

# Providing Quality Education For Newcomers - Challenges And Dimensions Of Solutions

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Latvia has welcomed war refugees from Ukraine with special understanding, and today's challenge is to provide them with quality education at all levels. Early preventive support systems and early intervention services provide full opportunities for the emotional, cognitive, mental and social development and well-being of newcomers. The most important factor for the inclusion of newcomers in education is a teacher who helps them to integrate successfully into their new environment and ensure stability and continuity in their development. This points to the need for competence development for teachers, improving skills to deal with the challenges of diversity, as it may exist in a classroom due to differences in intellectual abilities or learning disorders, interpersonal or social skills, beliefs and languages.

The study on the inclusion of newcomers in education has been conducted within the State Research Programme Project "Towards sustainable development and inclusive society in Latvia: response to demographic and migration challenges" (No. VPP-IZM-2018/1-0015).

The aim of the paper is to provide a comparative perspective of teachers' readiness to work with newcomers at different levels of education, offering solutions for their inclusion in the Latvian education system.

**Index Terms**— inclusive education; preventive support; diversity; professional competence of teachers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

European societies have been becoming increasingly diverse, both as a result of internal mobility within Europe and international migration, and this diversity and heterogeneity continues to become more visible at all levels of education.

Latvia has welcomed war refugees from Ukraine with special compassion and understanding, and today's task is to integrate the welcomed Ukrainian citizens into our cultural and linguistic space, to provide education at all levels, to teach Latvian language and culture, and to provide children with early support for their development and well-being.

When arriving in a new country, newcomer children have to adapt to a new education system and the culture of an educational establishment, which may be different from what they have experienced before [1].

The successful integration of newcomers into society is important both for newcomers themselves and for society. In order to promote the active involvement of newcomers in the educational process, educational institutions need to create learning environment where everyone can develop and share their previous experiences and cultural backgrounds. Creating such an environment, which recognizes individuals and the culture to which they belong, is an important part of a culturally supportive education [2]. As a result, newcomers can fulfil their potential and ensure long-term social, economic and political participation in society. For the local community, the integration of newcomers is valuable because it helps to promote tolerance and acceptance, strengthen people's understanding of diversity and overcome prejudices and fears, forming a fairer, more inclusive and socially just community.

The challenge for host countries is to develop policies and practical solutions for the inclusion of children in education, ensuring access to education that meets the diverse needs of newcomer children and promotes their inclusion in educational institutions and local communities.

Like any person, newcomer children have the right to access to quality education [3], [4]. They have specific social and emotional needs that quality inclusive education can help them overcome [5]. The studies confirm that child development is most rapid at an early age, when children have the least capacity to protect themselves, and therefore early support for children and their families is not only the most impactful but also the most cost-effective [6].

Teachers are the most important factor contributing to the quality of education and inclusion of newcomer children [7], [8]. Teachers help newcomer children to integrate successfully into their new environment, taking into account their different requirements, and provide stability and continuity in their physical, cognitive and social development [8], [9].

The aim of the paper is to provide a comparative perspective of teachers' readiness to work with newcomers at different levels of education, offering solutions for their inclusion in the Latvian education system.

The study presented in the paper is based on an analysis of scientific literature and binding documents, analytical judgements derived from previous research and the results of a teacher survey.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child grants all children, regardless of their migration status, the right to education [10]. In the UNESCO report "Migration, Displacement and Education. Building Bridges, not Walls", it is stated "Ensuring that migrants and refugees attend and complete school is only the first step towards inclusion. The main challenge in fully including these students in the host society is to offer an education of high quality that ensures the prevention of prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination [11].

Previous studies [12]-[14] show that teachers need support and professional development to be able to fully implement their work with newcomer children. Professional development programmes can help teachers to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to ensure the education of newcomer children regardless of their background and age, financial and social status, race and nationality, ethnicity, gender, religious and political beliefs, health status, prioritizing individualization, differentiation and personalization. According to theoretical guidelines, it is important to identify risk factors as early as possible, in the preschool years, and to strengthen protective factors in relation to children's full development [15]. Nowadays, the pedagogical process needs to shift from homogeneity to heterogeneity and diversity and see it as an advantage and an opportunity to improve the pedagogical process. In the case of homogeneity, differences are not recognized, and learners receive equal access and support. In heterogeneity, on the other hand, differences are seen as challenges to be addressed. Learners are perceived as different, and changes are made to meet their needs. Within diversity, learners are seen as different, and their differences serve as a resource for improving the educational process and learner development [16]. The use of diversity as an educational resource points to the need to implement inclusive education, valuing diversity and the contribution of each learner to the work of a learning group. Inclusive education is a process of finding the most appropriate ways to respond to diversity. Three important aspects of inclusive education are equity (to promote equal opportunities for everyone), quality (to reach one's full potential and have a positive learning experience) and justice (to compensate for existing inequalities and promote social justice in education) [17]. Inclusive education enables all learners to reach their potential and receive a good quality education. Through a personalized approach, targeted support and collaboration with families and local communities, special attention is given to learners at risk of exclusion and failure.

Newcomers bring different requirements into a classroom, which can be compared to The Johns Hopkins Diversity Wheel, a great visual tool for exploring diversity (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Diversity Wheel as used at Johns Hopkins University [18]

In order to promote the inclusion of newcomers, it is particularly relevant for teachers to develop skills to meet the challenges of diversity [19]. Diversity in a classroom may exist due to differences in intellectual abilities or learning disorders, interpersonal or social skills, beliefs and languages. The UNESCO 2017 report expresses a simple but relevant and important message "Every learner matters and matters equally"[20].

Diversity can be visible (e.g. race, gender) and invisible; dimensions of diversity are found both between groups and individuals, and a person can belong to more than one particular group. The dimensions of diversity are not always clear and easily defined, but are they interlinked, so it is important to respect all possible aspects that make each individual unique. It is important to ensure that learners are actively engaged in the learning process, relationships are positive and respectful, and learners experience a sense of belonging to a school and community. It is also important to ensure that learners are respected, valued, encouraged and supported to succeed and develop.

Successful inclusive education practice depends on teachers' competence, positive attitude, confidence and willingness to adapt to learners' educational purposes [17], [21]. As Mehta and Panju [17] point out, an inclusive teacher must have a holistic view of education with relevant knowledge, skills and experience in different contexts.

Inclusive education recognizing and supporting diversity is an important tool for the inclusion of newcomers to education and contributes significantly to the formation of an inclusive society [22]. Teachers play a central role in creating a safe and supportive environment in which newcomers can develop their abilities and talents. Teacher competence includes not only teaching skills but also cultural sensitivity and empathy to understand and support newcomers with different learning and social backgrounds. Teachers must be prepared to transform the educational process by using a variety of methodological approaches to ensure that learning is accessible and understandable for all learners. Including newcomers in education not only contributes to their individual development, but also enriches the whole classroom with new ideas and perspectives, creating an open and understanding society.

D. Chakravartya and G. Shinde [23] have identified in their research that it is essential for teachers to develop an understanding of the nature and implementation strategies of inclusive education, to develop skills to identify the learning needs of learners and select teaching methods according to these needs, to adapt the educational process to each learner, to recognize their development perspectives, to implement professional communication and motivate learners, and to create and implement a learner support system.

In the context of the newcomer inclusion in education, the teacher's role is broadened by the need to ensure fairness and equal opportunities in the educational process for learners with different abilities and learning characteristics, and to be able to use different approaches to teach children with different experiences, backgrounds and needs. Intercultural competence is essential for teachers to be able to work well in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms [24]. Intercultural competence encompasses both an understanding of different cultures and the ability of teachers to adapt teaching approaches and methodologies to suit different cultural backgrounds. Interculturally competent teachers must be prepared to create an open and respectful environment in which newcomers feel encouraged to share their cultures and experiences. It is also important for teachers to understand the impact of migration on the lives and the educational process of newcomers. This includes understanding the challenges faced by newcomer families, for example, language barriers, social and emotional aspects, and differences in the education system. Such understanding enables teachers to provide support that responds to the specific needs and challenges of newcomers.

### III. METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was developed to find out how prepared teachers are to integrate newcomers into the Latvian education system. It was based on a questionnaire developed in Estonia [25] to assess teachers' intercultural competence (covering attitudes, knowledge and skills), which was adjusted and updated to the Latvia's situation.

In the survey, respondents were asked to self-assess 16 statements related to their knowledge, skills and attitudes towards working with newcomers using a Likert scale (1 - no, 2 - rather no, 3 - rather yes, 4 - yes). In addition, they were asked to rate the availability of support received in organizing the pedagogical process with newcomers and solving problems, where 1 means no such support, 2 - never, 3 - very rarely, 4 - in acute cases when the problem is acute, 5 - always when necessary.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were processed in SPSS 22.0. At the start of the data processing, Cronbach's alpha is calculated to test for internal consistency, and the result is  $\alpha = .872$ . Since the distribution of the data does not follow a normal distribution, non-parametric tests were used in the descriptive statistics. 322 teachers took part in the survey. The characteristics of the respondent sample are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENT SAMPLE

Distribution by			
age	gender	experience	stage of education at which they work
18-30 y.o. – 33	female – 299	up to a year – 22	preschool – 164
31-40 y.o. – 74	male – 21	1-5 years – 117	school - 158
41-50 y.o. -85	do not want to specify - 2	6-10 years – 48	
51-60 y.o.– 95		11-20 years – 56	
age 60+ – 33		21-30 years - 59	
do not want to specify - 2		over 30 years - 20	

IV. RESULTS

The data summarized in Table 2 show correlations between teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards working with newcomers, while there was no correlation found between attitudes and support.

TABLE 2 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ATTITUDES

	Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
Skills	.369		
Attitudes	.209	.369	
Support	.189	.106	-

Although no statistically significant differences were found in self-assessments of knowledge, skills and attitudes according to the level of education at which they work ( $p > .05$ ), the Mean Rank analysis shows that preschool teachers have slightly higher self-assessments of skills and attitudes, while teachers have higher self-assessments of knowledge. Only a few statements have a mean rating above three (3 - rather yes, 4 - yes), indicating agreement: *I build supportive relationships with parents of newcomers* (Mean 3.12), *I consult with other teachers or administration to better understand issues related to the planning and implementation of the newcomers' educational process* (Mean 3.20), *I check the educational materials I use to ensure that cultural and ethnic biases are excluded* (Mean 3.12), and *I make changes to the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed* (Mean 3.27). In all other statements, the mean rating is below 3, indicating a low level of teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes. Statistically significant differences by level of education appear in the characteristics of particular statements (Table 3).

TABLE 3 STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION AT WHICH THEY WORK IN SELF-ASSESSMENTS OF THE CHARACTERISTIC STATEMENTS

Statement	p	Mean Rank	
		preschool	school
I am knowledgeable in teaching strategies that incorporate components of ethnic identity diversity.	.008	149.05	174.42
I build supportive relationships with the parents of newcomers.	.002	176.29	146.15
I organize events to increase children's knowledge of other cultures.	.008	174.52	147.98

Statistically significant differences were observed in support ratings ( $p = .000$ ), with preschool workers receiving less support for the inclusion of newcomers in education (Mean Rank 143.02) than school workers (Mean Rank 180.68). The results show the following:

- 65.5% indicate that they always receive the necessary support from the administration (preschool 67.1%, school 63.9%), 5.3% say that there is no such support or they have never received support (preschool 6.1%, school 4.5%),
- 56.2% of respondents have access to support from colleagues and a methodologist (preschool 60.4%, school 51.9%), while 6.5% of respondents have no such support or they have never received support (preschool 7.3%, school 5.7%),
- 31.1% of respondents have access to support from a psychologist whenever needed (preschool 20.1%, school 42.4%), 26.7% of respondents have no such support or they have never received support (preschool 32.9%, school 20.2%),
- only 29.8% of respondents have access to support from a social pedagogue whenever needed (preschool 17.1%, school 43.0%), 29.9% of respondents have no such support or they have never received support (preschool 40.9%, school 18.4%).

Since preschool is an important stage in a child's development, this paper focuses on the analysis of preschool teachers' responses.



TABLE 4 SELF-ASSESSMENTS OF THE STATEMENTS DESCRIBING PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE

Statement	Mean	Me	Mo	Distribution of responses (%)			
				1	2	3	4
I am knowledgeable in teaching strategies that incorporate components of ethnic identity diversity.	2.49	2	2	5.5	47.0	40.2	7.3
I have an understanding of the aspect of cultural diversity in pedagogy.	2.88	3	3	3.0	22.6	57.3	17.1
I am knowledgeable about how the experience of newcomers can affect their learning.	2.91	3	3	3.0	19.5	60.4	17.1
I am aware of various resources that can be used in the educational process of newcomers.	2.78	3	3	4.9	28.7	50.0	16.5

All the statements describing knowledge had a mean rating below 3, indicating insufficient theoretical knowledge for the inclusion of newcomers in education, and this was common for all preschool teachers, as no statistically significant differences were found according to the respondents' level of education and work experience ( $p > .05$ ). The results of the Kendall correlation test show that there is an interaction between the statements characterizing methodological support and knowledge, but it is weak ( $r < .210$ ). The mean ratings of the self-assessments for the skills are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5 SELF-ASSESSMENTS OF THE STATEMENTS DESCRIBING PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' SKILLS

Statement	Mean	Me	Mo	Distribution of responses (%)			
				1	2	3	4
I integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of newcomers into my lessons.	2.79	3	3	12.2	20.1	44.5	23.2
I build supportive relationships with the parents of newcomers.	3.29	2	4	7.9	5.5	36.0	50.6
I include examples of newcomers' experiences in my lessons.	2.79	3	3	8.5	26.2	43.3	22.0
I organize events to increase children's knowledge of other cultures.	2.86	3	3	7.3	24.4	43.3	25.0
When planning the educational activities, I take into account the customs of newcomers.	2.76	3	3	9.8	24.4	46.3	19.5
I consult with other teachers or administration to better understand issues related to the planning and implementation of the newcomers' educational process.	3.21	3	4	8.5	6.7	39.6	45.1
I check the educational materials I use in the teaching process to ensure that cultural and ethnic biases are excluded.	3.14	3	3	6.7	12.2	41.5	39.6
I make changes to the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed.	3.33	3	4	4.3	6.1	42.1	47.6

Self-assessments of the statement *I make changes to the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed* showed statistically significant differences by experience ( $p = .022$ ): the respondents with 1-5 years of experience rated their skills higher (Mean Rank 97.13), but new teachers with less than a year of experience (Mean Rank 66.78) and preschool teachers with more than 40 years of experience (Mean Rank 67.85) rated their skills lower. No statistically significant differences were found according to the respondents' level of education ( $p > .05$ ). The results of the Kendall correlation test show that there are interactions between the different types of support and the statements describing skills, but they are weak ( $r < .240$ ).

TABLE 6 SELF-ASSESSMENTS OF THE STATEMENTS DESCRIBING PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

Statement	Mean	Me	Mo	Distribution of responses (%)			
				1	2	3	4
Newcomers enrich the environment of my institution.	2.96	3	3	6.1	17.7	50.6	25.6
Newcomers enrich learning.	2.91	3	3	6.7	20.1	48.8	24.4
Newcomers enrich Latvian culture.	2.52	2	2	8.5	42.7	36.6	12.2
I think my institution could be more multicultural.	2.59	3	3	9.1	34.8	44.5	11.6

No statistically significant differences were found according to the respondents' level of education and work experience ( $p > .05$ ). The Kendall correlation test showed no interactions between the statements describing the different types of support and attitudes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Teachers are the main source of inclusive education for newcomer children, providing all the above-mentioned aspects on a daily basis, but in terms of their readiness for the inclusion of newcomers in the Latvian education system, the survey data shows a low level of teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes.

A comparison of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of preschool teachers and schoolteachers shows that preschool teachers have slightly higher self-assessments of skills and attitudes, while teachers have slightly higher self-assessments of knowledge.

The overall results of the study indicate a lack of theoretical knowledge in addressing diversity challenges in inclusive education, and it is common for all preschool teachers, as no statistically significant differences were found according to the respondents' level of education and work experience ( $p > .05$ ).

The assessment of the statements describing preschool teachers' attitudes points to the need, first of all, to make changes at the individual level, focusing on changing personal attitudes towards newcomers.

The empirical research conducted proved the relevance of teachers' readiness to work with newcomers and highlighted the importance of teachers' competences, confirming the need to acquire new knowledge, skills and attitudes in addressing the challenges of diversity in inclusive education in Latvia. In order to celebrate diversity, it is necessary not only to acknowledge that it exists, but also to value it positively.

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