the article revealed that the attitude towards the inclusion of these children is not yet completely positive, and therefore, the inclusion process is not successful. A considerable number of informants said that it is better for these children to attend special institutions or groups, while the other part of informants claimed that there are all opportunities for inclusion, all that is needed is wish. It all depends on the teacher, how one will accept the child.

Research carried out by Ibrahimagic et al. (2015) revealed that inappropriate education of children with ASD occurs due to the attitude of people, as they do not believe that positive changes in these children are possible; due to inadequate teaching that does not correspond to the latest knowledge, and due to lack of funds. The following is also confirmed by the qualitative research, when informants indicated that the negative attitude (of parents, administration) towards these children still remains. PT and ESS stated that they lack knowledge and especially practical training in working with these children, there are not enough

seminars. Moreover, both educators and ESS lack funds to ensure equal opportunities for these children in the pre-school education institution.

After carrying out the empirical study, some problems and limitations emerged. The sample size was small, 6 and 5 informants, thus the findings of the research are only intended to fulfil the purpose of this research. One of the limitations is the difficult recording of answers, because not all informants agreed to have their statements recorded on a dictaphone. The refusal was influenced by their previous negative experiences of participating in research. Another limitation is the lack of time, two informants had time for the interview only during their lunch breaks; thus, time for the interview was limited and took place in a hurry.

Recommendations for further research: in order to obtain more detailed information about the features of ensuring equal opportunities for children with ASD in a pre-school education institution, it would be appropriate to interview children's parents and the administrative staff of the pre-school education institution. An action plan for the implementation of inclusive education has been prepared on the basis of inclusive education; thus, it would be significant to select a larger and more diverse sample of informants/respondents and interview them about ensuring equal opportunities for children with ASD in pre-school education institution.

Possibilities of using research findings in practice: in Lithuania, more and more attention is being paid to the early education and ensuring equal opportunities for children with ASD, therefore the application of the obtained findings could be a preventive measure, when taking into account which opportunities of the children are most often violated and what opportunities are available in order to avoid those violations.

## Conclusions

According to pre-school teachers, ensuring equal opportunities for children with ASD is limited. Educators distinguish the following features: there is no possibility to ensure that the child is 100% safe in the pre-school education institution, because they work in groups alone, with no assistants; the groups are not fully adapted to these children, thus PT are often forced to restrict the freedom and opportunities of these children; PT are not able to control the ridicule of other children and adults, to change the established negative attitude, and to ensure the respect of all those around them. However, children with ASD are provided with the following opportunities: individual education; educators produce suitable and safe educational tools for them; create a separate space in the group, where the child can feel safe and calm; actively and willingly communicate and cooperate with the child's parents, thus ensuring more effective education, involve the child in social activities (cultural activities, dances, excursions).



In the opinion of educational support specialists, features of the implementation of equal opportunities for children with ASD in the pre-school education institution are as follows: specialists work with children individually, the child receives all the necessary help (of a special educator, speech therapist, physiotherapist, psychologist); the environment, where the child is being educated, is safe and adapted, ESS apply safe and appropriate tools in the education of children; preventive measures are implemented, thus there are no difficulties regarding the child's admission to an educational institution. Nonetheless, equal opportunities of these children are limited by: lack of appropriate means; unpreparedness of ESS (lack of knowledge, competence and experience to work with these children); educational and financial support is needed.

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