

## Inclusive Pre-School Education in Latvia: Problems and Solutions

Agrita Tauriņa and Tija Zīriņa

University of Latvia, Latvia

agrita.taurina@lu.lv; tija.zirina@lu.lv

### ABSTRACT

Cabinet Regulations No. 556 of November 19, 2019 titled ‘On Education Development Guidelines 2021–2027’ state the importance of targeted support measures for ensuring inclusive education in Latvian educational institutions. However, the evidence in pre-schools indicates an insufficient understanding and interest in using these support measures to find solutions to the challenges of inclusive education. This empirical study investigates the problems in carrying out evaluations of children with special needs, establishing an individual plan and receiving support measures, and it also explores pedagogical solutions to these problems. Thanks to the European Social Fund (ESF) Project No. 9.2.1.3/16/1/001 ‘Improving the support system for children with communication difficulties, behavioural disorders and domestic violence’, teachers are now able to receive qualified specialist support on how to cooperate with parents or legal guardians and how to organise the pedagogical process. The aim of this research is to assess teachers’ awareness of what is stipulated in regulatory enactments for ensuring inclusive education, the challenges to inclusive education and the available solutions. Literature analysis, teachers’ surveys, an analysis of student behaviour in pre-schools and pedagogical documentation are used. The research results reflect the level of awareness among teachers of the education guidelines, the content of regulatory enactments and the willingness of teachers to accept diversity, seek support measures and cooperate with parents or legal guardians to ensure an education that is appropriate to each child’s abilities.

*Keywords:* inclusive education, individual plan, pre-school age child, special needs, support measures

## Introduction

The first paragraph of Section 53 of the General Education Law in Latvia states that students with special needs may be enrolled in general education programmes. Requirements of general education institutions admitting students with special needs in their general education programmes are specified by the Cabinet of Ministers (*Vispārējās izglītības likums*, 1999). Paragraph 7 of Cabinet Regulations No. 556, adopted on 19 November 2019, 'Requirements for General Education Institutions to Admit Students with Special Needs in their Educational Programs' specifies that the head of the education institution must approve the procedures for determining the needs of students with special needs as well as developing and implementing the plan. They must also specify the tasks and responsibilities of each person involved in the plan and identify the pedagogue responsible for overseeing the process of implementation (*Prasības vispārējās izglītības iestādēm, lai to īstenotajās izglītības programmās uzņemtu izglītojamos ar speciālām vajadzībām*, 2019).

Since 1 September 2020, when these provisions came into force, each general education institution has been required to have internal regulations, which specify the activities of the institution, prepared to show compliance with the Cabinet Regulations. However, two academic years is a short period for all general education employees to gain sufficient experience in implementing inclusive education. Solidary with parents and the local community is required for inclusive education to be a success. By implementing inclusive education, general education institutions, including pre-schools, are now admitting students who previously attended special education institutions or special education classes. Some of these students have behavioural issues and support for school employees is required. To provide this support as well as offer help to the legal guardians of these children, the European Social Fund (ESF) project No. 9.2.1.3/16/I/001 'Support systems development for children with communication difficulties, behavioural disorders and domestic violence' has been launched to host various events that offer professional advice from specialists. This project is implemented by the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights and includes a support team of various specialists.

## Literature Review

As Dukes and Smith (2006) have emphasised, 'society is becoming more diverse and our Pre-school settings are beginning to reflect this' (p. 1). Pre-school settings in Latvia reflect a large diversity of children with different developmental needs and it is necessary to find support measures for teachers to enable them to cope with the variety of difficulties they face in their professional life (Šūmane et al., 2019). The results of previous research indicate a need to provide as broad access as possible to pedagogical professional development programmes in special

(inclusive) education to strengthen the professional competence of pedagogues. According to Paseka and Schwab (2019), teachers in inclusive settings 'have to reflect [on] their teaching practice and the constraints they usually experience by using parents as critical friends to get an external perspective on their endeavours to meet the needs of their students' (p. 269). The parents' role is critical to the success of any educational efforts and it is one of the main considerations in the implementation of successful inclusion of young children with special needs. Parents who are involved in pre-school activities and familiar with the daily routine of the institution are a boon to inclusive education because their participation promotes belonging (Karlsudd, 2022).

According to Black-Hawkins (2017), inclusive education is creating a shift in the way teachers think about education. Her findings are important for research on the implementation of inclusive education in pre-school settings because they suggest a reversal in the usual approach that has been taken. As she writes, inclusive education implies a move 'away from a traditional, or individualised, approach to learner diversity that starts by making provision for most learners, and then offers something additional or different for some learners identified as having particular needs' (Black-Hawkins, 2017, p.13). To make this move, mutual interactions with other teachers and their assistants is required. The assistant's role is particularly important in providing support for children with special needs and emphasized by Finland's approach to inclusive education (Mäensivu et al., 2012). In Latvia, the inclusion of children with different special educational needs is a problem as pre-schools lack sufficient staff members and teachers do not always receive the necessary support they need to deal with issues that arise in the group.

## Methodology

The aim of this study is to investigate the problems in implementing inclusive education in Latvia at the pre-school level and to find solutions to these problems. Ultimately, the goal is to assist teachers in carrying out an evaluation of children's special needs, establishing an individual plan and receiving support measures. The research tasks are as follows:

1. To explore the main difficulties of including children with special needs in a general education programme and explore mitigation possibilities.
2. To survey pre-school education pedagogues regarding their experience in implementing inclusive education and support measures and to explore parents' understanding of their child's interactions and interests to gain information about the special needs of the child.
3. To analyse the support measures for inclusive education and the recommendations provided.

The cooperation of the preschool education institution of Riga municipality was sought to obtain research data. This institution was selected since it has a typical distribution of employee position units. Compared to other municipal institutions, the number of employees and parents of children in the selected preschool educational institution is among the largest, allowing for broad insight into the specific problems this research investigates. In this preschool educational institution, a general education curriculum is implemented. All children enrolled in the institution participate in this program, including those with special needs. To gain insight into the current situation regarding the inclusion of children with special needs in a general educational institution, teachers of the specific institution and parents whose children attend this institution were invited to participate in the survey. Educators were offered a questionnaire in paper format with open-ended and closed-ended questions, whereas parents were given the questionnaire in electronic format. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out in a separate room at a previously agreed upon a meeting time. In total, 35 preschool teachers, 113 parents of children and 6 parents of children with special needs completed questionnaires and participated in individual interviews.

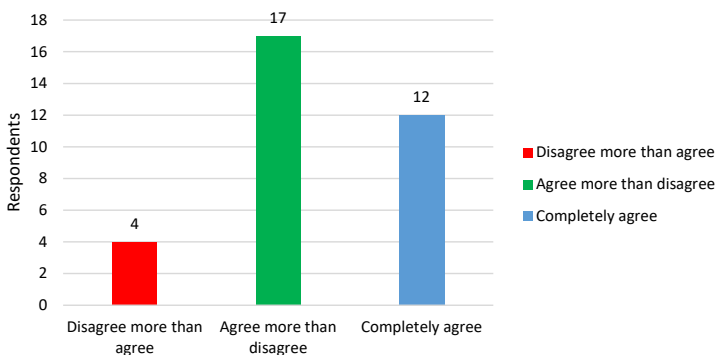
This study also interviewed experts on the problems and solutions of inclusive education. The cooperation of the preschool education institution with inclusive education experts was ensured under the European Social Fund (ESF) project. Experts from the project included a psychologist, family psychotherapist, social worker and special pedagogue.

## Results

Understanding the feasibility of inclusive education and the developmental possibilities of children with special needs is of crucial importance in many countries. As Terzi (2010) has indicated, the question of what constitutes a fair provision for students with special needs is extremely controversial in almost all developed countries. Cabinet Regulations No. 453 'Methodology for Evaluating the Special Needs of Students in Pre-school Education Institutions' (Izglītojamo speciālo vajadzību izvērtēšanas metodika pirmsskolas izglītības iestādēs, 2021), adopted on 29 June 2021, specifies the methodology for evaluating the special needs of students in pre-school education institutions. Although this methodology came into force on 1 September 2021, 37% of the pedagogues included in this survey indicated that they were only partially informed about the evaluation of special needs and the necessity to implement inclusive education. These results indicate that the institution needs to establish a support team that would explain the purpose of inclusive education, which is to ensure an opportunity for every child to obtain a quality education. The need for this team is consistent with the data on the qualifications of teachers in the preschool educational institution.

Many teachers in this study mentioned that they have no education in this area. Only 3 out of 35 teachers had training in special education or speech therapy (either at a bachelor's or master's level), and only 1 out of 35 teachers had completed a 72-hour training course in special education. When answering the question 'how often do you receive information about your child's academic achievements', 46% of parents stated that they receive information at least once a week, 32% 1–3 times a month, 12% 1–5 times every six months and 9% once year.

The task of the head of the institution is to ensure educational activities for employees and parents regarding the implementation of inclusive education and to make joint decisions on further actions. One solution is to receive precise, professional information, which entails participation in the ESF project. For this research, it was important to understand the opinion of teachers on how they evaluate the opportunity to receive support from specialists in inclusive education. Thus, we asked teachers the following question: 'Do you agree with the statement that by participating in project work, it is possible to receive expert advice and a program of support measures?' Figure 1 below shows their responses.



*Figure 1.* Do you Agree That Expert Advice and Support Measures are Obtainable by Participating in Project Work?

Results of the survey showed that that the vast majority teachers were in agreement or partial agreement with the statement that participating in the project brought them benefits. During the interviews, however, we found that teachers did not so much wish to receive advice or information regarding possible support measures from the project specialists as they wanted an assistant for a child with special needs. It is possible that the perceived need for an assistant was the reason that 6 teachers disagreed or expressed more disagreement than agreement with the statement.

The cooperation of the parents is vital to the implementation of inclusive education, and for this reason it is the task of institutions' employees to provide information, offer advice and observe confidentiality with respect to all information given and acquired. This study asked teachers about their interactions with the parents or legal guardians of students and their ability to communicate to them the importance of inclusive education. Figure 2 below shows their responses to the question 'Have you been successful in communicating to all the parents of the group the importance of inclusive education and the need for their children to gain relationship experience?'

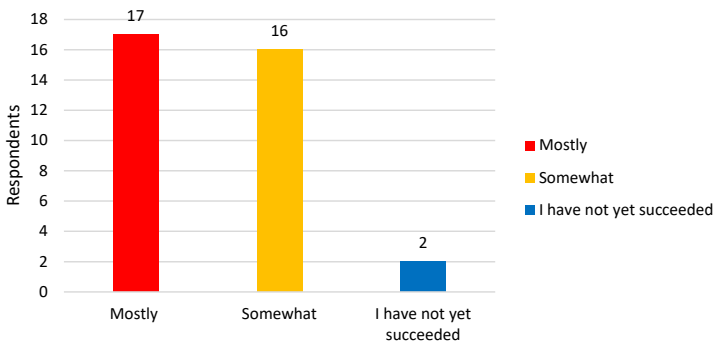


Figure 2. Have You Been Successful in Communicating the Importance of Inclusive Education to Parents?

As Figure shows, 17 teachers had sufficiently good communication with parents and almost the same number of respondents (16 teachers) had some communication. Only 2 respondents acknowledged that they had insufficient interactions with parents and had not yet been able to communicate to them the importance of inclusive education.

Analysing the documentation of the specific pre-school education institution, we found that when assembling groups of students, it is preferable to include no more than one or two students with special needs to ensure an individualised approach. An important task of pedagogues is to observe children. Observations are especially important when implementing inclusive education. In their discussions with experts, teachers comment on the results of observations and aim to determine the best solutions. Typically, most difficulties in creating educational groups arise with the inclusion of newly accepted children. Although the legal guardians of all newly accepted children are asked to provide as much information as possible about their child, the information may not be adequate for educational purposes. This study carried out a survey of 113 students' parents/legal guardians and found that the information they provided was more useful

for developing strategies to mitigate adaptation or behavioural problems than for understanding the special needs of the child, which were quite often undiagnosed.

Taking into account that the development of individual plans for a child with special needs has been implemented only since 1 September 2021, we asked teachers whether they agree with the statement that the development of these plans is the primary pedagogical challenge. The results are shown in Figure 3.

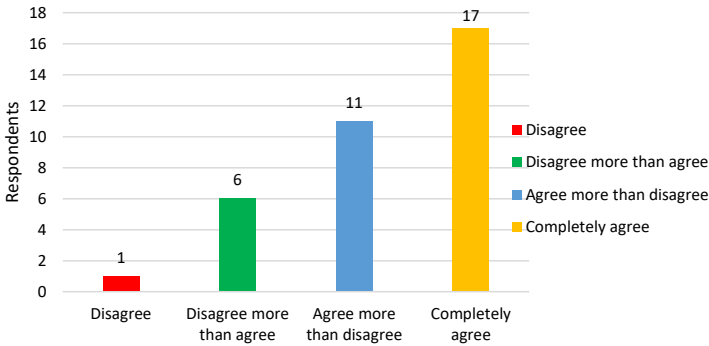


Figure 3. Do You Agree That the Development of Plans is the Primary Pedagogical Challenge?

According to the responses, the majority of teachers agreed or mostly agreed that the development of plans was the primary pedagogical challenge, and only 1 teacher completely disagreed with this statement. We conclude that knowledge obtained through courses, expert advice, or project participation may be helpful in solving this problem.

An individual plan is to be jointly evaluated by the student, student's parents/legal guardians and pedagogues involved in the implementation of the plan not less than twice during the academic year, and written minutes are to be kept. However, it does not appear that these procedures are always followed. Results from the survey showed that in most cases, these discussions take place infrequently or not at all, and only one teacher indicated that they take place regularly (see Figure 4). Thus, slightly less than one third of pedagogues carry out discussions with parents/legal guardians regarding the development of an individual plan for their child. The COVID-19 restriction measures might possibly explain these findings. During the period of lockdown, parents were not permitted to be present on the school premises; thus discussions could only take place outside the school, which was inconvenient for both parties. The use of technologies in the provision of information may have also been a contributing factor. The 'e-klase' communication method is currently being used, but in previous years it was not used. Instead, other technological communication methods were implemented

that did not have the convenience of the e-klase method. Unfortunately, not all pedagogues have good digital skills; therefore, the development of courses in pedagogy and technical skills are currently underway for upcoming years.

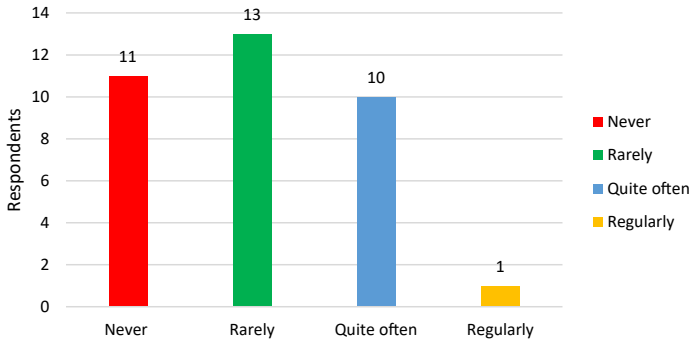


Figure 4. How Often Do You Recommend Parents Practices to be Implemented?

Within the scope of the ESF project, specialists from the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children’s Rights in cooperation with the pre-school stressed that the peer environment of the group has an impact on the outcomes of inclusive education; therefore, during consultations with group staff, information was provided not only about the behaviour, interests and skills of a child with special needs, but also about other children in the group. To reflect the importance of the group setting, we asked teachers about relationships between children . The question was whether the children in their classroom willingly participated and cooperated in daily activities together with children who have communication difficulties. The results are shown in Figure 5 below.

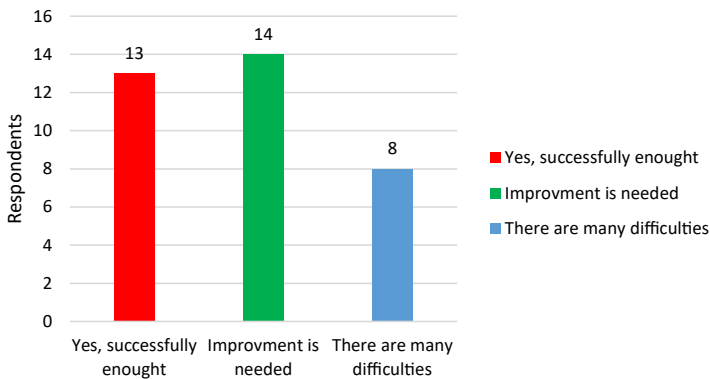


Figure 5. Do the Children in Your Classroom Willingly Participate in Daily Activities Together With Children Who Have Communication Difficulties?



Obtained results demonstrate that 13 teachers have a successful experience with children in groups, whereas 14 indicated that improvement is needed and 8 acknowledged many difficulties in this regard. In individual semi-structured interviews with teachers, we found that teachers support the implementation of inclusive education and made efforts to facilitate it.

## Discussion

In most developed countries, special education has been 'extended in scope' and is now 'the concern of all schools, teachers and professionals working with children rather than the separate domain of a limited number of specialists' (Jones, 2004, p. 6). This is also the case in Latvian pre-schools, where team-work is encouraged in the implementation of inclusive education. For this reason, it is essential for pre-school teachers to have a support system in place that includes experts involved in the ESF project.

To facilitate one-on-one discussions with parents/legal guardians of the 6 students with special needs in this study, we analysed the ESF project recommendations in Regulation No. 9.2.1.3/16/I/001 'Support systems development for children with communication difficulties, behavioural disorders and domestic violence'. These recommendations have been formulated by experts who include a psychologist, family psychotherapist, social worker, and special pedagogue. They are summarised below:

- Continue to provide necessary support for children in accordance with their individual needs and the competencies of the institution's specialists.
- Expand the support team and organise support team meetings to identify current problem situations, put forward goals and tasks, determine responsible persons for individual situations, establish individual education/behaviour support plans, plan meetings with parents and support institutions (for example, social services), and present the current difficulties and progress of the child's development.
- During work with children, implement realistic tasks that can be measured within a particular time frame. Develop these tasks together with their parents and specialists.
- Continue to perform pedagogical observations and use them to carry out evaluations of the special needs of students.
- In work with groups, use social and emotional learning to help children in the group understand their emotions as well as those of others.
- Continue educational training (and educate children's parents and colleagues) on how to solve difficulties with children, including how to correct undesirable behaviour.

- Promote self-guided learning, which is an important skill for children to develop to be able to maximise their abilities. Self-guided learning reveals areas of difficulty and interest, and at the same time helps the child learn to plan and organise their activities.
- Continue working with parents/legal guardians, encouraging and motivating them to seek additional support at the educational facility and elsewhere.

Clarifying comments by experts on these recommendations were provided for teachers the implementation of these tasks. For example, when suggesting that parents visit a specialist with their child, it is important to explain the justification and aim of the recommendation. The recommendation to make an appointment with a psychologist, for example, might be given in relation to specific observational signs of neurodevelopmental disorder or other difficulties. Equally important is being able to answer parents' questions about the nature of the particular specialist's work, for example, whether the specialist is a pedagogue, speech therapist, psychologist or other professional.

More detailed explanations by experts were also provided for teachers. Example, during a remote consultation it was stated that there are students in the group whose skills, abilities and knowledge are not commensurate with those of other children in the same age group. An earlier diagnosis and provision of targeted support might have been utilised to enhance the skill development of these students. We conclude that the pedagogue's observations and early cooperation with parents, administration and support staff specialists are vital in providing special needs children with the necessary support.

Dukes and Smith (2007) highlight the importance of communication with parents in the educational process:

*The more you get to know a parent the more you are able to understand the things they may say or do and vice versa. Many misunderstandings can be avoided by taking a little time to think about and appreciate a parent's perspective'. (p. 62)*

The willingness of pedagogues to understand the situation and perspective of parents can be very helpful in communicating with them for the purpose of obtaining support for children in inclusive education. Research shows that cooperation between professionals and parents is crucial for children with special needs (Roffey, 2005). However, finding the best way to obtain this cooperation can be challenging, as Baldock (2011) writes: 'As a society we remain fundamentally uncertain where to draw the boundaries and lines of connection between the family, the community and the state when it comes to the welfare of young children' (p. 133).

The implementers of ESF project, the Advisory Unit of the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights, explains that the programme is developed based on information provided by the education institution. It includes a support programme with an implementation plan and detailed recommendations for each party. The 'Implementation plan of the support programme' includes tasks that require implementation within the next 3 months. In case of any questions or uncertainties, it is recommended that persons contact the Advisory Unit specialists. 'Recommendations for the implementation of the support programme' are included in an attachment to the support programme and intended to be implemented after the programme has commenced.

The ESF project approach to pre-school education appears to be very useful in reaching the goals of inclusive education. As Beneke et al. (2018) writes, different educational projects are helpful in achieving 'the goal of engaging each and every child' because they allow teachers to choose a topic of 'high interest to their particular group of students and they facilitate an in-depth study of the topic through firsthand investigation and research' (p. 13). In order to evaluate the usefulness of the recommendations provided by the ESF project, specialists of the Advisory Unit carry out an electronic survey for support providers within 6 months after the development of the support programme to obtain information about the results of cooperation with experts and parents of children in the programme.

## Conclusions

This study investigated the level of implementation and perceived effectiveness among Latvian preschool teachers of recommendations provided by the ESF Project No. 9.2.1.3/16/1/001 'Improving the support system for children with communication difficulties, behavioural disorders and domestic violence'. Empirical data based on questionnaires and interviews were obtained from 35 teachers in the preschool education institution of Riga municipality as well as 113 parents of children and 6 parents of children with special needs. The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. In Latvia, a gradual transition to inclusive education whereby children with special needs are being admitted into general education programmes is being implemented in accordance with the documents of education policy and regulations of education institutions, as well as the wishes of parents of children with special needs.
2. Although pre-school educators are informed about the documents of education policy and the content of institutional regulations, they lack of knowledge, support measures and accumulated work experience to implement these requirements.

3. The Advisory Unit of the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights provides the institution participating in the project with support measures for the implementation of inclusive education, specific recommendations and an opportunity to receive answers to problematic questions related to daily pedagogical work.
4. Results of an empirical study indicate that less than one third of pedagogues communicate with the parents/legal guardians of the child regarding the development of an individual plan. This situation needs to improve. Provision of support measures also needs improvement. Difficulties often arise due to insufficient understanding and support from parents of other students, making it necessary to be proactive in gaining civic support for inclusive education from individuals within the community.

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## About the authors

**Agrita Tauriņa**, Dr. paed., is a docent in the Department of Pre-school and Elementary School Education, Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Arts at the University of Latvia. Her research interests are in early child development and language acquisition, the facilitation of dialogue speech and inclusive education. She is an active researcher in projects about children's early development and pre-school institution management.

**Tija Zīriņa**, Dr. psych., is a professor in the Department of Pre-school and Elementary School Education, Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Arts at the University of Latvia. Much of her work has been done in training students and teachers in developmental psychology and educational psychology. She has also initiated and coordinated international scientific projects in pre-school education. She has been involved in international project activities (EEA and Norway Grants, ERASMUS) for more than 10 years and has developed skills of working in a multicultural research environment.