

INFLUENCE OF THE PROJECT “QUALITATIVE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN” ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE PROJECT SCHOOLS

Projekta "Kvalitatīva iekļaujošā izglītība bērniem ar īpašām vajadzībām" ietekme uz iekļaujošās izglītības attīstību projekta skolās

Dita Nīmante,

University of Latvia, Latvia

E-mail: ditas@latnet.lv

Linda Daniela,

University of Latvia, Latvia

E-mail: linda.daniela@lu.lv

Abstract. *The study „Evaluation of the project influence on the development of inclusive education in project schools” was implemented from 2009 till 2011 in the project “Qualitative inclusive education for special needs children” (Education initiative centre, State Education content centre, Soros Foundation Latvia, more information in: <http://www.iic.lv>) with the aim to find out whether the project results brought changes in defined inclusive education indicators. The article analyzes how the cooperation of school’s pedagogues in promoting inclusive education in general comprehensive school has improved as a result of the project.*

Keywords: *Inclusive education, Inclusive school, Index for inclusive education, pedagogues’ cooperation for inclusive education.*

Introduction

Inclusive education both in the world and in Latvia is one of the most controversially assessed issues (*Farrel, Ainscow, 2002, Nīmante, 2008*), at the same time since the end of the nineties of the previous century till nowadays it has become the pedagogical topicality of Latvia. The topicality of inclusive education has been promoted by the movement of “*inclusive education*” or “*education for all*” in the world, Latvia’s joining the European Union as well as the political endeavors of Latvia to ensure qualitative and accessible education to every pupil in Latvia. Several internationally ratified documents, which also Latvia has approved, have promoted the development of inclusive education in Europe. The most important documents of the recent years are: resolution of the European Council in 2003 *Promoting the employment and social integration of people with functional disturbances*, resolution of the European Council in 2003 *Ensuring equal possibilities to pupils and students with functional disturbances in education and training*. All European countries have ratified UNESCO *Salamanca declaration* which (UNESCO, 1994), which is considered the first internationally acknowledged document in the world that defines inclusive education (Peters,

2007). Among other things it says that “Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost – effectiveness of the entire education system.” (UNESCO, 1994, Article, 2) The conclusions and recommendations of the 48th session *Inclusive education: the Way of Future* of the International Conference on Education (ICE) (2008) confirms that inclusive education is a continuous process the aim of which is to offer qualitative education for all.

Though discussions on inclusive education have been extensive, there are comparatively few studies on inclusive education in Latvia. (Nīmante, 2008, *Includ-es case-study: pre-primary school*, 2008, Bērziņa, 2010, Gento, Maslo, Nīmante, 2011). *The Consultative Board* was established in 2009 in the project “Qualitative inclusive education for special needs children” that from 2009 till 2011 was implemented by *Education initiative centre* in cooperation with *State Education content centre* and *Soros Foundation Latvia*, which carried out a study “Evaluation of the project influence on the development of inclusive education in project schools”. Dr. paed. Dita Nīmante, Dr. paed. Linda Daniela, Mag. psych. Gundega Demidova, Mag. paed. Sandra Kraukle, Bak. paed. Sandra Pumpure, Bak. psych. Kristīne Liepiņa, Sarmīte Daugē participated in different stages of the study (adaptation of the questionnaires, distribution and collection of questionnaires, feeding data in the electronic environment, data processing in the program – SPSS-18, interpretation of the obtained results). The aim of the study was to find out whether changes have been achieved in some indicators (variables) of inclusive education as a result of the project. The authors of the article will analyze how the cooperation of school’s pedagogues in promoting inclusive education in general comprehensive school has improved as a result of the project.

Research question. How did the mutual cooperation of the school’s staff improve as a result of the project?

Description of the research basis. Participants of the study were: 9 general comprehensive schools from three regions of Latvia (Kurzeme, Zemgale and Vidzeme), schools are different as regards the number of pupils and the school type – elementary, basic and secondary schools participated in the study. Two out of nine schools have several years’ experience in integrating children with special needs in a regular school as well as in implementing the child-centered program “Step by step” where one of the most essential values is inclusive education. Though formally (when applying for the participation in the project) schools had defined that they are inclusive schools, the project researchers faced the situation when part of the teachers did not comprehend it as the mission of the school but more like a necessity dictated by the reality of the life. Inclusive education in schools was, firstly, understood as increasing the accessibility of education and its quality for all children, welcoming children with special needs, ensuring qualitative

education for all children, including those who have learning difficulties thus ensuring that these children stay at school and they do not need to attend another educational institution (for example, welcoming pupils with special needs, licensing special education programs, integrative programs). Secondly, it was understood as broadening of school's functions (for example, establishing the boarding school, broadening the offer of interest education). Though the project was implemented in the whole school Grade 3 of all project schools was chosen for evaluating the project influence. The measurement was performed in Grade 3 and after a year with the same pupils when they were in Grade 4. **N pupils**= 350 at the beginning of the study and 300 at the end of the study in Grade 4. **N parents**= 343 at the beginning of the study and 239 at the end of the study, and **N teachers** = 270 at the beginning of the study and 173 at the end of the study. The article will analyze the summarized results from the teachers' questionnaires.

Description of the methodology of the research. There were several stages in the study: 2009 – selection of the methodology; the researchers chose the English version of the “Index for inclusive education” (Booth, Ainscow, 2002) and its adapted Latvian version (Indekss iekļaujošajai izglītībai, 2006); definition of the variables (indicators) (see Appendix 1), preparation of the questionnaire, its testing and correction. January 2010 – the first distribution of the questionnaires. September 2010 - summarizing the first data. January 2011 – the second distribution of questionnaires; may 2011 – data processing, conclusions. Questionnairing was organized in two stages – the first stage was at the beginning of the study in January 2010 and the second in January 2011 when the project results were evaluated. The features of inclusive school characteristic to each school involved in the project were found out with the help of the questionnaire when the respondents had to choose the answer to the statements from “yes; rather yes; rather no; no”. The answers were coded “Yes”- 1; “Rather yes”- 2; “Rather no”- 3; “No” - 4. The questionnaires were anonymous and answers to the questions were used only in a summarized way that facilitated the respondents' possibility to express freely their opinion.

The obtained quantitative data were process in the Program SPSS 18 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), *Chronbach's Alpha* method was used to establish the distribution of frequencies and data validity in the summarized answers. The results obtained at the beginning of the study and at the end were compared at the end of the study to evaluate the gains of the project. This article will evaluate the questionnaires filled in by the teachers.

Theoretical foundation of the research. Education of teachers in the field of inclusive education is defined as one of the key principles of the inclusive school. (European Special education development agency, 2009). In order teachers were able to work in an inclusive school they need not only the understanding of what inclusive education is but also a positive attitude and stable value system. Besides understanding, attitude and values the teacher also needs knowledge and skills. The teacher should not only know what inclusive education is but he/she

should also need diverse pedagogical competences to be able to work in an inclusive environment. (Nīmante, Tūbele, 2010). Starting the work in “an inclusive class” the teacher should know and be able to: assess, diagnose pedagogically the pupils’ educational needs; the teacher should possess the skills to analyze, plan, cooperate and the ability to ask advice from the colleagues, the ability to handle pupils’ behavior problems, the lack of motivation; the teacher should have good communication skills. In order to solve problems in such a class the teacher should be able to form humane relations. (Crisci, 1981). Ainscow closely links the development of inclusive education in schools with the teachers’ professional growth and education, cooperation in problem solving. (Ainscow, 1994). One of the most important skills that the teacher needs in an inclusive school is the cooperation skill and the ability to work in a team. (European Special education development agency, 2009). The teacher should cooperate in the inclusive school because the teacher in the pedagogical process of an inclusive school faces different problems and challenges which cannot be solved by oneself, being locked away in one’s classroom. Bērziņa (Bērziņa, 2010). admits that only by cooperating teachers can overcome the challenges of inclusive education at school. The traditional teacher who is used to work “behind the closed door” and alone take the whole responsibility, who usually and traditionally tries to do everything alone, on his/her own, in the inclusive school “breaks”, he/she becomes exhausted; it seems that everything is additional work and he/she is overwrought. The cooperation among teachers in planning the teaching process, in ensuring the support, in problem solving plays the decisive role in implementing inclusive education at school. Therefore the implementation of inclusive education results in changing the whole school culture or as Skrtic has named it- the professional culture of the school. (Skrtic, 1991). The school tends to become more child-centered, school becomes a place which is meant for children. At the same time it should be admitted that it is not easy for the school to take over inclusive education because it is a complex phenomenon. In inclusive schools the school itself changes – school policy changes, school culture and school activity change, the way how the school implements teaching and learning changes. (Booth, Ainscow, 2002).

Teachers share their experience and look for joint solutions in the professional culture of inclusive education. Teacher changes what happens in the classroom. Lipsky and Gartner express their view on inclusive schools indicating that though there is no unified model or approach the inclusive schools are similar because these schools have similar features and values. (Lipsky, Gartner, 1999, p. 17). Teachers’ cooperation is mentioned as an important prerequisite for implementing inclusive education at schools. Giangreco (Giangreco, 1997). agrees that teachers’ cooperation in a team and agreed opinions are singled out as the first features of an inclusive school. One of the instruments, methodological aid that has been developed in Great Britain to promote the development of inclusive schools is the “Index for inclusive education” (further in the text – index). (Booth, Ainscow, 2002). 11 authors of the *Index* – university faculty, experts, practitioners – have

approved several times and twice re-worked this instrument to make it a more effective assistant in the development of inclusive schools. The *Index* defines inclusive education in the broadest sense of its understanding: “It is concerned with minimizing barriers to learning and participation, whoever experiences them and wherever they are located within the cultures, policies and practices of a school.” (Ainscow, 2002, 30.p). The Index singles out three dimensions – inclusive culture and its development, inclusive policy and its establishment, inclusive action and its improvement. Each dimension has several indicators. It is possible to mark out several indicators that directly refer to teachers’ cooperation. The authors of the study on the basis of the “Index for inclusive education” identified also several variables that were included in the teacher’s questionnaire and which reveal teachers’ cooperation for promoting inclusive education: Mutual cooperation of the school’s staff; teachers as partners for each other in planning, implementing and analyzing their work; School community has a common understanding about inclusion; teachers of the school learn from each other as well as their competences are fully used at school. These variables will be analyzed in the article.

Research results. Evaluating the obtained results relating to the cooperation of the school’s staff with each other it is possible to conclude that data have changed during a year they have moved closer to the answer “Yes” as well as the showings of standard deviation have decreased. Though considerable progress is not observed the results still reveal a tendency which indicates that the purposeful activities in the project have facilitated teachers’ willingness to cooperate (see table1). Cooperation in the project was not spontaneous as it most frequently happens at school but it was purposefully organized. Teachers’ further education and the exchange of teachers’ experience (lesson observation and lesson analysis) as well as joint workshops in which the teachers had a possibility to share their experience and demonstrate the most effective strategies for work in inclusive class were organized in the project. As a result of further education organized in the project teachers acquired definite skills how to plan differentiated lesson in their subject, how to adjust support activities for pupils with learning difficulties, how to achieve the lesson plans making the necessary adjustments in the teaching/learning process, how to cooperate in order to achieve the set learning outcomes.

Table 1

Cooperation among the school staff kolas

School staff cooperates with each other		
Beginning of the study	Mean	1,55
	N	270
	Std. Deviation	,606
End of the study	Mean	1,52
	N	173
	Std. Deviation	,587

Evaluating the obtained results on the question whether teachers are partners in planning the teaching it is possible to conclude that teachers with certainty have

chosen the answer “Yes” as well as the showings of standard deviation have decreased. Though progress is not observed, the results show the tendency which indicates that the purposeful activities organized during the project have facilitated teachers’ cooperation and partnership in planning the teaching/learning process. (See Table 2) Joint planning of the work in theory is mentioned as an essential prerequisite for implementing inclusive education at school. During the project teachers’ skills of joint planning, cooperation with different specialists were improved.

Table 2

Teachers are partners in planning teaching/learning

Pedagogues are partners in planning teaching/learning (teachers)		
Beginning of the study	Mean	1,62
	N	269
	Std. Deviation	,668
End of the study	Mean	1,55
	N	173
	Std. Deviation	,642

Evaluating the obtained results on the question whether teachers at school learn from each other and whether their competences are fully used allows concluding that also answers concerning this indicator of the index of inclusive education have increased closer to the answer “Yes” and the showings of standard deviation have decreased. Though progress is not observed also with this indicator, the results still show a tendency which indicates that purposeful project activities have resulted in fact that teachers have started learning from each other and they feel that their competences are more widely used. (See table 3). The result of such cooperation is gradual formation of an inclusive and positive school environment, positive relations, openness and readiness to share with other colleagues how they integrate what they have acquired in seminars, workshops in their everyday work, and what the results are. This proves that changes in schools cannot be introduced in a short period of time simply changing the policy formulations; it should be followed by concrete actions. To ensure that changes are not only in political decisions but also in the everyday work of every teacher, that principles of inclusive education are observed in everyday life, a long-term planned work is necessary which, in its turn, will positively influence every pupil, increase the quality of education for all regardless their individual educational needs. The questionnaires filled in by the teachers where they had a possibility to express their ideas about the main gains in the project more widely were summarized at the end of the project. Teachers acknowledge that *“The influence was positive because in this project teachers share information, experience and the obtained results.”* Promotion of purposeful cooperation changes the existing cultural environment of the school and thus also the professional culture of teachers. Teachers are more ready to learn from each other. As teachers themselves have written: *“Teachers pay more attention to this, they often discuss the unclear issues, share the experience.”* This indicates that it is possible within a year to achieve changes in teachers’

attitude to their work, to look for cooperation possibilities and to learn from the others thus decreasing the time spent on searching individual solutions to problems. Also the mutual trust among the teachers increases which in long run can decrease thus a phenomenon characteristic to pedagogical environment as “the burnout”.

Table 3

Teachers at school learn from each other and their competences are fully used at school

Teachers at school learn from each other and their competences are fully used at school		
Beginning of the study	Mean	1,63
	N	268
	Std. Deviation	,589
End of the study	Mean	1,51
	N	173
	Std. Deviation	,643

The obtained results (See Table 4) on teachers’ understanding on inclusive education show that at the time (2009-2011) when teachers studied together, cooperated with teachers from other project schools, implemented the principles of inclusive education in their schools, their understanding of inclusive education has also changed. The obtained results where the indicator about a common understanding in teachers’ answers has been clear “Yes” also indicate it. It shows that the purposeful project activities have contributed to increasing the teachers’ understanding of the necessity to observe the principles of inclusive education. Though the results have not changed radically the tendency is positive and thus there is hope that teachers not only understand how to do it but also are able to apply their knowledge, skills and competences in observing the principles of inclusive education. To make the results long lasting and to really change the cultural environment of the school it is necessary to continue such work with teachers including these principles both in education of the future teachers and in improving the in-service teachers’ professional competence. The work purposefully started in the project that has facilitated the teachers’ cooperation, learning together and learning from each other should be continued.

Table 4

There is common understanding on inclusive education at school

There is common understanding on inclusive education at school		
Beginning of the study	Mean	1,84
	N	264
	Std. Deviation	,745
End of the study	Mean	1,74
	N	173
	Std. Deviation	,812

Conclusions. The analysis of the obtained results prove that on the whole there are positive tendencies in all the analyzed variables which indicates that the purposeful activities performed during the project have facilitated teachers’

cooperation, which, in its turn, has promoted the understanding of inclusive education and will definitely in future promote the development of inclusive and positive environment at school. The pedagogues' cooperation implemented during the project was not spontaneous but purposefully organized. Teachers' further education, exchange of good practice (lesson observation and analysis), workshops promoted teachers' cooperation, mutual learning from each other, joint planning; teachers' sense that their competence is more fully used at school on the whole increased.

This conclusion confirms the conclusions obtained as a result of theoretical analysis that the development of teachers' cooperation skills is one of the main preconditions of promoting the environment of inclusive school. As a result of such a purposefully organized process the teacher is able to overcome the competence boundaries of a traditional teacher that go beyond just "teaching the particular school subject"; the teacher stops feeling solitary responsible for the outcome of the work. In an inclusive school the teacher understands that it is the result of joint work and cooperation.

Taking into account the results of the study it can be concluded that it would be valuable also for teachers of other schools to take over the good experience established in the project that facilitates cooperation for promoting inclusive education at school. As it was stated in the project the teachers who have acquired professional education 10 and more years before had not mastered such knowledge and skills during their basic studies. Also those teachers who have acquired teachers' professional education during the last 10 years are not sufficiently prepared for practical work with children in inclusive environment. It means that purposefully organized teachers' further education and promotion of cooperation at school become especially important and it can be implemented in different untraditional forms as "workplace learning" or "learning through cooperation, learning from one another". Teachers themselves admitted at the end of the project that learning by doing is especially important for teachers. Role plays, workshops in which teachers are both participants and organizers help best to acquire new methods, strategies which they immediately can apply in practice. Only practical acquisition of methods facilitates their introduction in practice. Secondly, equally important aspect is the teachers' mutual cooperation that started in the project. Lesson observation and analysis that follows afterwards can take place both in one's own school and in other project schools. The result of such cooperation is establishment of positive inclusive environment and new professional culture at school.

The study showed that there are changes in teachers' opinions, but they are not considerable; however, they allow concluding that it is possible to initiate changes in such a short period of time but to ensure essential and long-lasting changes it should be understood that changes in the cultural environment of the school, changes in teachers' attitude and thus making the school an inclusive school are not possible with short-term activities. It confirms also the idea arrived at as a

result of theoretical analysis that the formation of an inclusive school is a gradual and complex process. The improvement achieved in the project schools indicates the necessity to continue the work as well as to plan in a broader context both the changes in the education of pre-service teachers and the increase of competence of the in-service teachers.

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Dita Nīmanīte	University of Latvia Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Arts Jūrmalas gatve 74/76, Rīga, Latvia E-mail: ditas@latnet.lv , Phone: +371 29117118
Linda Daniela	University of Latvia Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Arts Jūrmalas gatve 74/76, Rīga, Latvia E-mail: linda.daniela@lu.lv , Phone: +371 26408896