

## Participants' evaluations of the meaningful implementation of Inclusive Education in preschool for team training

Tiiu Tammemäe<sup>a1</sup>, Lii Lilleoja<sup>a</sup>, Pille Nelis<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *The School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University*

<sup>b</sup> *The Institute of Education, University of Tartu*

### Summary

According to the approach of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, the vision of an inclusive education system is to ensure high-quality educational opportunities for all students in their local community together with their peers.

Implementation of inclusive education requires keeping in mind several aspects concerning a child with a need for support, for example, preparing a curriculum that matches the child's development, introducing adjustments in teaching methods, if necessary, adjustments in the evaluation system, as well as changes related to the environment (Mitchell, 2014).

The work done by Kanep (2008) indicates that if children with special needs are not noticed at preschool age and do not receive enough support, later problems related to learning increase at school. It was also pointed out in the results of the National Audit Office of Estonia (Riigikontroll, 2020) that the lack of support in kindergarten that meets the child's needs can lead to a greater need for support and costs at school. At the same time, it was recognised that although teachers have been offered various in-service training courses over the years, only 5% of the interviewed kindergarten teachers felt confident in teaching children in need of support. Various studies have shown that creating professional learning communities to acquire new knowledge and enhance learning skills is useful and effective (Wenger et al., 2011).

In Estonia, preschool teachers have been offered different in-service training courses on the implementing inclusive education in recent years. However, attending different courses for individual teachers does not significantly contribute to developing a unified vision of the kindergarten staff. Therefore, conducting further training for kindergarten teams is expedient, allowing the participants to analyse the situation and plan and implement improvement activities together.

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<sup>1</sup> School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, Tallinn; [tiiu.tammemae@tlu.ee](mailto:tiiu.tammemae@tlu.ee)

This article examines the feedback of the participants to the in-service training “Meaningful implementation of inclusive education in a preschool institution” (40 ECTS credits) conducted at Tallinn University, where teams of pedagogues from four kindergartens participated. Each team consisted of 23 members, including a leader, a specialist and 2–4 teachers. Meetings took place for one year (from March 2021 to March 2022) with two training days each month. The aim of this study is to map the evaluations of participants of the in-service training on the completed training and on the occurrence of changes in the meaningful implementation of inclusive preschool education at a personal level and as teamwork in their kindergartens.

Research questions:

1. How do the participants of the training evaluate the content and scope of the in-service training for the meaningful implementation of inclusive preschool education in their kindergartens?
2. How do the participants evaluate teamwork and one’s personal role in planning and implementing changes in kindergarten development activities during the in-service training period?
3. What activities have the participants planned and implemented in their kindergartens in relation to the topics covered in training?

In order to collect data, an online feedback survey was conducted on the completed training. The survey included three questions based on a scale (4 – I completely agree; ..., 1 – I don’t agree at all) and five questions requiring free answers. Free responses were grouped and analysed based on the research questions of this survey. Participants indicated respective kindergarten (L1, L2, L3, L4). Quotations are given in italics in unaltered form. Although it was not necessary to indicate one’s job position, several respondents had included it when answering (E.g.: As a teacher... As a manager, I find... etc.). All participants answered the questions, and the answers were given electronically within one week, the answers were anonymous. The quantitative approach was used in the analysis of the research results based on scale-based questions; descriptive statistics were used when presenting the results. Qualitative inductive content analysis was used to analyse free responses.

In general, the content and scope of the training were considered appropriate. The two-day training cycles helped deepen the topic, and during the year, enough meetings took place to acquire new knowledge and practice and apply new skills in between the training days.

The participants valued the opportunity to participate in the training as a team. By supporting each other and discussing important topics, the staff was united even more and gained a more profound learning experience. Belonging

to a professional community, reflecting on one's activities and receiving feedback from colleagues is considered important part of consistent professional teaching. In order to complete independent tasks, the teams had to meet each other, share assignments, coordinate and give feedback during the periods between contact learning.

Although the completion of the final thesis based on action research was initially considered somewhat complex, it was later found that its implementation had a direct impact on several kindergarten development activities. Professional staff is characterised by shared values, mutual cooperation, and shared positive practice (Louis et al., 1996).

During the training, the participants practised new methods, changed and adapted to the physical and learning environment, and used various intervention techniques. Mitchell (2014) and Robo (2014) have also emphasised that the teacher should think about different possibilities and implement the necessary changes. During the training course, participants had the opportunity to consult with colleagues, reflect on their activities and receive feedback. Based on various studies, professional learning communities are considered very effective as an opportunity to acquire and practice new skills and knowledge (Wenger et al., 2011).

Since it was important for the given in-service training that the leader also participates in the team, the participants had a pleasant opportunity to exchange ideas with the whole staff. Researchers have emphasised the leader's role in implementing changes (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010) and consider discussions and brainstorming important, as employees are more likely to adopt new ideas when management includes them in discussions (Zollers, et al., 1999).

As a shortcoming of this study, it can be pointed out that when collecting feedback, the participants' length of employment, previously completed training courses, or previous contact with children in need of support were not mentioned. Also, when collecting answers, the position was not specified, whether it was a manager, teacher or support services specialist.

In conclusion, it can be said that considering the evaluations of the participants of the in-service training, team training is a practical form of meaningful implementation of inclusive education in kindergartens.

As the organisers of the training, we are happy that the discussed topics were not just considered important to the participants during the training, but on the basis of the knowledge gained, new activities are continuously planned and implemented in order to meaningfully implement inclusive education in their institutions. On the basis of the received feedback, the in-service training will be analysed, changes will be made if necessary, and Tallinn University is planning to offer similar in-service training for kindergarten teams in the future.

The research was completed within the framework of the Norwegian and EMP project “Developing and enhancing the teaching quality of inclusive education curriculum” (1.02.2019–31.01.2023), where additional training for kindergarten teams was developed and implemented at Tallinn University.

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*Keywords:* inclusive education, preschool education, teamwork in kindergarten, team training