

A model of inclusive education in the context of Estonian preschool education: a systematic literature review

Pille Nelis^{a1}, Margus Pedaste^a

^a *Institute of Education, University of Tartu*

Summary

Introduction

The idea of inclusive education has become a key issue in the fields of education around the world (Soukakou, 2012; Vlachau & Fyssa, 2016). Studies have shown that participation in qualitative early childhood education programmes and in the inclusive classroom has a positive effect on children's academic skills and social development (Kwon, Hong, & Jeon, 2017; Odom, 2002; OECD, 2018a). Inclusive education is generally conceptualised as access to learning opportunities that supports the rights of all children, with and without disabilities, to participate actively in everyday activities within their communities (Prater, 2010; UNESCO, 2008). Multiple definitions of inclusive education can be found in the literature, with authors emphasising its different aspects (Kivirand, Leijen, Lepp, & Malva, 2020). However, with various definitions offered by the literature where different aspects are emphasised, it is still unclear what are all the relevant aspects in the definition of inclusive education and thus, our study focuses on formulating a new definition.

In addition, inclusive education is a multi-dimensional issue lacking clarity about its implementation (Haug, 2017; Prater, 2010). According to the literature, there are different characteristics to be considered for implementing successful inclusive education, and the model most commonly used for this is the bioecological one developed by Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues (Love, 2018; Næsby, 2018; Odom et al., 1999). Several authors and some agencies have divided the key characteristics of inclusive education into *structural features* and *process features* (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Fyssa et al., 2014; Pelatti et al., 2016). Thus, there are different ways for categorising the characteristics of inclusive education and more clarity needs to be achieved in order to support the implementation of the principles of inclusive education.

¹ Institute of Education, University of Tartu, Salme 1a, Tartu, 50103 Estonia; pille.nelis@ut.ee

By screening all the titles of the most important educational research journals focusing on publishing systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses or research on inclusive education (*Review of Educational Research*, *Educational Research Review* and *International Journal of Inclusive Education*), we found only a few articles focusing on inclusive education at the early childhood education level (Botha, Kourkoutas, 2016; Capp, 2017; de Jager, 2013; Gaffney & Wilkins, 2016; Schneider, 2015). Thus, there is a lack of systematic literature reviews on the definitions and key features of inclusive education in early childhood education that would help to understand the nature of inclusive education in all its aspects, support the implementation of inclusive education and provide a basis for comparing inclusive education in different contexts.

We aim to suggest a definition that would integrate the most important aspects provided by definitions used in the literature; operationalise the contemporary concept of inclusive education through characteristics identified in different studies; and provide a framework for applying inclusive education at the early childhood level. These aims could be achieved by using a systematic literature review, and we expect it to shed some light on the matter in order to make decisions that could guide the application of inclusive education in the current situation where the concept of inclusive education has not been operationalised clearly enough.

The following sub-goals were formulated:

1. To define inclusive education based on different approaches to inclusive education.
2. To find out the key features to implement inclusive education in the context of early childhood education.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify studies reporting on inclusive education in the early childhood education context. The first search in the EBSCOhost service discovered 580 sources. After removing the duplicates, 423 publications remained for the following analysis. The abstract of each article was screened to see if the article met the inclusion criteria. If insufficient information was presented in the abstract, full texts were retrieved for further examination. Following the criteria, 197 articles were selected for full-text examination. During the examination exclusion criteria were established according to which 142 articles were excluded and 55 articles passed for further analysis. The remaining 55 articles were coded and analysed based on research questions. Qualitative inductive content analysis was used to analyse the articles.

Key findings and discussion

It was found that inclusive education can be defined through philosophical and practical sense. The analysed articles showed that four aspects – access, belonging and membership, social integration, and human rights – could describe the philosophical sense.

In Estonia, a large proportion of children have access to education at a younger age than in other countries. In 2016, 90% of three-year-olds participated in pre-primary education compared to the OECD average of 76% and the EU average of 82% (OECD, 2018b).

Three aspects – participation, support, and development of every child – describe the practical sense of inclusion. Inclusion is achieved by ensuring meaningful participation of children and personalised support when needed to achieve the development of the child according to the child's potential. The principles of inclusive education should be reflected in strategic documents, including the curriculum. In addition, the implementation of inclusive education is supported by a shared understanding of inclusive education (Florian, 2017). The results of previous research conducted in Estonia have shown that the meaning of inclusive education is interpreted differently among special-ists, teachers and education managers (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Kivirand et al. 2020).

As a result of our study a new definition was provided for inclusive education: *an educational approach that takes into account human rights and provides all children with access to high quality education in a learning environment where children feel social integration and belongingness in their wider social network despite their special needs; it is achieved by the meaningful participation of all children and personalised support in the development of each child's full potential.*

Contemporary inclusive education was operationalised by 14 categories of characteristics on five levels: child characteristics, physical inclusion, social inclusion, and psychical inclusion on the children level; teacher characteristics and classroom practices on the teacher level; family involvement and family support on the family level; school culture and structural characteristics on the institutional level; policy and legislation, cooperation, resources and funding, and monitoring and evaluation on the state level. The characteristics are described through the model where in the middle of each level is the subject who is related to the characteristics or is responsible for providing the access and ensuring the quality of the characteristics on a particular level and thereby influences the implementation of inclusive education. The model refers to responsibility on different levels and should help to implement inclusive education in early childhood education.

The success of teaching and how a teacher copes with teaching in an inclusive environment depends on the teacher's knowledge and attitudes (Park et al., 2018). In their study, Häidkind and Oras (2016) pointed out that the attitudes of kindergarten teachers towards inclusion in Estonia were more positive than those of schoolteachers. At the same time, early childhood teachers experience difficulties in involving children with special needs (Häidkind & Oras, 2016). Thus, kindergarten teachers should be provided with training to increase their competence in involving children with special needs.

The findings of the current study are valuable for designing curricula for improving early childhood teachers' skills of applying inclusive education. The curriculum should consider the teacher level characteristics, especially classroom practices as well as other characteristics that influence teachers' skills of applying inclusive education. Furthermore, this model should promote evaluation of the needs of teachers' professional development and implementation of inclusive education in general.

Keywords: inclusive education, early childhood education, preschool, definition, systematic review