

# The notion of inclusive education and challenges for the teacher in kindergartens and the first stage of school

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## Summary

The objective of inclusive education is to improve the efficiency of the education system to reach all learners. What one deems to be inclusive education more precisely depends on what groups of learners can remain aside from education. In developed democratic countries most of all it is dealt with including learners with special educational needs (SEN) in ordinary schools at one's place of residence. Also the homepage of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (2016) formulates the essence of inclusive education as follows: "In the organisation of the studies of students with SEN, the principle of inclusive education is taken as a basis, according to which students with SEN study in the ordinary school at their place of residence as a rule." According to official statistics 13% of learners in Estonian kindergartens and 17% in schools of general education have special educational needs.

This article focuses on the challenges that teachers encounter when dealing with inclusive education. Since the 1990s the learning differences within a group or class have increased, therefore, a modern teacher has to be highly flexible concerning her/his approaches. In professional standards (Kollom *et al.*, 2013; Pedaste *et al.*, 2013) it is clearly stated that dealing with children with SEN within a teaching group is an area of responsibility of the teacher. Research by students has shown, however, that Estonian teachers (19–95% of interviewees) rather estimate their special pedagogical knowledge to be insufficient and respective in-service training is still one of the priorities in teacher training. Researchers have found that kindergarten teachers maintain a neutral attitude towards the inclusion of learners with special needs (Bendová *et al.*, 2014), while primary school's teachers both neutral and negative ones (De Boera *et al.*, 2011). Based on an overview by Hattie

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(2012) charting efficient study skills, an individual approach is worthy of application for the teacher.

The practice that learners with special needs are isolated somewhere and only specialists can deal with them has been in effect for decades. Within the context of inclusive education, the emphasis has shifted: the teacher has to be supported, advised and guided by support specialists. At that it is important, however, that special pedagogues, speech therapists, social pedagogues and psychologists enable the teacher and parent to control the process and take responsibility. Pecek, Cuk and Lesar (2008), for example, have found that class teachers accept only to a minor extent the fact that the inclusion of students with SEN is their responsibility.

To sum up it can be said that the ideas of inclusive education have been spreading in Estonia for 15–20 years as yet; there are laws, regulations, and a concept of the organisation of studies governing the area. However, major changes in education, take place slowly (Fullan, 2006) and analyses in the field of education carried out in 2015 (statistics and questionnaires) still refer to difficulties in the involvement of learners with SEN (inclusion has not become a natural part of pre-school or basic education). The objective of this research is to find out how inclusive education in kindergartens and schools (first stage of study) is defined and what are the challenges and solutions for a teacher in connection with the inclusion of learners in the ordinary educational system.

The research took place within the project “Child in a safe educational system: involvement and intervention for the interests of all children (2014–2016)” of NGO Hea Algu, and was funded with monies from the European Economic Area Grants programme “Children and Youth at Risk”. Teams of 21 schools and 19 kindergartens (teacher, support specialist, members of management) from all over Estonia took part in the research. In the spring of 2015 team members filled in individual questionnaires and examinations of study and leisure activities (60 min) they performed. The teams were given five days training within the project. In the autumn the institutions were asked to cooperatively define what inclusive education is and to prepare a written plan for the promotion of inclusive education for one’s institution concerning the academic year of 2015/2016. Research issues and answers thereto as a resulting from this data analysis are as follows:

1. What is the concept of inclusive education connected to? It became evident from individual interviews that inclusive education is rather defined more widely. If a child with special needs was highlighted, then an individual approach was promptly emphasised as well. Surprisingly, it emerged that inclusive education is rather the inclusion of learners in the

study process, inclusion of support specialists and parents. When plans for the promotion of inclusive education were prepared after combined team training sessions at institutional level, inclusive education first and foremost was related to learners with SEN.

2. What options are outlined to promote inclusive education? It became evident from plans for inclusive education that activities can be aimed at children, teachers, parents, and the (additional) use of support structures, changing the environment or cooperation between different parties. In the work organisation of an institution possibilities are sought so that learners with SEN would be and learn with others as much as possible.
3. How are attitudes concerning inclusive education different in kindergarten and school? In kindergartens, the only support specialist was the speech therapist; in schools additionally a special pedagogue, social pedagogue and school psychologist were at work. School is mandatory and the processes taking place there (incl. inclusion) are more specifically regulated, having a stricter nature than in kindergarten. At the same time in the kindergartens in the groups at least two adults are at work and this results in better opportunities for teamwork.
4. What possibilities of adapting the organisation of studies and the environment do teachers know, and what problems they have experienced in connection with the inclusion of children with SEN? It became evident from the teachers' responses that there are problems dividing their attention between those with special needs, who have study and behavioural problems, and with the remainder of the class. Regarding the possibilities of adapting the physical and social environments, variations of the room, furniture, tools, and relationships between people, the size of the group, supporting personal were mentioned. More frequent training of teachers and the development of teamwork in the institutions were given as solutions to these problems.
5. How do learners in the same group feel during studies and leisure, how does the teacher react to an individual child? It became evident that bad or hard feelings during studies were expressed by the behaviour of ordinary children, rather than children differing from others. The teacher's reactions to a difficult child, especially in kindergarten, were more positive and supportive.

Results obtained during the research might have a practical output for teacher training. For the development of inclusive education, it is still required to teach in high schools who and what children with SEN are (attention has to be paid to the peculiarities, support of studies and behaviour). Similarly, it is also important to prepare teachers for the joint

teaching of a learner with SEN and the remaining children (group processes, control). Inclusive education should not operate at the expense, or cause suffering to anyone, rather that the teacher should understand the implications surrounding the physical and social environment of the learners. As a result of the research it can be stated that the inclusion of children with special needs takes place in Estonian kindergartens to a somewhat greater extent than in schools.

*Keywords:* inclusive education, children with SEN, kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers