

Support for Children of Returning Migrant Families in Latvian Schools

Una Auziņa

University of Latvia, Latvia

una.auzina@isriga.lv

ABSTRACT

Every year, approximately 800 families return to live in Latvia. Remigrant (returning migrant) families both include parents who were born in Latvia and spent their childhoods there, or were born abroad. The number of students from remigrating families in Latvian educational institutions is constantly increasing.

Although there is some support for children from remigrating families, it does not necessarily reflect all the needs for a supportive and inclusive learning environment in an educational institution, especially in relation to student well-being, achievement and participation. Studies in Latvia show that if problems identified by the representatives of educational institutions (principals and educators) are more related to the learning content or the knowledge of the students, then the parents emphasize the aspect of attitude more. The parents believe that teachers sometimes lack understanding and tolerance, because the focus is more on learning subjects than building a class team, promoting cooperation or preventing conflicts.

One of the resources to solve the identified problems of the integration process of students with foreign educational experience in schools is not only the collective mutual cooperation of the educational institution, support measures, cooperation with the student's family, but also targeted work with the student's classmates and the entire school community. This can contribute to the fact that every student in an educational institution can feel safe, motivated and passionate about eliminating the gaps in their knowledge and being included in the Latvian education system.

The research uses theoretical analysis methods: an analysis of scientific literature and an analysis of international experience. Based on this, criteria for evaluating support will be developed.

Keywords: Children, family, return migrants, school, support

Introduction

Migration has been a part of human history since ancient times. Families move to other countries for a variety of reasons, and the reasons for returning differ just as much. Some of these motives are the pursuit of a better quality of life, new work or educational opportunities, or the desire to provide their children with a sense of homeland that they once lost.

Returning to Latvia after a period of time spent abroad has so far been a relatively little studied topic in the study of migration processes in Latvia. There is a lack of in-depth studies based on the study of the practice of the return process, focusing on Latvian nationals who have returned to their homeland – remigrants.

Every year, approximately 800 families return to live in Latvia. Remigrating families include parents (of returning migrant children) who were born and raised in Latvia, and those where the parents were born outside of Latvia, but one or both grandparents were born in Latvia. According to definition (Ministru kabineta noteikumi, 2018) a remigrant is defined as a Latvian national (citizen, non-citizen or person born in Latvia) who has emigrated to another country for the purpose of changing permanent residence for at least one year.

There are several important issues that need to be resolved in order to make remigration more successful. Although a plan of support measures has been created and a series of actions have been taken to support returning migrants and their families, it is not always successful. Integration is hampered by many factors that are political, economic, social and other issues that are important to people.

Research shows that until 2017, personal motives contributed the most to returning to Latvia – the desire to be with family, the desire to give children an education and the opportunity to live in their/their parents' homeland, rather than economic motivation (Zača, Hazans, Bela, 2018). The number of students from remigrating families in Latvian educational institutions is increasing: in the school year 2015/2016 there were 664 students, in 2017/2018 835 students, but in 2019/2020 already 1680. Remigrated students have studied in more than 75% of Riga municipal educational institutions in the last three years (Mihailovs, 2020).

For adult expats, this is often a step back into a normal environment, but what about children? How do children feel when they return to their parents' or grandparents' homeland, and integrate into school and society in general? Gross has drawn attention to the fact that a child's well-being in the context of migration is definitely influenced by various factors – the student's age, ability to adapt to new conditions, parents' busyness or participation in school life, the attitude of teachers and the competence of the entire school community in working with newcomers both from the point of view of the learning process and the point of view of sensitivity, as well as the readiness of other children and the attitude towards children with a different level of the national language, subject knowledge, different mentality, etc. (Gross, 2022).

In 2018, 4,852 remigrants returned to Latvia. Children (aged 14 and younger) and young people (aged 25 to 34) make up the largest part of returning migrants (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde, 2019). In the study on the consolidation of a unifying national identity and cultural space of Latvia during (Mieraņa et al., 2017) it is said that 30% of returning migrants who have children encountered difficulties related to their children's education. Dissatisfaction with the school environment certainly significantly reduces the willingness of both sexes to stay in Latvia permanently and connect their life with Latvia in the long term, as well as the probability of evaluating their decision to return as correct.

What is at the root of this dissatisfaction? Are the problems related to the lack of suitable methodological and teaching materials in educational institutions, the need for further education of pedagogues on the inclusion of learners in the Latvian education system, or are there other factors? There are studies on support measures educational institutions need to improve for their work with immigrant and return migrant children, but there is a lack of in-depth research on what support measures students need to help integrate into school.

The research questions that will be answered in this study are:

1. What is the regulatory provision for support for the children of return migrants in Latvian schools?
2. What problems have been identified and what kind of support would be needed, taking into account the experience of Latvia and other countries?

Methodology

While researching what support measures are needed for children of returning migrant families to help them integrate into school, both theoretical literature and normative documents on remigration in general and related issues were searched and analyzed. Data from the Ministry of Education and Science provided information on how many remigrating students study in Latvian educational institutions (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2020). The regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers explain the procedure by which learners are admitted to general education programs. These regulations apply both to learners who have returned or moved from their home country to permanent residence in Latvia after a long absence and who have previously received education in Latvia, as well as to those who have not previously studied in Latvia (Ministru kabineta noteikumi, 2022). They also indicate what support and for how long these students are expected to receive. The guidelines for the development of education in Latvia, which is a planning document on a unified state policy and development strategy in education from 2021 to 2027, were examined. Also, policy outcomes for all population groups were analyzed. Special attention was paid to the issue of the planned inclusive learning process in order to understand whether and how the

set goals could facilitate the integration of remigrant students in Latvian educational institutions in the future. Order of the Cabinet of Ministers on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy Guidelines 2012-2018 for 2018, indicates the planned and accomplished in relation to diaspora-decisions, as well as the real remigration processes, which are related to providing information to those who are thinking about returning, and specific support to those people who have returned, paying attention also to how to achieve the inclusion of the children of return migrants in the Latvian education system (Ministru kabineta noteikumi, 2017).

In this study, information from the State Service of Quality of Education (Izglītības kvalitātes valsts dienests, 2014) was used about students (children from remigrant families) who have returned from studies in another country. During this research with the aim of finding out what the integration of these students into the Latvian education system has been like, 64 educational institutions of Latvia were identified, where students who have returned from studies in another country have studied/are studying. A total of 184 questionnaires were received, incl. 31 from directors of educational institutions, 111 educators and 42 parents.

Information about remigrant children in Latvia and other countries was especially searched for, analyzing the research of various authors on this topic. The theoretical literature on remigration and its effects in general was explored using the following keywords: children, family, school, return migrants, support. In the databases Researchgate, Scopus, Sage and Springer, in general, more than ten articles were selected that researched and analyzed the experience of remigrant children in Latvia and the world, as well as the various challenges that children and young people face when moving (Vathi and Duci, 2016; Dumitru and Langa, 2016; Gross, 2022; Catalano, 2016; Parrenas, 2005). The results of quantitative and qualitative studies of return migrant children in Latvia (Hazans, 2016; Ose, 2015; Pičukāne and Mihailovs, 2017) provide theoretical material about the situation in Latvia, while Lithuanian remigration researcher (Bagdonaitė, 2020) analyzes the experience of teachers in working with return migrant children in Lithuania, citing challenges and good practices that help these children integrate into schools. Here you can see a lot of similarities and you can easily draw parallels with the difficulties faced by the children of returning migrants in Latvian schools. The most important conclusions that were obtained are that all political decisions related to the migration process affect the children of migrant families. Appropriate and thoughtful preparation of the education system for the reception of returnees provides opportunities for successful integration of returnees and their children, creating long-term added value for the country. Both external and internal factors affect the children of returned families, so it is difficult to find the right approach for the successful integration of these children in the new home country.

The analysis of the theoretical literature and regulatory documents on the support measures intended for the return migrant children helped to find answers to the questions about what kind of regulatory provision is intended to support the return migrant children in Latvian schools. It revealed both what has been introduced or is planned to be introduced in legislation to facilitate the inclusion of these children in educational institutions, as well as what problems have been identified. Based on the obtained data, it was possible to create criteria for what kind of support remigrant children in Latvia would need, taking into account the experience of Latvia and other countries.

Results

The research found out what the regulatory provision is for the return migrant children in Latvia and what measures are implemented to promote their inclusion in educational institutions.

In order to ensure all possible support for the inclusion of reemigrated children in general educational institutions of Latvia and to prepare pedagogues to work with children who return to Latvia from abroad, the Latvian Language Agency regularly organizes professional competence improvement courses for pedagogues. Informative seminars are also organized for municipal education work coordinators, school administrations and teachers who work or will work with re-emigrants, immigrants and asylum seekers. In 2021, an online guide was published for parents of returning migrants who plan to return, as well as for teachers of these children, to help understand the problems that such children may face.

When living abroad, families have wide opportunities to improve their knowledge of the Latvian language together with their children in an attractive and engaging way, as well as learn the content of other subjects at the same time. Latvian language learning programs and additional materials for Latvian language learning for diaspora children of different ages have been developed, as well as reading books, animated films and video lessons for understanding grammar questions. Latvian Language Agency constantly develops and improves Latvian language learning materials, including electronic teaching aids that are publicly available on the agency's website. The currently developed descriptions and materials of the functional levels of the Latvian language provide an opportunity to improve the teaching and assessment of the Latvian language for all groups and skill levels of Latvian language learners. This means that students have great opportunities to learn and improve the language even before they start school in Latvia.

Joining a new school is already a process full of challenges. It is even more difficult for a student from a remigrant family if there is a lack of knowledge of the Latvian language, different curricula, etc. In the study of the State Service

of Quality of Education “Inclusion in the Latvian education system of students of general education institutions who have returned from studies in another country” it was found that only 4 out of 36 interviewed pedagogues indicated that the student who returned from studies in another country and continued their studies in Latvia did not need special support measures (Izglītības kvalitātes valsts dienests, 2014).

The regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers on the procedure (Ministru kabineta noteikumi, 2022) in which pupils are admitted to general education institutions and deducted from them, the mandatory requirements for transfer to the next class stipulate that a pupil who has previously studied in Latvia, returning from studies in another country, is admitted in a class appropriate to his age and needs, observing the sequence of previously learned curriculum. In order to diagnose the learner’s learning needs and plan the further learning process, by inviting the learner and the parent or responsible official of a minor learner, the level of the learner’s language skills and the level of the learned content are determined. Then, by the order of the director, the state-funded support measures to be implemented during one school year are determined for the acquisition of compulsory basic education – the improvement of the skills of the Latvian language and literature, history and social sciences subjects, as well as the learning of the subjects that differ from the Latvian and the student’s previously learned educational program. It has been established that additional hours may be charged for support measures in schools and paid for from the state budget.

If a student from another country has not previously studied in Latvia, then state-financed support measures for obtaining compulsory basic education can be implemented within one to three school years (Ministru kabineta noteikumi, 2022).

What are the conclusions about the proposed regulatory support for remigrant children in Latvian schools? The evaluation of the student’s knowledge is essential in order to find appropriate support measures, such as an individual study plan, the amount of additional consultations or the possibility of attracting the help of a psychologist, social pedagogue, speech therapist, or other specialists.

The materials available for learning and improving the Latvian language are numerous and diverse. This indicates that it is possible to improve Latvian language skills both in the family and at school, but there is probably not enough information on where and what to look for and how to use them meaningfully.

Support measures are mainly intended for subjects related to the Latvian language. It would be important to determine the level of knowledge of the learner in each subject. It is important to create a certain learning plan for each student, according to his knowledge, in which teachers and students agree on specific learning goals and the time for their implementation. Even though the support offered seems wide enough, it is not always available and sufficient for

all remigrant students to successfully integrate in an educational institution. Normative rules do not say anything about the time of adaptation in which there would be no grading. This would be an important psychological support for the return migrant children. The adaptation period would allow students to familiarize themselves with the new situation in the classroom and school in general, to strengthen or improve their Latvian language skills, to overcome differences in educational programs and gaps in knowledge, in order to safely and confidently continue the learning process.

It is important to start with the understanding that when analyzing the role of children in migration processes, the return experience of children is special, taking into account that their move to the country of origin of their parents cannot always be described as “returning home”, as some were born and grew up in another country. For many children, the new “home” is a completely new world with a different language, different rules and different attitudes from other people than what they have experienced so far. For these children, the move is not really a return, but rather a migration, since they were born in a different host country.

For children, “returning” means changing the existing social environment and they have to start building new relationships in an often unfamiliar environment. It can be very difficult for them to switch between different school systems and this transition can cause confusion and insecurity for the child. Schools that accept remigrating children do not always show understanding and flexibility in adapting to the individual needs of the student, both psycho-emotionally and academically.

Schools are one of the first and perhaps now the most impactful challenges that migrant children face when they move, and these experiences have lasting effects throughout a person’s life.

Although the support program for remigrating students is working, qualitative and quantitative studies (Ose, 2015; Gross, 2022) on the inclusion of students in Latvian schools show that the Latvian education system as a whole is still not welcoming to families returning to Latvia. For a long time, efforts have been made to ensure that the returning migrant children are given a one-year transitional period, where they would not be given grades in academic subjects. During this time, the child would improve his language skills and develop an understanding of the lessons, but would not yet receive an assessment. Low grades do not motivate students to learn.

These children often have a different knowledge of the Latvian language than local children, which also makes it difficult to perceive the learning material in other subjects at school. Many children of returning migrants have problems understanding the Latvian language, speaking fluently in Latvian (Mihailovs, 2020), which actually makes it difficult to learn all subjects and communicate

with both teachers and classmates. Even though schools offer supplementary lessons of the Latvian language prescribed by the state, the reality is often that teachers are not prepared to teach Latvian as a foreign language. Schools often lack the resources to provide additional support for language learning, both in terms of human resources and teaching materials.

There is also no unified system in the country, who will provide this help to students, when and how, and how the funding provided by the state will be distributed. Support measures for students who have recently returned to Latvia (additional learning of the Latvian language or other subjects not previously taught in the country of residence, orientation in Latvian culture, consultations of a psychologist or social pedagogue, which since 2012 are provided for by the Cabinet of Ministers' regulations for students who have returned to Latvia), many respondents did not receive or received only partially (Ose, 2015).

What are the research results on how the return migrant children integrate into Latvian schools? Both the students themselves, their parents, and the teachers admit that the teachers lack experience in working with re-emigrant children, and this is exactly what causes difficulties. Considering the limited experience with such students, schools and teachers lack recommendations, consultations and examples of positive practice for the successful inclusion of such children in school.

Teachers indicate that they lack both methodology and materials available at school for working with remigrants according to different age stages, as well as a lack of information about existing materials focused on teaching language to them, and the skills to combine all the needs of a remigrant in language and environment learning. Most of the pedagogues who participated in the study indicated that they did not know where to look for support in working with remigrated students (Izglītības kvalitātes valsts dienests, 2014).

The presence of a teaching assistant in the school during the initial period would help the integration of recently returned children into the education system. The law on the basic educational development standards in Latvia for 2021-2027 (Ministru kabineta noteikumi, 2021) states that there is not enough available support staff in local government basic and general secondary education institutions, especially speech therapists, educational psychologists and teaching assistants, as a shortcoming of the current system. Teaching assistants are mentioned in the state support measures, but they are provided with municipal funding, which is often insufficient. Individual student lesson plans would be another school support measure, but they are not always created and used. In a survey of Latvian school principals and teachers (Mihailovs, 2020) regarding the most significant problems encountered by remigrated students, the mismatch of educational programs, students' lack of knowledge of the Latvian language, differences in culture and values, as well as insufficient human and financial resources for the creation of individual plans and for implementation. So, the problems mentioned by the

pedagogues are related to the teaching content, the knowledge of the students and insufficient financial possibilities in terms of both support staff and teaching materials, with little attention being paid to the well-being of these students.

When surveying parents of remigrated students in the same study (Mihailovs, 2020), parents also mentioned the inconsistency of educational programs, a large number of parents also mentioned problems related to the lack of understanding and tolerance of educators, bad relations with classmates, classmates “doing wrong” and lack of initiative by educators. The qualitative research conducted by Ose on remigrant students in Latvian schools also shows that, from the point of view of parents and students, the attitude of teachers towards students who have returned to Latvia varies from a supportive attitude, an individualized approach in working with them, to neglect, ignoring the student’s needs. Teachers are often overworked, disinterested and intolerant (Ose, 2015). Parents also see differences in the educational system and teaching methodology of Latvia and their previous home country, indicating that Latvian schools are more oriented towards knowledge, remembering, “implantation”, rather than critical thinking and the ability to apply the acquired knowledge in real life.

In in-depth interviews, even the factors that hinder the inclusion of return migrant children in schools (Gross, 2022), the parents of remigrant children mentioned the different “atmosphere” in their previous and current school in Latvia, including children’s behavior in the classroom, where children in schools in Latvia are ruder, less careful, less polite, less tolerant. Parents indicate that psychological difficulties and bad relations with classmates/schoolmates are a problem that often hinders integration more than difficulties in learning. Such concerns are not unfounded. Latvia’s complex historical experience contributes to a low society’s tolerance for diversity, multiculturalism and makes it difficult to integrate into Latvian society. Using Eurostat data, Zubikova (2021) revealed that Latvia has the lowest level of immigrant integration (along with Slovenia) of all 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004.

Based on the results of the study, Gross (2022) also acknowledges that the obstacles that hinder the successful integration of returning students into the Latvian school system are also related to the lack of communication/cooperation between the school and parents, which includes communication not only about the students’ academic performance, but also the psychological wellness in a educational institution. Parents would like to cooperate more with the school and receive feedback from teachers more often in order to feel informed about their child’s difficulties and progress both academically and psycho-emotionally.

The different atmosphere, evaluation system, teacher-student relationship often cause the student anxiety and confusion about what is expected of him, which of course does not contribute to successful integration in the educational institution.

Discussion

The world is currently changing the understanding of what role education plays in shaping our common world and common future. The world events of recent years (COVID, the war in Ukraine, various global changes, etc.) clearly show that the movement of people from one country to another is often externally created, a need that is not related to an individual's or family's desire to move.

Global problems affect many people around the world, driving migration and forcing people to adapt to the situations they are exposed to. The increasing mobility of people around the world, regardless of why they change their place of residence, has created a new pedagogical reality that brings the world's cultural and racial diversity into educational institutions. Teachers increasingly have to work in new environments with students who have different educational backgrounds, languages and cultures. All of this forces us to improve our understanding of the diversity of people and the differences of each one, calls us to be tolerant and open-minded, looking at diversity as an advantage, not a disadvantage in an educational institution.

How do others in the world deal with these issues? It is worth taking into account the experience of our closest neighbors, taking care to prepare potential remigrants and make their integration easier and faster. In Estonia, the "Program for compatriots, 2014-2020" was developed, the purpose of which was to support Estonians living abroad, helping them maintain their Estonian language skills, maintaining Estonian national culture and identity, as well as providing support to those who are considering returning to Estonia (Hartman, 2021). Cassarino (2008) has emphasized in his studies that the previous preparation of repatriates, both on an individual psychological level and from the point of view of society, is of great importance. It makes the return significantly easier. The program provides a significant amount of support for educational activities, realizing that knowledge of the language is one of the prerequisites for returning to Estonia, being included in the education system and actively participating in the Estonian cultural space. In Estonia, the same techniques are used for remigrant students as for immigrant children – each child is provided with an individual approach and an adapted learning plan that meets his individual needs.

In Lithuania, compensatory training is provided to the children of return migrant families and it is financed by the state. As an example of good practice, the model where researchers and practitioners cooperated, creating an online platform to help teachers better understand diversity, and to promote understanding of how to treat such remigrant and newcomer students should be mentioned. When working with returning students, teachers in Lithuania, as in Latvia, face new challenges that require preparation, new methods, materials, as well as external help for the school, for example with support staff and additional funding. As for the measures planned in Lithuania, it should be mentioned that,

in order to facilitate the integration of returned children, students who do not speak Lithuanian at all can be provided with the opportunity to learn Lithuanian for one year in a remedial class or a remedial mobile group before starting school. Of course, not all schools in Lithuania have the opportunity to create such classes, especially if only a few children return to some schools. In this case, it is proposed to organize weekend language classes in the regions as needed. The positive thing in that case is that the child is not separated from the class of his peers and with support he can continue his studies together with everyone.

The main obstacles currently faced by Lithuanian educational institutions are Lithuanian language training and the lack of pedagogues' competencies, specifically in terms of tolerance. They were identified as particularly important challenges in a study carried out in Lithuania (Bagdonaitė, 2020). As a priority for the more successful inclusion of remigrant children in Lithuanian schools, the development of a cooperative environment (teachers, parents, children) within the school is set as one of the most successful methods for facilitating the work of pedagogues with such students

According to Targamadze and Manjgaladze (2020), the process of children's integration in school is determined by five levels (public, systemic, institutional, interpersonal, intrapersonal). The family and the child's personal characteristics are undoubtedly important, but the aim of this article was to find criteria that could improve the inclusion of remigrant students, based on the first four levels. These factors, when correlated with each other, affect how the student will feel in the new situation.

Taking into account the theoretical literature on the support of remigrant children in Latvia and other countries, as well as analyzing the research conducted from the point of view of parents, teachers, and peers of these children, support criteria were created that would be necessary to facilitate the inclusion of remigrant children in Latvian schools. Those are:

- A fixed adaptation period when students are not evaluated
- An inclusive curriculum
- Motivating learning process and individual learning plans
- Students' participation in the learning process in setting and achieving goals
- Effective cooperation and communication between the school and parents
- Using differentiated, student-appropriate assessment of learning progress
- Improving the competence of teachers
- Student wellbeing– ensuring a safe and supportive environment at school
- Promotion of friendship, empathy and tolerance in educational institutions.

Some of these support criteria require a change in legislation, for example, in relation to the possibility of providing remigrant students with adaptation time and using a different assessment system / no grading, however most are within

the competence of the school, depending on what the overall school climate is, how the school community respects students' academic, personal and social differences, is able to create a safe, welcoming and motivating environment, or is ready and able to implement solutions that meet the educational needs of an articular student.

The following educational goals of Latvia, which are planned to be implemented by 2027, are encouraging and promising, and would probably also improve the inclusion of returning migrants and other newcomers in Latvian schools. It is indicated that in order to be able to implement individualized learning, changes in the educational organization are necessary, respecting the differentiation in the learning process and creating opportunities to follow the performance of each individual and their progress. Also, in terms of the evaluation of students' performance, the emphasis changes from "evaluation – goal" to "the need to identify the strengths and areas for improvement of each individual, to determine the main factors affecting growth and to offer the most effective solutions for further development". This Educational Development Plan states that the educational institution must provide an inclusive and emotionally safe learning environment, it must be an open and multifunctional place and environment for learning and personal development for different groups of learners, adapted to individual needs, abilities, skills and previous experience.

Conclusions

Migration is a complex phenomenon that forces students to overcome various challenges while integrating into school, so working with remigrant children requires an individual and sensitive approach that corresponds to each individual child.

Education in Latvia still does not meet the wishes and needs of all people. This indicates the shortcomings of the current education model in Latvia in order to ensure a meaningful learning process for all students.

Although the regulatory documents indicate that remigrant children have access to various types of learning support in schools, the results of the surveys show that often the students did not receive it or only partially received it.

The assessment system should gradually change, it should be a process of systematic empirical observation of students' progress and the challenges they face in learning and observing how they overcome them. Educators should clearly identify pedagogical goals that they can measure and that cannot be measured by assessment. In order to ensure a gentle transition to a new education system and not to cause psychological trauma, one of the possible solutions could be a one-year transition period for children of remigrating families, during which they do not receive an assessment at school.

It is important to create an individual learning plan and achievable goals for these students, providing the necessary support to achieve them by adapting the curriculum to each child's educational needs. Inclusion is also the use of different teaching methods so that all children are actively involved in the classroom.

A successful learning process is certainly important, but what parents indicate as difficulties in integrating into Latvian educational institutions is not so much related to the technical provision of learning, but the attitude of teachers and other students towards the remigrant-student. This means that schools need to find a way to develop friendship, empathy and mutual respect between all children, as well as between children in the classroom and the school's community as a whole.

The student's well-being is of great importance in the development of learning motivation and perception, in the formation of mutual relations with classmates, teachers and the surrounding world.

The school's connection with the parents of remigrant children can play an important role in ensuring a positive learning environment. Involvement of parents and informing them about the learning process, progress and difficulties (also related to children's well-being) would definitely promote the integration of students in Latvian schools.

It is necessary to invest in the education of teachers, because educators that are open to diversity, knowledgeable, creative and motivated with a sense of mission, are one of the prerequisites for schools to be able to successfully integrate different children.

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About the authors

Una Auziņa is the teacher with more than 25 years of experience as an educator, teaching students of all ages, from primary school to adults. She has 20 years of work experience in an International school, as well as a Bachelor's degree in psychology and a Master's degree in educational sciences. Currently does Doctoral studies in education, and her research is on the integration of remigrant children in Latvian schools.