

# Special educational training and counselling for teachers in an inclusive kindergarten group: an action research

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## Summary

A special needs child might be different from other children because of their abilities, health factors, language and cultural background or personality traits. Therefore, they require adaptations to their learning environment (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava, 2008). Barton and Smith (2015) emphasise that the process of including special needs children should follow three principles: guaranteeing access (designing physical conditions for inclusive learning), enabling participation (planning activities in a way that allows everyone to collaborate meaningfully and amicably) and guaranteeing support (resources, training of the personnel, cooperation).

Special needs children require more learning support than others, and the changes that are made in the learning environment should secure a high-quality preschool education for every child involved (Love, 2018; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020; Næsby, 2020). The quality of inclusion in kindergartens has not been researched extensively: usually, the research is conducted using a questionnaire (Barton & Smith, 2015; Korela, 2019; Markna, 2021) and observation (Soukakou, 2012) or a combination of the two (Häidkind & Oras, 2016; Love, 2018). Abroad, it has been more common to use the Inclusive Classroom Profile evaluation system (ICP, Soukakou, 2012). Over the course of three hours, the changes to the physical environment, social relationships, the support offered during leisure time and learning activities and cooperation between adults are evaluated. The results have shown that these are precisely the aspects that must be worked on to raise the quality of inclusion (Love, 2018; Lundqvist & Bodin, 2018; Soukakou et al., 2018).

Studies carried out by university students in Estonia (Adusoo, 2016; Korela, 2019; Külaots, 2016; Markna, 2021; Ploom, 2021) that have used this method of interviewing teachers have demonstrated that general, special needs-related

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training has a minimal impact. Investigations conducted regarding the cooperation between the teacher and the special education professional have shown that teachers expect a more personal approach (Karindi & Tamm, 2019). Therefore, we have decided to experiment with a combination of special needs training and counselling to support the kindergarten teachers and then evaluate the suitability of this approach for improving inclusive education in kindergarten groups.

Pedagogic action research was carried out with four kindergarten groups during the academic year of 2020/2021 (see Vint & Šuman, 2021). Eight experienced teachers participated in the study. All teachers who had an average of 5–17 years' experience had worked with children in the 4–5 and 6–7 age groups. The groups were composed of special needs children and children of age-appropriate development. Firstly, we observed the classroom and the learning activities for 1.5 hours, then the teachers answered the questionnaire. Next, the teachers participated in a training session arranged by the kindergarten. They learned about subjects, such as “Assessing the development of a child and different methods of teaching” (4 hours) and “Managing behavioural issues” (2 hours). After that, the teachers were offered counselling (2 hours) about topics of their choice concerning inclusive education. The counselling included agreeing on some changes to be applied in their classroom during the following 6–8 weeks. At the end of the investigation process, we observed the classrooms again and collected feedback on the training and counselling. We used descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis to analyse the data.

The action research results showed that in the estimation of the teachers, there were between 4 to 10 children who had different development levels than the rest (in a group of 22 children). The county-level counselling team found that only four children required a change in their learning environment. According to the observers, the first impression was that, before the intervention, 1–3 children per group stood out (8 children in total), and after the intervention, 0–2 children stood out (3 children in total). These children did not participate in the regular activities offered by the teacher and left the group, which meant that they missed out on the learning activities and interfered with the other children's education. The recommendation is that preschool education would also apply the same principle used by Estonian schools – only those with different disabilities are considered to be children with special needs.

We wanted to know what kind of changes the teachers applied to include all the children in the learning process. The applied adaptations could be grouped into three broad categories: physical factors (furniture, instruments, room, time), psychosocial factors (relations, communication, collaboration, atmosphere, agreements), teaching (helping, feedback, subgroups, extra assignments, differentiating). Prior to the investigation, teachers had brought examples from

all the categories, and during the counselling, we reflected on additional measures that could be considered. It would be possible to raise teamwork efficiency in all groups using the pre-existing resources. Two to three adults at a time were engaged with the children, which allowed them to divide the work assignments and made it possible for the teachers to give clearer instructions to the helpers. During the second observation, cooperation improved, the children were taught in smaller subgroups, and the ones who needed more help were supported in a more versatile way. Compared to the earlier research (Häidkind & Oras, 2016), the teachers were more aware of the necessity to make adaptations. Other authors (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020; Kivirand *et al.*, 2020, Slabina, 2017) have also noted that co-teaching is an essential factor within inclusive classes.

The training highlighted the principles and recommendations that teachers could adopt. The teachers agreed that the questions discussed in training were relevant to their everyday work. When asked whether the training helped them improve and complemented their previous knowledge, most of the teachers said that their knowledge of the subject had significantly improved. The subsequent counselling focused on applying their knowledge to their kindergarten group. The teachers of the three groups felt comfortable being counselled and would have recommended a similar experience to the other groups. Every group counselled made three agreements (12 in total) that the teachers were to follow. Two months later, the teachers had completed the agreement (“yes” or “more or less”) in seven cases, but in the case of five agreements, they were unable to find a consensus. At the end of the action research, the teachers evaluated how much the training and counselling supported the employment of inclusive education. This was on a scale of 1 to 5 (1- did not support at all, 5- supported a lot). Their evaluations were in the range of 3–4 (average 3.6).

The research demonstrated that the line between the pedagogical and special education competencies (Koolieelse lasteasutuse pedagoogide kvalifikatsiooninõuded, 2013) is hard to define, and teachers needed support from the special educator to apply general pedagogical knowledge while teaching a heterogeneous group (Lundqvist & Bodin, 2018; Malva, 2021; Tan, 2021). In the Estonian schools, this is called general support (Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumiseadus, 2010), which should be sufficient for children with age-appropriate development, and who also differ greatly among themselves. A teacher who can actively adapt to the learning environment and analyse the suitability of the changes, can guarantee a higher quality preschool education both for the children of age-appropriate development and the special needs children.

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