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A Student with Special Educational Needs in Latvian Educational Institutions — in Theory and Practice

Uczeń ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi
w łotewskich instytucjach edukacyjnych
w teorii i praktyce

ABSTRACT

Education Development Guidelines 2014–2020 of the Republic of Latvia determine: high-quality and inclusive education for personal development, human welfare and sustainable national growth, the improvement of educational achievements and the availability of educational and social support services for inhabitants subjected to the risk of social inclusion. In Latvia revised legislation, made changes in laws. The most serious problem in teachers' opinion are: insufficient financial means for inclusive education, the lack of provision of support specialists activity of full value (special pedagogy, speech therapist, etc.) in general education institutions, etc. Until 2022 it is planned to: develop competence-based general education curriculum, approve it and implement in pre-school education, basic education and secondary education levels providing for: the development of educational content, the development of models and methodics of school-work management, the development and perfection of diagnostic

KEY WORDS

inclusive education,
inclusion, social
support, sustainable
development, pupil
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needs

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

edukacja włączająca,
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instruments, the development of the content of diagnostic tests and test examinations, the development and approbation of learning and methodical aids, the perfection of teachers professional competence in order to implement educational content in learning process.

ABSTRAKT

Podczas konferencji na Salamance w 1994 roku poświęconej zapewnieniu specjalnej edukacji w krajach całego świata przyjęto nowe wytyczne – przejście do tworzenia instytucji edukacji włączającej. Został wystosowany apel dający sygnał rozpoczęcia włączania uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami do szkół ogólnokształcących. Chodziło o powstrzymanie ich segregacji poprzez kierowanie do oddzielnych szkół specjalnych i traktowanie tego jako normę. Podkreślano tym samym, że jest to najbardziej skuteczne narzędzie do walki z postawą dyskryminującą, przyczyniające się do stworzenia sprzyjających warunków tworzenia społeczeństwa włączającego i umożliwiające dostęp do nauki dla wszystkich. Przeprowadzone i zaprezentowane badania wykazały, że Łotwa jest dopiero na początku drogi, jeśli chodzi o budowanie inkluzyjnych instytucji edukacyjnych. Szkoły w rzeczywistości dopiero zaczęły ten proces, a na Łotwie nie są w pełni uporządkowane podstawy legislacyjne, finansowe, szkolenia dla nauczycieli i doszkąlanie metodyczne, tak aby zapewnić rzeczywisty i humanitarny proces integracji społecznej. System wsparcia na poziomie krajowym dopiero co raczkuje, a dalszy rozwój hamuje brak wsparcia finansowego. Opracowany i planowany do wdrożenia do 2022 roku program działania, jest nastawiony na stworzenie na Łotwie rzeczywistego i zrównoważonego systemu edukacji włączającej.

Introduction

During the conference at Salamanca in 1994, focused on providing special education in countries all over the world, new guidelines were marked—particularly a transition to institution building including education. An appeal has been issued giving the starting signal to help students with special needs from mainstream schools. The idea was to

stop their segregation by directing a separate unit of special schools, and treating them as the norm. They all emphasized the same thing, that the most effective tool to combat discriminatory attitudes is the act contributing to creating favorable conditions for the creation of an inclusive society and to enable access to learning for all.

Inclusive education is the notion of overall general application which can be applied in any country in the world, affecting the implementation of various policies and methods of primary education, higher education and teacher education. Inclusive education is based on the assumption that the main factor in the field of social policy is education, which provides the basis for the sustainable and harmonious development of society in the long run. Inclusive education is important for both developing countries and developed countries, as the difficult process of exclusion deepens the many inequalities in education worldwide. This inequality is transformed into other areas of society. Authentic inclusive education is chaotic and requires an active attitude on the part of the state authorities, teachers, students, parents and the entire civil society in order to engage students with different backgrounds, a differentiated approach to education and the physical use of the possibility of a single educational institution. Inclusive education has become one of the most discussed and debated current topics and has gained international overtones.

Inclusive education speaks of the concept of the educational institution, in which the teaching process provides the necessary and significant support for each student where no one is to be endorsed or excluded. The main emphasis is put on teachers to work and solve problems together as a team of educational institution and support professionals, adaptive and supportive of school environment and the involvement of students of a particular class.

Findings

Until 1991, Latvia was a Soviet Republic and this meant that there was a clear division into a separate special and general education system. Information on pupils with special needs in the mainstream educational institutions and information on inclusive education,



in fact, would get to teachers almost at the same time, but they did not spawn significant action at the state level.

In 1997, an LU Professor, D. Nimante, prepared an explanation of the concept of inclusive education. According to the studies of D. Nimante, the concept of inclusive education in Latvia is associated with three approaches: inclusive education as special education, inclusive education and integration of third understanding of inclusive education, in which any student can be the subject, while each educational institution is the object.

Since 2000, the Law on Education of the Republic of Latvia has been present, where art. 3 states that special education is a special kind of general education. Art. 1 of the Act speaks about people pursuing special education. Special education provides opportunities and conditions for pupils with special needs to acquire education according to their health, skills, and level of development in each educational institution, while providing educational, psychological and medical correction of students and prepare them for work and life within their society. Each educational institution has the right to license the special education program in the manner prescribed by the law on general education, if the conditions are right and given that qualified staff are there to provide high quality education for students with special needs. Integrating students with special needs (the term used here) in institutions of general education is defined by the art. 53 of the Act the General Education Law, indicating that the parents of students with special needs have a reasonable basis to choose an educational institution for their child, according to their own preference.

The sole purpose of special education within the concept of the development of education in Latvia is to give students with special needs the opportunities to gain an appropriate education according to their capabilities and health education in each educational institution, while providing educational and psychological correction and medical preparation for work and life in society. The guidelines for achieving this goal are as follows: in Latvia, there should be both educational options that provide education in special educational institutions and those organized for special assistance, given to students in general education schools. Each student with special needs should be provided with the opportunity to become educated in a way that is the most suitable for them, an educational institution providing

professional assistance with qualified personnel and the opportunity to prepare for life.

Provisions regarding the integrational processes and inclusive educational institutions in general were only introduced after 2004 and began to operate in the same period. In fact, until 2004, Latvia created the legal basis for the inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream general educational institutions; but gradually it improved on awareness and social acceptance; beginning the practical inclusion of pupils with special needs into mainstream schools and pre-school educational institutions; in universities for teacher training programs, general education was included in lectures on issues of special education; They organized courses and projects within the framework of which the training of teachers of general education institutions; implemented a significant number of projects developed as the special educational institutions, as well as the general unit, the activities were financed by EU funds; the parents of students with special needs also became more active, creating support groups in different parts of Latvia.

The Latvian National Development Plan says that in a knowledge-based society, a qualitative basis and general or vocational education creates a minimal starting capital, without which it is impossible to include fully-fledged and effective adaptation of a person in everyday life and enter the labor market. The role of government is to ensure that every sector of general primary and secondary education, to benefit from the possibility of higher education and training, and access to pre-school education in all regions of Latvia. In 2007, the National Center for Special Education was created, as well as the composition of the State Pedagogical Medical Commission work.

In 2008, the UNESCO International Conference on Education was held in the country, being the largest international forum on issues of education policy, indicating the direction of inclusive education as the most basic rules and strategy of the availability and quality of education. The transition from special education to inclusive education was considered a major paradigm shift, whereby the teacher should become a versatile manager of groups of students: but at the same time, fulfilling the role of an educator, motivator, a moderator, as well as a specialist in evaluation of education and science.

In the second half of 2008, approved guidelines for youth were designed to minimise the risk of social exclusion and to create a support



system for inclusive education. It was about the characterization of the current situation, so that the goals and tasks would be there to achieve the objectives put forward by the Latvian National Development Plan and the guidelines of the National Development Plan of Education for the years 2007–2013 and the implementation of EU directives and UN documents related to the existence of integrating the environment with simultaneous reduction of social exclusion.

Since 2009, education authorities and school principals have had the opportunity to decide on the need to employ experts and the valuation of their work, 15% of the targeted subsidies. Unfortunately, in 2008, at the beginning of the economic crisis, a significant part of the educational institutions liquidated the positions of specialists, making many institutions of general education virtually impossible (actually illegal) in the sphere of education of students with special needs. In subsequent years, even small educational institutions, within the limits of their abilities and in conditions of insufficient funding, have sought to ensure the participation of individual professionals (employed, even for just a few hours a week), within the school support system. However, schools often urged parents to seek support in the centers of state administration, special education institutions and raising their individual help for the child.

The integrated support system for educational institutions which started inclusive operations, actually no longer exists in Latvia, so the task of the Ministry of Education is to seek solutions to ensure the functioning of inclusive educational institutions, including encouraging the process of inclusion of pupils with special needs into general education institutions. It is therefore necessary to build a support system on the following levels: national, regional, county, city, concrete, offices and educational institutions using the experience of the most valuable potential of each of the units in such a way that everyone involved in the process of incorporation were able to provide mutual assistance.

In 2009 an on-going project of the European Social Fund (hereinafter the ESF) is developed starting from 4 January 2011 by the PCES MEN, the aim of which is to create a support system for students with disabilities. It's about ensuring a good education conducive to their integration into society in Latvia. With the financial support of this project (resources from the ESF) work began in the Latvian cities of Balvi, Daugavpils, Jēkabpils, Jelgava, Jūrmala, Liepāja, Riga and Valmiera

for support centers for inclusive education, whose mission is to provide assistance to local governments, educational institutions implementing business inclusion. The University of Liepāja and the Latvian University started this work, and continue to be laboratories of special education at the Academy in Rezekne. The project ended at the end of 2013 and without the Ministry of Education's funding and support, inclusive education support centers continue to cooperate only with the closest educational institutions. On the other hand, unfortunately, the system operates at the state level, but in a limited way.

The Latvian Ministry of Education reviewed, verified, processed and specified legal documents, that define the educational opportunities of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream institutions (see Table 1).

Normative document	Takes effect	Predicts
The provisions of Council of Ministers No. 709: "Regulations on pedagogical medical commission"	19.10.2012	The task of the State Pedagogical Medical Commission is: to encourage the adoption of the general education of students with special needs, to guarantee them the necessary support measures during the process of teaching and conduct public examination papers.
The provisions of Council of Ministers No. 710: "The rules on security of institutions of general primary and secondary education, according to the special needs of students"	19.10.2012	The student may be included in a: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mainstream class in state primary and secondary general education; – Possibility of opening separate classes exclusively for students with special needs.
The provisions of Council of Ministers No. 1510: "The procedure during the state examination"	17.12.2013	For students who are ruling the state or local government within the pedagogical medical committee on the implementation of appropriate an educational program or pedagogical medical review committee, a speech therapist, a decision regarding the school psychologist or clinical classification as a student with special needs. Center for Special Education is determined to carry out the separate state audit work and the implementation of the support program.

Table 1.

Normative documents regulating the work of institutions of general education in the education of students with special needs



The Guidelines for the Development of Education for the years 2014–2020, as the main objective is the denominated quality of inclusive education for personal development, general social prosperity and sustainable development of the country. Priorities of the Latvian National Development Plan (NDP) for the years 2014 to 2020 assume an increase in the achievements of teaching and the availability of support services, educational and social development of people at risk of social exclusion (the students which are at risk are people with various disabilities), adequate quality of inclusive education for personality development, general social prosperity and sustainable development of the state, which is why it is important to do everything possible to organize the process of inclusion in the country, supporting teachers in institutions of general education and providing them with the possibility of hard work with students for whom the learning process requires additional support and individual help.

Given the above assessment of the current situation in the Latvian system of integrating general institutions, and taking the ratio of teachers within the process into consideration, the possibility of securing support and troubleshooting, the author conducted a survey. It was attended by 470 respondents from schools of different regions of Latvia, of whom 94 persons (20%) were directors of educational institutions and the people who make decisions at the strategic level, 376 (80%) of respondents are teachers, psychologists, special educators and other professionals. The selection of such and not other respondents was based on the fact that their views may differ depending on the level (strategic and tactical) of the employed person, and the level of their competence in this matter. Work experience of the respondents ranges from one to 49 years with a mean of 19.5 years. Half of the respondents had a work experience over 20 years, a quarter of more than 30 years.

267 (56.8%) of respondents have the skills for the practical integration of action, while 203 (43.2%) of respondents admit that their level of competence in this matter is insufficient and needs to increase. A group of 344 (73.2%) of respondents have practical experience in working with students with special needs, however, 126 (26.8%) are without practice. Experience in working with projects in the field of inclusive education is 266 (56.6%) patients, of which 25 (5.3%), guided projects, 204 (43.4%) did not have experience in

working on projects. Half of the respondents represented educational institutions in which the number of students does not exceed 200. The average class size in schools is 16 pupils and only in 25% of cases is more than 22 students.

Readiness of the educational institution to work in an inclusive way is acknowledged by 145 (30.9%) of the respondents, 271 (57.7%) of respondents believe that educational institutions are partly ready, while 43 (9.1%) believe the opposite. On the question of whether the presence of children with special needs in public educational institutions is a normal phenomenon and a matter of daily 150 (31.9%) answered yes, but most—277 (58.9%) believe that students with special educational needs in educational institutions are exceptions. More than half of respondents (240 accounting for 51.1%) have a positive attitude and are willing to engage actively in the implementation of inclusive education, 172 (36.6%) passively accept this process and 49 patients (10.4%), openly or in a latent way which precludes action.

There is a significant relationship between the vision of the readiness of school to integrate the activities and the presence of students with special needs in the school if the school already has experience in working with students with special needs, readiness of schools and teachers for inclusive is higher than in schools with students with special needs, or schools where such pupils are individual exceptions.

Two-stage cluster analysis of the factors that characterizes the perceptions of inclusive education has enabled the division of respondents into three homogeneous clusters. The first includes 184 (39.1%) of respondents who level the benefits of inclusive education rate higher than the level of concern associated with this process. The second group of 159 (33.8%) of the respondents with the level of benefits and the level of concern balance. Respondents belonging to the third group (121 people representing 25.7%) level of concern regarding the inclusion rate higher than the level of benefits.

This division leads to the conclusion that it is very important for the implementation of inclusive education that role of positive thinking teachers is present, favoring joining the “neutral” to those who think positively, in such a way that the final result of 2/3 teachers show a positive attitude to the project. This should be taken into account by organizing courses for teachers First of all, listeners testing should be carried out, identifying where the group (neutral, positive



attitude, negative image) can be divided and then create a training course with the appropriate content for each group.

Respondents who participated in the implementation of projects related to inclusive education, with a high probability (84%) see it as more benefits than they have related concerns. Those who did not participate in projects or were only executors and have experience in working with students with special needs, but their work experience ranges from 26.5 to 30.5 years for the first cluster fit with the probability of 65.9%. With increasing seniority probability drops to 41.1%. The highest probability (32%), fit into the third cluster, which is characteristic of the high level of concern associated with the inclusion has been seen in people who do not have professional experience of project managers, but they have experience in working with students with special needs, and internship work is 30.5 years, or less than 26.5 years, while incorporating the level of competence is not sufficient for practical action and it should increase.

In the third part of the survey the respondents assessed the importance of issues related to the implementation of inclusive education. From the point of view of respondents the most important (about 14% out of 100%) are the following: insufficient financial security of inclusive education; lack of wholesome support for professionals (special educator, psychologist, speech therapist, etc.) in general educational institutions; and the lack of adequate infrastructure (lack of premises, lifts, hoists and audio equipment for pupils with special needs, textbooks for visually impaired students, special equipment, textbooks, resources, exercise books)

Of least importance in the evaluation of the respondents were poorly developed database of normative acts related to the implementation of inclusive education; strict regulations on the activities of an educational institution, a huge number of regulations governing and laws that restrict the ability of schools to the policy of inclusive education and the attitude of parents of students with special needs or belief that an educational institution should create a unique environment for their child and provide extraordinary care, such as those who are able to provide the institutions of special education, but secondary schools.

There are important planning documents for the development of education in Latvia. The education documents hierarchy are: Sustainable

Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030, which defines the need for a paradigm shift in education and the National Development Plan 2014–2020 year included the direction of “competence development” states that people need a diverse knowledge to be able to receive and execute decent work and be able to have the ability to care for themselves and their families to contribute to the development of the country, and all this determines the need for a competent approach to general secondary education. In order to realize the stated objectives, Latvia developed a program of action “Growth and employment” with the specific aim of support “Development of the contents of general education competency-based approach” to provide “Approval and implementation of the content of general education competency-based approach”.

This is because an increasing number of students with special needs acquire education in mainstream education as a result of the introduction of the principles of inclusive education to general education. In order to gain knowledge of different subjects according to their level of development, opportunities and health, teaching aid is planned to be implemented, supplying knowledge in an understandable and simple language during the 7–9 grades, when students begin to learn new subjects, such as biology, physics or chemistry.

Analyzing the statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science it can be said that every school year there is a growing number of students with recognized learning disorders, which cause difficulties in mastering the knowledge appropriate to the period of development of students. These students should benefit from the aid in the process of education, which would allow them to demonstrate their acquired knowledge and skills. It is therefore necessary to develop and give such materials to teachers in schools, which will allow them flexible use of such techniques in the educational process in order to help students in the process of integration into the education system.

It is planned that by 2022 the content of general education will be developed based on a competence approach, approved and implemented at the level of the kindergarten, primary and secondary education. Therefore the following actions are expected to be undertaken: develop learning content; create a working model and methodology for the organization of the teaching unit; development and improvement of diagnostic tools; drafting the text of the diagnostic



work and exams; development and approval of teaching and methodology; improving the professional competence of teachers in order to implement the content of education in the teaching process.

Conclusions

The study found that we are only at the beginning of the road when it comes to building inclusive educational institutions. Schools in fact have just started this process, and they are not properly organized in Latvia on the basis of legislative, financial, training for teachers and methodical training, so as to ensure real and humane process of social integration. The support system at the national level is just in its infancy, and further development is hampered by a lack of financial support. The action program developed and planned to be implemented in 2022 is set to create a real, sustainable and inclusive Latvian education system.

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