

# Implementation of inclusive education in Estonian kindergartens based on the theoretical model of inclusive education: a case study

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## Summary

Although the vision of inclusive education aiming to reduce barriers to participation in education and community has been internationally agreed upon (UNESCO, 2020), there is a lack of common interpretations and clarity as to for whom and how exactly inclusive education should be implemented in each educational institution (Nilholm, 2021). Despite being a complex and, at times, controversial approach, inclusive education leads to academic success and social benefits for all learners when implemented appropriately (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020).

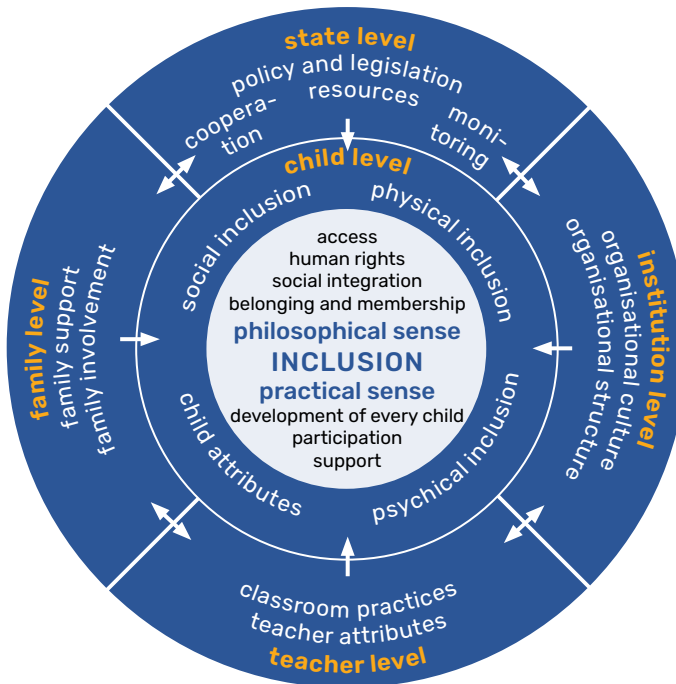
The implementation of inclusive education is successful only if all levels of the education system support it. Coherence between different levels is better achieved when the key characteristics at each level have been described (Haug, 2017). Therefore, we have created a model (see Figure 1) for implementing inclusive education where we describe 14 key characteristics at five levels (Nelis & Pedaste, 2020).

At its centre is the definition of inclusive education with its two dimensions, philosophical and practical sense, accompanied by their specific features. The darker blue circles represent how the key characteristics of inclusive education in early childhood education are operationalised: each level highlights the subject related to the key characteristics. The arrows illustrate the relatedness and influence between different levels.

Little is known about the application of the key characteristics of inclusive education in the different contexts of early childhood education (Love & Horn, 2021). The proposed model is based on a systematic literature review (Nelis & Pedaste, 2020); therefore, it is important to study its applicability in early childhood education.

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**Figure 1.** Model for the implementation of inclusive education (based on Nelis & Pedaste, 2020).

This article aims to explore the implementation of inclusive education in Estonian kindergartens based on the theoretical model. Therefore, we formulated two research questions:

- 1) To what extent do the key characteristics presented in the model appear in the daily practice of kindergartens implementing inclusive education?
- 2) How do kindergartens differ in the implementation of inclusive education, and what are the reasons for these differences?

## Methodology

We chose the method of case study to answer the research questions and achieve the purpose of this study. Purposeful sampling was used based on criteria supporting the implementation of inclusive education: 1) the existence of support specialists, 2) readiness to apply the principles of inclusive education and 3) voluntary request to participate in the training course on inclusive education for kindergarten teams. Four kindergartens were selected, and the kindergartens selected participants from each of them. The participants were included in the study on a voluntary basis. To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the study, we used a triangulation of methods: focus

group interviews, observations and document analysis. Up to 7 kindergarten employees (director and/or head teacher, up to 6 teachers and/or a support specialist) from each kindergarten participated in the semi-structured focus group. Observations were carried out in one group of each kindergarten. The researcher observed and recorded all activities during the schooling and education process and activities, such as getting dressed for going outside. Document analysis involved two documents: the curriculum and development plan of the kindergartens.

The anonymity of all participants was ensured. Data analysis was done within and across cases using qualitative deductive content analysis. The categories were built based on the above model (Nelis & Pedaste, 2020).

### Key findings and discussion

In response to the first research question, all 14 key characteristics described in the model were found to also be evident in the activities of kindergartens. However, some differences compared with the theoretical model emerged among the features describing the key characteristics.

The following features did not appear in this case study: *perception of inclusive education* related to the key characteristic of *family involvement* at the family level, *philosophical approach to inclusive education* related to the *organisational culture* at the institutional level, and *policy and legislation* at the state level. This might refer to a need for more understanding of the idea of inclusive education among parents, kindergartens and society in general: the focus is mostly on the practical sense and applications of inclusive education. However, the definition of inclusive education includes both dimensions: philosophical sense and practical sense (Nelis & Pedaste, 2020). Harmonisation of the understanding and discussion about the nature of inclusive education supports its implementation (Florian et al., 2017).

We also added some new features to the model based on the study. At the teacher level, we added the feature *teacher's professional development* related to the key characteristic *teacher attributes*. Teachers' continuous professional development was revealed as crucial because it is an essential prerequisite for the implementation of inclusive education and its quality. Some researchers (Räis et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019) also indicate insufficient preparation of teachers as a barrier to implementing inclusive education. At the institutional level, we also specified the feature presented in the theoretical model as *personnel-related activities* related to the key characteristic *organisational structure*. The case study showed that more detailed characteristics could be presented separately here: *structure of employees, work organisation and benefits*.

Regarding the second research question, some differences occurred between kindergartens in implementing inclusive education. They may stem from the background of the kindergartens and the extent to which the kindergarten had conceptualised the nature of inclusive education. In kindergartens where discussions had been held about the philosophical dimension of inclusive education, more and more relevant features were applied for the meaningful inclusion of all children. The available resources were better mobilised and innovative solutions could be found. Elsewhere, the focus was only on the practical nature of inclusive education and solutions were rather seen in the support provided by specialists. Ainscow (2020) also argues that the implementation of inclusive education is related to the development of the educational institution and that one should focus on increasing the capacity of the institution.

Our study clearly highlights the state-level challenges of implementing inclusive education, a finding in line with other studies (Haug, 2020; Shuelka, 2018). The key characteristic *policy and legislation* is important in implementing inclusive education, but the principles of inclusive education need to be clearer and reflected in the Estonian legislation and not too rigid to implement inclusion. Other authors also see a vague policy and an unclear understanding of inclusion as the main concern when implementing inclusive education (Haug, 2020; Magnusson et al., 2019). A lack of both support specialists in society and resources was revealed as a serious challenge in our study. Sharma and others (2019) also mention the lack of resources as an obstacle to implementing inclusive education. We also identified the ineffective cooperation of the kindergartens' external support system and network as a bottleneck. At the same time, greater cooperation between different institutions, supported by legislation, should be one of the priorities for inclusive education (Hesjedal et al., 2015). Monitoring and evaluation that would involve the opinions of stakeholders in the educational ecosystem is also a state-level challenge yet to be met.

The results of this study will help universities design programmes supporting positive attitudes towards inclusive education among teachers and leaders and prepare teachers and educational leaders to implement inclusive practices. Further research should focus on developing tools to assess the current situation and quality of inclusive education, which will help plan resources to move towards a more inclusive society. The results of this study are based on the analysis of the activities of four Estonian kindergartens and are therefore not generalisable.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, early childhood education, application of the model, case study