

## **Inclusion of Newcomer Children in Preschool: The Case of Latvia**

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### **Abstract**

The ethnic and cultural diversity of today's society calls for sustainable intercultural education in an inclusive environment. The inclusion of newcomer children in the Latvian education system has become a topical issue with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The preschool period is the time when the foundation for future achievements is laid; in an inclusive environment, children's knowledge and skills are fostered to find solutions in the sustainable society of the future. The readiness of preschool teachers for working with newcomer children is determined by the set of competences teachers have in place for the successful inclusion of newcomers in preschool education. A preschool teacher's competence to work with newcomers is a complex construct which includes many sub-competences. In their research, the authors identify knowledge, skills and attitudes that characterize a teacher's work with newcomer children in an inclusive environment. The results show that Latvia's preschool teachers lack the knowledge and skills for working with newcomer children, and their attitude towards these children is not always positive.

**Keywords:** teacher, competence for working with newcomer children, preschool

### **Introduction**

The aim of the paper is to identify the level of competence of Latvia's preschool teachers for working with newcomer children. Today's rapidly changing era and the resulting demands bring to the fore the aspects related to children's education already from the preschool age. The OECD (2018) identifies three main challenges that modern societies need to be able to cope with: 1) the challenges associated with climate changes; 2) the challenges related to economic conditions (the need for new economic and institutional governance models); 3) the challenges posed by social changes (migration, multiculturalism, reduction of social inequalities, etc.).

Preschool is an important period when the foundations of a person's worldview, personal culture, attitude towards oneself and the surrounding world, and values are laid. Research shows that 50% of adult intelligence is developed in the preschool period (Firmansyah, 2018). Children are seen as the agents of change in terms of sustainability (Davis, 2015). Children are active, interact with others and build experiences in social contexts that form the basis for further development.

The migration process has a strong impact on the child's future development (Gürgah Oğul, Telli, 2023): it is connected not only with the change of the usual environment, but also of language, culture, etc. aspects. These children should also be

provided with the education to which they are entitled (Dunhill, Schuurman & Tormen, 2021) and which is based on meeting the child's emotional, social and learning needs (Crooks et al., 2020; Jalušič & Bajt, 2022). Otherwise, we may lose adults who will be able to take an active part in society in the future. It is also an opportunity for children in the host country to enrich their experience in an inclusive intercultural environment, learning about themselves as part of the world and developing through interaction.

In Latvia, the problem became more acute with the onset of Russia's attack on Ukraine: in 2022, 4405 Ukrainian war refugee children were registered in Latvia's educational institutions, including 1,329 children who attended preschool educational institutions (Central Statistical Bureau, 2022).

Newcomer children need to adapt to the education system of their new country of residence, be able to communicate with others, develop a personal identity and feel safe and accepted in their new host country. The educational institution is an environment where (a) newcomer children can adapt to the new social structure (Soylu, Kaysili, & Sever, 2020), (b) it is important to strengthen an inclusive education system and recognize the cultural background of newcomers as part of education (Arigatou International, 2021), (c) the emotional, social and learning needs of newcomer children are met (Prudnikova et al., 2023). The level of teachers' competence shows their readiness to work with newcomers.

In pedagogy, competence is seen as the ability to organize a multidimensional and relational learning process that is closely related to the complexity of everyday educational practice (Nasiopoulou, 2020). Competence of a preschool teacher is considered a meta-competence, and it is a complex construct comprising several sub-competences:

- pedagogical competence – organization and management of the daily educational process (Lillvist, Sandberg, Sheridan, & Williams, 2014; Dikilitaş, Bahrami & Erbakan, 2023; Šteinberga, 2013; Mathers, 2021),
- specific content competence – field of training (Lillvist et al., 2014; Lutsan et al., 2020; Šteinberga, 2013; Mathers, 2021),
- individual competence – personal skills, individual psychological characteristics and experience (Lillvist et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2022),
- playing competence – encouragement and assessment of children in the process of playing activity (Lillvist et al., 2014),
- competence of a child perspective – teachers' understanding and knowledge of children's learning and development (Lillvist et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2023; Lamb, 2019),
- collaborative and social competence – teachers' collaboration and interaction with different social groups (colleagues, administration, parents, children) in a positive, respectful way (Lillvist et al., 2014; Mary & Young, 2018; Šteinberga, 2013; Lunneblad, 2017), intercultural competence (Martin-Beltrán, Durham, & Cataneo, 2023; Patel et al., 2023).

The attitudinal aspect related to each of the aforementioned sub-competences is important. A teacher is tolerant of the different. This characteristic fosters positive emotional attachment, connection to resources and helps to navigate in new systems (Patel et al., 2023). It also alleviates newcomers' confusion and tension arising from their different previous social, cultural and linguistic experience (Picchio & Mayer, 2019).

## Methodology

In order to understand the situation in Latvia and determine what support preschool teachers need to develop their competence for working with newcomer children, mixed methods research was carried out, during which qualitative (discussion) and quantitative data (survey) were collected.

### *Qualitative data collection and analysis*

The participants of the discussion answered 4 questions: 1) What are the competences a teacher needs for working with newcomers? 2) What hinders a positive interaction between a teacher and a newcomer? 3) What processes affect teachers' readiness for working with newcomers? 4) What are the recommendations to improve the situation?

Primary data were collected during the discussion that was attended by 19 preschool teachers, 7 education policy makers, 3 parents of newcomers and 3 representatives of public bodies. Simple transcription and content analysis were applied, leading to the following: identification of the most important teacher competences for working with newcomers, factors influencing teacher competences for working with newcomers, and possible solutions for improving teacher competences for working with newcomers.

### *Quantitative data collection and analysis*

The questionnaire developed in Estonia (Timoštšuk, Uibu & Vanahans, 2022) was used as a basis for assessing teachers' intercultural competence (covering attitudes, knowledge and skills). The questions were adapted for Latvia's preschool teachers. Based on the theoretical analysis and the results of the discussion, the questionnaire was designed in 5 blocks: 1) questions describing the respondent, 2) self-assessment of the respondents' knowledge, skills and attitudes, 3) statements on collaboration, 4) self-assessment of foreign language competence, 5) questions on motivation for working with newcomers. The research focuses on the self-assessment of competence, and for this purpose the respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with the given statements where 1 - definitely no, 2 - rather no than yes, 3 - rather yes than no, 4 - definitely yes.

In line with the research framework (Geske & Grīnfelds, 2020; Yusoff, 2019), attention was paid to the validity of the questionnaire. The assessment of 1) face validity was carried out: whether the formulated questions of the questionnaire were content-wise and technically relevant to the research aims and tasks; 2) content validity of the questionnaire was implemented: the discussions were organized during which the clarity, comprehensibility and relevance of the questions to the research aim were assessed by experts in the field; 3) internal consistency was put into effect as a result of the questionnaire approbation, in which the Cronbach's alpha result for the questionnaire as a whole was ( $\alpha=.908$ ).

### *Characteristics of the research participants*

The discussion was attended by 19 preschool teachers, 7 education policy makers, 3 parents of newcomers, 3 representatives of public bodies.

152 Latvia's preschool teachers took part in the survey. The respondents varied in age: 22% under the age of 30, 37% 31-40 years old, 43% 41-50 years old, 35% 51-60 years old, 14% over the age of 60, 1% did not specify his/her age. They have different

experience: 17% less than a year, 47% 1-5 years, 22% 6-10 years, 33% 11-20 years, 24% 21-30 years, 9% more than 30 years.

## Results and Discussion

Analyzing the transcripts of the discussion, the participants stressed that:

*..a teacher is the person who provides support for the social adaptation of newcomers to their new school environment,*  
*..the results to be achieved depend to a large extent on the professional competence of teachers,*  
*.. it is important to be aware of the teacher's readiness to integrate newcomers into the educational process,*  
*..the most important competence of teachers is tolerance,*  
*..how teachers can embrace diversity and treat all pupils and children equally,*  
*..how well they have developed personal qualities such as respect, love and adaptability (flexibility),*  
*..how competent teachers are in the matters of global education and culture.*

It is obvious that the statements highlight pedagogical competence (Lillvist et al., 2014; Dikilitaş, Bahrami & Erbakan, 2023; Šteinberga, 2013; Mathers, 2021), individual competence (Lillvist et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2022), intercultural communicative competence (Martin-Beltrán, Durham, & Cataneo, 2023; Patel et al., 2023), while, for example, competence of a child perspective (Lillvist et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2023; Lamb, 2019) or specific content competence (Lillvist et al., 2014; Lutsan et al., 2020; Šteinberga, 2013; Mathers, 2021) are not mentioned at all, which may be taken for granted and not emphasized by the participants of the discussion in the context of newcomers. The focus is on those competences that transform when newcomers integrate into the educational environment.

Awareness of the importance of teacher's competence, attitude towards diversity, support provision, etc. is an important factor in the successful inclusion of newcomer children (Prudņikova, 2023). Teachers' knowledge of the dimensions of cultural diversity is important for newcomer children from different cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, the implementation of children's cultural experience and learning in connection with their experience provides an opportunity to organize a more meaningful educational process (Gay, 2000). Teachers must be able to use a variety of pedagogical and methodological tools to ensure quality preschool education. They must also be sensitive to the needs of newcomer children, for example for emotional support and individualized help (Prudņikova, 2023). The discussion on the lack of teachers' competence points to the need to improve it to ensure that all children, regardless of their origin or language, can receive a quality education which is free from prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, 2019).

Faced the new reality, it is necessary to develop the existing competence to a quality that would ensure equal educational opportunities for all children, i.e., a learning process that promotes the development of all children and is rewarding for the parties involved. Successful transformation is based on individual awareness of one's own level of knowledge, skills and attitude, reflection on professional activity and the desire to improve its quality. When filling in the questionnaire, preschool teachers were

asked to assess their competence (knowledge, skills and attitude) for working with newcomers.

The results of the questionnaire related to the respondents' self-assessment of knowledge are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Respondents' self-assessment of knowledge*

Statement	Mean
I am knowledgeable in teaching strategies that incorporate components of ethnic identity diversity.	2.520
I have an understanding of the aspect of cultural diversity in pedagogy.	2.882
I am knowledgeable about how the experience of newcomers can affect their learning.	2.888
I am aware of various resources that can be used in the educational process of newcomers.	2.783

No statistically significant differences were found according to the respondents' age and work experience. A teacher needs to be aware of potential problems and implement specific strategies, knowing the children's cultural characteristics, in order to ensure both active learning of newcomer children and the adaptation of new cultural contexts to the educational process (Soylu, Kaysili, & Sever, 2020). A teacher needs to be open to the new and, based on his/her experience and gained knowledge, develop his/her practice through a variety of individual and group work activities (Prudnikova et al., 2023).

The acquired results indicate a lack of knowledge and a need for continuing education. Attention needs to be paid to knowledge of teaching strategies that include components of ethnic identity diversity: 4.6% of respondents indicated that they were not knowledgeable, 46.1% - rather not knowledgeable in the use of such strategies, which is worrying: teachers' lack of knowledge limits the implementation of inclusive education (Kurniawati et al., 2017), affects lesson planning and often does not meet children's expectations (Santos & Miguel, 2019), threatens a meaningful process based on constructivism according to the child's educational needs.

The results of the questionnaire related to the respondents' self-assessment of skills are summarized in Table 2.

The results showed statistically very significant differences according to the respondents' work experience ( $p=.006$ ): respondents with 1-5 years of work experience (Mean Rank 92.56) make the most changes to the learning environment so that all children have equal opportunities to succeed; teachers with 11-20 years of work experience make the least changes to the learning environment (Mean Rank 64.27), which may indicate routine and reluctance to changing the usual and may create barriers to inclusion of newcomers, as creating an environment that acknowledges individuals and the culture they belong to is an important part of culturally supportive education (Soylu, Kaysili, & Sever, 2020). It is alarming that every second teacher (32.9%) does not take into account the customs of newcomers when planning the educational activities and does not include examples of newcomers' experience in their play-based activities (32.9%). Consequently, teachers (30,2%) do not integrate newcomers' cultural values and lifestyles into their lessons.

**Table 2.***Respondents' self-assessment of skills*

Statement	Mean
I integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of newcomers into my lessons.	2.816
I build supportive relationships with the parents of newcomers.	3.322
I include examples of newcomers' experience in my play-based activities.	2.803
I organize activities to increase children's knowledge of other cultures.	2.901
When planning the educational activities, I take into account the customs of newcomers.	2.763
I consult with other teachers or administration to better understand the issues related to teaching newcomers.	3.230
I check the educational materials I use in the teaching process to ensure that cultural and ethnic biases are excluded.	3.191
I make changes in the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed.	3.355

The results of the questionnaire related to the respondents' self-assessment of attitude are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.***Respondents' self-assessment of attitude*

Statement	Mean
Newcomers enrich the environment of my institution.	2.974
Newcomers enrich learning.	2.921
Newcomers enrich Latvian culture.	2.559
I think my institution could be more multicultural.	2.579

There were statistically significant differences ( $p=.036$ ) in the ratings of the statement *Newcomers enrich the environment of my institution* depending on experience: the respondents with 11-20 years of teaching experience were less likely to agree with the statement. We assume that this is the time when a teacher is most critical of what is happening. No statistically significant differences were found depending on the respondents' age.

Many teachers' attitude towards newcomers is not positive, e.g., respondents strongly disagree or rather disagree that newcomers enrich Latvian culture (76%) or enrich learning (40%). Treatment is based on teachers' lack of knowledge and confidence in working with newcomer children with different types of educational needs, and it affects the quality of the teaching process (Kurniawati et al., 2017). It is possible that attitude is also influenced by the Latvian experience: the effects of the Soviet era, when the national identity was limited, are still felt. Although some research has found a correlation between teachers' attitude and their educational qualifications (the higher the educational qualification, the more positive the attitude towards newcomers) (Hsien, Brown, & Bortoli, 2009), this was not found in the present research.

## Recommendations

Preschool teachers' competence for working with newcomers is insufficient and needs to be improved. One way is through state-funded (fully or partly) continuing education that could be offered in three modules: 1) a knowledge development module, where lectures are the predominant form of teaching, 2) a skills development module, where workshops are organized to learn different skills; 3) an integrated module that could take the form of summer schools or camps, where knowledge and skills are acquired and good practices are shared. The attitude module is not identified separately. Attitude changes as knowledge and skills increase, giving a teacher inner confidence. This is also indicated by the correlations between knowledge, skills and attitudes found in the research process. A teacher can choose one, two or all three modules after the self-assessment: it depends on the teacher's identified inner need for development and motivation for continuing education in order to organize successful work with newcomer children in preschool.

## Conclusions

The effects of the challenges posed by social changes (migration, multiculturalism, etc.) in terms of sustainability, where children are perceived as the agents of change, highlight the need for a transformation of the preschool teacher's competence. The teacher's competence in working with newcomer children becomes an important quality criterion. The research results suggest that Latvia's preschool teachers lack the knowledge, skills and experience to successfully integrate newcomer children. It is necessary to organize state-funded (full or part) continuing education for preschool teachers to meet the needs of this single point in time.

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