



## **Practice and innovation inclusive education in pre-school institutions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Inclusive education in pre-school education is a general policy and practice in European countries, but implementation of the policy varies from country to country depending on institutional, legal factors, funding, access to pre-school education and pedagogical concepts. The aim of the study is to analyze the practice and innovation of inclusive education in pre-school institutions in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. Features of the practice of inclusive education for pre-school children have been determined on the basis of qualitative and quantitative methodology, content analysis and statistical analysis. The results indicate that there are differences in the inclusive education of pre-school children in these countries. Therefore, the practice of inclusive education in the Czech Republic is very different where children of pre-school age are highly involved in formal education, study in special groups to a greater extent and in completely separate educational institutions, and to a lesser extent in special pre-school institutions. Segregation in the Czech Republic is more intense, and therefore the level of inclusion is much lower. It was found that models of inclusion in pre-school education institutions in these countries can be defined as a model of full inclusion in Poland and Hungary (79.68% and 82.18%, respectively), partial inclusion in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (64.85% and 19.74% respectively). The Czech Republic differs significantly from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia in inclusive education for pre-school children.

**Keywords:** practice of inclusive education; practice of teaching children with special education needs (SEN); inclusion of pre-school children; inclusion of children in Eastern Europe.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusion is a response to the human rights movement in the context of equality for all citizens regardless of nationality, gender, age, socio-economic characteristics disability in all spheres of social life. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; United Nations, 2006) was one of the triggers

for the implementation of the concept of inclusion in all spheres of society on a global scale. The UN Convention focuses on the education system: countries should provide access to educational institutions of various levels and promote learning in pre-school education institutions, schools, universities, regardless of the type of disability. Over the past thirty years of the practice of teachers, special attention has been paid to the inclusion of children with special education needs, children who communicate in several languages in a multicultural environment, poor children of different nationalities. Today, inclusive education is the subject of research and a requirement of European institutions of the EU, the Council of Europe, experts, families, non-governmental organizations, governments and individuals (Bajrami, 2019).

Inclusive learning in pre-school education is a general policy and practice in European countries, but policy implementation varies from country to country depending on institutional, legal factors, conditions of inclusion, funding, access to pre-school education and pedagogical concepts (Schwab 2019; Loreman 2017; UNESCO 2017; Watkins 2017). In Europe, educational policy of inclusion is moving targeted towards a more consistent focus on inclusion, which means "provisions to ensure effective education in mainstream classrooms" (Fettes & Karamouzian, 2018). This requires and actualizes the problems of researching the practice of inclusive education in the countries of Eastern Europe, which is a poorly studied subject today.

To achieve a high level of inclusion in pre-school education institutions, it is necessary to create a system of inclusive education through the use of innovative teaching methods. However, the very notion of inclusion has changed over the past ten years. The UN Convention focused on children with disabilities, how they can be supported, and the needs for inclusion in general institutions pre-school education. Later documents providing for the implementation of the program of inclusion (for example, the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) cover all learners (Schwab, 2019). In fact, the paradigm has transformed, which included a special attention to organizations that themselves create full inclusion barriers. In such conditions, the question arose of ensuring equal educational conditions for educational institutions for all children (Avramidis and Norwich 2002; Watkins and Meijer 2016; European Parliament 2017).

The theoretical concepts of inclusive learning have led to the emergence of different practices depending on the interpretation of inclusion by different interested parties in different countries. Despite the importance of legislation and inclusion policies for shaping the context of inclusion research, the implementation of such ideas and practices in pre-school institutions does not happen automatically (Forlin 2006; Xu 2012). In reality, children are still at a disadvantage due to a focus on scarce education models that placed emphasis on segmentation, segregation, rather than positive inclusive learning practices (Andrews et al. 2015; Finkelstein, Sharma & Furlonger, 2019). "Implementation of inclusion practices varies significantly across countries" (Van Kessel et al., 2020).

So, the advocacy of idealistic policies at the international, national levels and the mandatory legislation do not guarantee the implementation of the policy of inclusion in practice. This requires learning about the practice of inclusion in pre-school institutions. The purpose of this study is to analyze the practice and innovation of inclusive education in pre-school institutions in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no consensus in the scientific literature on the definition of inclusion. Scientific publications do not clearly define this notion (Kola-Bezka, 2018). Therefore, conceptualization and definition are missing in publications on inclusive education (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). No definition of inclusion is universally accepted; the formation of this concept can be a positive step in the development of the practice of inclusion (Florian 2014).

Nevertheless, Mitchell (2015) considers the definition of this notion in a unified direction as one that forms a false dichotomy and simplifies its understanding. In other words, inclusion can be understood as what happens or does not happen. But Mitchell (2015) understands inclusion as a concept with many values and processes that provide real interpretation, taking into account the complexity of educational institutions and the many interdependent concepts at its core. A similar conclusion is reached by Chhabra, Bose & Chadha (2018), who define inclusion as a philosophy and practice of supporting the rights of all children, regardless of their abilities, the practice of active participation in all spheres of society. Amatori, Mesquita & Quelhas (2020) consider inclusion as a catalyst for development that can reduce inequalities and provide lifelong learning opportunities for everybody.

Schuman (2017) considers early childhood inclusion as a concept based on policy values and practices to support the rights of every young child, his family, regardless of ability. This practice provides for participation in a wide range of events as full-fledged members of society. High-quality inclusion is essential for the development of children to unlock their potential, develop learning skills that ensure successful participation in school life and adult life in the future (Bartolo, Björck-Åkesson, Giné & Kyriazopoulou, 2016). The intercultural competences of teachers of 3-4 year olds children provide such development and learning for pre-school children (Mary & Young, 2017).

Accordingly, scientific publications integrate the concepts of learning, intercultural competences of teachers and children, sustainable development, and inequality into the philosophy of inclusion. These concepts are intertwined, creating new conditions for the inclusion of children with special education needs.

The desired outcomes of the practice of inclusion of children with disabilities and their families include the formation of a sense of belonging to society, membership, positive social relations and friendships, development and training for full unlock the potential. The defining characteristics of inclusion for defining high-quality inclusion programs and services for pre-school children are participation, access and support (Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

Inclusive education and learning refers to school models where children with special needs (SENs) spend a lot of time with students without these needs. According to scientific publications, the implementation of inclusive learning requires ensuring a positive attitude towards such learning, the perception of practice as positive, requires the resources of inclusive education (Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

According to a study by Chhabra, Bose & Chadha (2018), the quality of inclusive practice for children in the conditions of pre-school education is on the verge of minimal and good. This indicates the need for improvement in many areas, in particular in the field of materials supply, provision of additional resources, equipment (Chhabra, Bose & Chadha, 2018).

For the purposes of this article, the practice of inclusion is conceptualized as a high-order construct that combines various aspects of behavior and concepts. The practice of inclusion ensures the formation of cognitive processes in institutions of pre-school education and training (Gherardi 2008). But the behavior of a specific phenomenon that can be observed does not unite specific results and context of inclusion. Ainscow (2005) defines inclusive practice as actions aimed at overcoming barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow, 2005). Taking into account that the review of scientific publications focuses on pedagogy and practice, the practice of inclusion is considered to define the strategies / behaviors that teachers use to ensure the education of children with special needs in pre-school institutions based on the national concept of inclusion.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology is based on the philosophy of inclusion, which integrates the concepts of lifelong learning, intercultural competences of teachers and children, sustainable development, and inequality. This study used a qualitative and quantitative design based on content analysis of inclusive practices in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and a statistical analysis of indicators for assessing the involvement of pre-school children in education:

1. Population and enrolment, ISCED 02 (Pre-primary education) in 2016/2017.
2. Children/learners with an official decision of SEN, ISCED 02 (Pre-primary education) in 2016/2017.
3. The enrolment rate in inclusive education in 2018.

This study includes an analysis of the level of segregation of pre-school children, depending on the pre-school institutions in which studying children with special educational needs. The segregation is built taking into account the following types of pre-school education institutions: all formal educational settings; out of formal educational settings; mainstream formal educational settings; mainstream groups / classes for at least 80%; mainstream groups / classes for at least 80%; in separate special groups / units / classes in mainstream educational settings; in separate special (pre) schools.

## **RESULTS**

The systems of individual countries are tending to basic or specialized education by defining the means of support that children with special educational needs receive. Children with SEN and children who are multilingual in early childhood education systems in high per capita income countries, with low unemployment

are included in a more organized system of inclusion. Such a system provides a greater level of support, funding, and service delivery at the local level (Bajrami, 2019).

According to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (Table 1), the actual number of children studying in Poland was 428,356 thousand people, in the Czech Republic - 328,802 thousand people, in Hungary - 360,771 thousand people, in Slovakia - 174,448 thousand people. At the same time, the number of children attending formal pre-school institutions in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia is less (424.384 thousand people, 317.487 thousand people and 165.009 thousand people), while in the Czech Republic it is more (367.453 thousand people). This accordingly led to the education of pre-school children in non-formal pre-school institutions in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. For example, the indicator "Children / learners out of formal educational settings" in Poland was 3,061,000. Children / learners enrolled in mainstream formal educational settings in Poland amounted to 422.357 thousand people, in the Czech Republic - 363.892 thousand people, in Hungary - 255.465 thousand people, in Slovakia - 163.066 thousand people.

**Table 1: Population and enrolment, ISCED 02 (Pre-primary education) in 2016/2017**

	Poland	Czech Republic	Hungary	Slovakia
1.1 Actual population of children/learners at:	428,356	328,802	360,771	174,448
1.2 Children/learners enrolled in all formal educational settings at:	424,384	367,453	317,487	165,009
1.3 Children/learners out of formal educational settings at:	3,061	-	-	-
1.4 Children/learners enrolled in mainstream formal educational settings at:	422,357	363,892	255,465	163,066
1.5 Children/learners enrolled in mainstream groups/classes for at least 80% of the time at:	421,947	355,415	253,93	162,728

Source: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2020).

In fact, these data indicate that there are differences in the inclusive education of pre-school children in these countries. Therefore, the practice of inclusion in the Czech Republic is especially different, where pre-school children are highly involved in formal education, while in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia the level of involvement is slightly lower (99%, 88% and 95%, respectively).

The number of pre-school children with an officially diagnosed SEN is: 11,936 thousand people in Poland, 15,342 thousand people in the Czech Republic, 8,616,000 people in Hungary, 6,860 thousand people in Slovakia (Table 2, indicator 3.1). The proportion of children with SEN in the total number of children in pre-school education institutions is: 2.79% in Poland, 4.67% in the Czech Republic, 2.39% in Hungary and 3.93% in Slovakia (ratio of indicators 3.1 and 1.1).

**Table 2: Children/learners with an official decision of SEN, ISCED 02 (Pre-primary education) in 2016/2017**

	Poland	Czech Republic	Hungary	Slovakia
3.1 Children/learners with an official decision of SEN in any form of education at:	11,936	15,342	8,616	6,860
3.2 Children/learners with an official decision of SEN educated in mainstream groups/classes for at least 80% of the time at:	9,511	3,029	7,081	4,449
Share (3.2 / 3.1), %	79,68	19,74	82,18	64,85
3.3 Children/learners with an official decision of SEN educated in separate special groups/units/classes in mainstream educational settings at:	410	8,477	1,535	338
Share (3.3 / 3.1), %	3,43	55,25	17,82	4,93
3.4 Children/learners with an official decision of SEN educated in separate special (pre)schools at:	2,015	3,836	-	1,943
Share(3.4 / 3.1), %	16,88	25,00		28,32

Source: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2020).

Among children with SEN, 9,511 study in main groups (at least 80% of the time) in Poland, 3,029 in the Czech Republic, 7,081 in Hungary and 4,449 in Slovakia (indicator 3.2). In fact, the models of inclusion in pre-school education institutions of these countries can be defined as a model of full inclusion in Poland and Hungary (79.68% and 82.18%, respectively), partial inclusion in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (64.85% and 19.74%, respectively). So, the Czech Republic differs significantly from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia in inclusive education for pre-school children.

In 2018, the level of inclusion of children in these countries changed. The enrolment rate in inclusive education in 2018 (based on the enrolled pre-primary population, is 99.43%, 96.72% in Czech Republic, 79.98% in Hungary, 98.62% in Slovakia, while the average is 98.6% in Europe. in most countries, enrollment in inclusive education involves enrollment in the main class following examples and practice based on 80% working time or other benchmarks. Children aged 4 years who are outside of inclusion are enrolled in separate classes, completely separate special institutions, in institutions of non-formal education, organized by health services or social services. Such children may also not attend pre-school education at all. An example of a high level of education in non-formal education institutions is the Czech Republic, where 8,477 thousand children attend "separate special groups / units / classes in mainstream educational settings", which is 55.25% of children with special needs and opportunities. But the indicator is lower in Hungary (1.535 or 17.82%), Slovakia (338 or 4.93%) and Poland (410 or 3.43%). Thus, the segregation policy has a high level of manifestation in the Czech Republic and Hungary. The number of children studying in separate classes is: 2,015 in Poland (16.88%), 3,836 in the Czech Republic (25.00%) and 1,943 in Slovakia (28.32%). In fact, this means a high segregation of children with SEN. Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN based on the enrolled pre-primary population (Figure 1) averages 2.15% in 27 European countries, in particular in Poland 2.81%, in the Czech Republic - 4.18%, in Hungary 2.71% and in Slovakia - 4.16%.



**Figure 1: Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN, based on the enrolled pre-primary population (%)**

Source: European Agency (2020).

The data relate to those children who are formally recognized as having special educational needs and who have received a formal SEN decision in accordance with the EASIE's working definition. The SEN identification rate ranges from 0.22% to 19.63%; the overall average in 27 European countries is 2.15%. The SEN identification rate in boys ranges from 0.13% to 12.07%; the overall average across 24 European countries is 1.34%. The SEN detection rate in girls ranges from 0.09% to 7.56%; the overall average across 24 European countries is 0.64%.

Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in inclusive settings based on the enrolled pre-primary population is 2.24% in Poland, 0.82% in the Czech Republic, 2.23% in Hungary and 2.7% in Slovakia (Table 3). The percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in special groups, based on the enrolled pre-primary population is 0.1% in Poland, 2.31% in the Czech Republic, 0.48% in Hungary and 0.2% in Slovakia.

**Table 3: Indicators of the distribution of placements of children with an official decision of SEN, pre-primary population, 2018**

	Poland	Czech Republic	Hungary	Slovakia
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in inclusive settings, based on the enrolled pre-primary population (%)	2,24	0,82	2,23	2,7
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in special	0,1	2,31	0,48	0,2

groups, based on the enrolled pre-primary population (%)				
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in special pre-schools, based on the enrolled pre-primary population (%)	0,47	1,04	-	1,18
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in fully separate educational settings, based on the enrolled pre-primary population (%)	0,57	3,35	-	1,38

Source: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2020).

Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in special pre-schools, based on the enrolled pre-primary population is 0.47% in Poland, 1.04% in the Czech Republic and 1.18% in Slovakia. The percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in fully separate educational settings, based on the enrolled pre-primary population is 0.57% in Poland, 3.35% in the Czech Republic and 1.38% in Slovakia.

Therefore, unlike Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, in the Czech Republic the number of children in special institutions of pre-school inclusive education is significantly less. On the other hand, such children in the Czech Republic study in special groups, to a greater extent and in completely separate educational institutions, and to a lesser extent in special pre-school institutions. So, segregation in the Czech Republic is more intense, and therefore the level of inclusion is much lower. As noted, "pre-primary education is carried out in segregated, proximity, integrated, inclusive forms" (Burkovičová, 2016). This, in particular, may be due to the long transition of the Czech Republic from ethnic discrimination to social integration (Fónadová, Katriňák & Simonová, 2019), exacerbated by inequality among various ethnic groups in the country's education system. Thus, segregation exists in all countries for children who cannot attend general pre-school educational institutions.

The identified trends of inclusion are determined due to a number of factors. In particular, legal. For example, Poland has ratified all international documents and local documents defining the rights of persons with disabilities (Świtała, 2020): "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2011), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union () and The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). " In Poland, the philosophy of inclusion provides for equality of rights for all children, providing opportunities for individual development, ensuring children's access to education in various pre-school educational institutions. Despite this, there are still challenges at the local level in Poland that hinder the country's inclusive development (Kola-Bezka, 2018).

## DISCUSSION

Inclusion in early childhood education is essential for every child. Including children with special needs in mainstream early childhood education and care is the first step towards building an inclusive society. The creation of an inclusive society cannot be imagined without successful inclusion in education. Its implementation is difficult and slow, and it is influenced by a number of factors. Ensuring inclusion in pre-school education and care requires an educational environment that meets the needs of children with special needs, requires competent staff which can work with these children, and requires affordable means of working with these children. This leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to eliminate the numerous barriers that are in the existing system of pre-school education and care in the studied countries, in particular the Czech Republic, where there is increased segregation. The process of inclusion is not easy at all, but its advantages serve as a guide, an encouraging factor for existing efforts to create an inclusive pre-school environment (Petrovska, Sivevska & Runceva, 2019).

Our study confirms the findings of Schwab (2019), Loreman (2017), (Watkins 2017) on variations in inclusion policies across Europe depending on institutional factors, conditions of inclusion and access to pre-school education, and pedagogical concepts. In the Czech Republic, there has still not been a purposeful transition to an effective policy of inclusion of pre-school children (Fettes & Karamouzian, 2018), which in the future will determine the education of these children, influence sustainable development, and equality.

The findings of this study correlate with those of Andrews et al. 2015; Finkelstein, Sharma & Furlonger (2019) and confirm that in real conditions, pre-school children, in particular in the Czech Republic, are still at a disadvantage due to segmentation, segregation, a large number of children studying in special groups, completely separate educational institutions, in special pre-school institutions. In fact, in the Czech Republic, in comparison with Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, there is no full-fledged positive practice of inclusive education. This means that in the Czech Republic, inclusion programs are characterized by a low level of quality and

effectiveness in practice, and such factors of inclusion as participation, access and support (Paseka & Schwab, 2020) are still not widely available. This study also partly confirms the findings of Chhabra, Bose & Chadha (2018), and indicates that the quality of inclusive practice of children in the conditions of pre-school education is on the verge of minimal and good, in particular in the Czech Republic. At the same time, “Special education needs are addressed on a policy level in all four countries” (Van Kessel et al., 2020), and teachers play the most important role in training children. Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are characterized by a policy of inclusion in accordance with international practice and a three-sided approach: “(1) special schools; (2) special classes in mainstream schools; or (3) mainstream classes ”(Van Kessel et al., 2020). Therefore, the transformation of the system of inclusion at the international level significantly affects the national system of inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

This study proves the existence of challenges in the practice of inclusion in pre-school education institutions in Eastern Europe through various institutional, legal, socio-economic factors. The inclusion models of Poland and Hungary are characterized by a high level of inclusion (79.68% and 82.18%, respectively) in pre-school education institutions, while in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (64.85% and 19.74%, respectively), the level of inclusive education is significantly lower. In general, the Czech Republic significantly differs from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia in inclusive education of pre-school children, which is due to the high level of ethnic discrimination. The long transition to social integration in the Czech educational system determined the quality of inclusion. As a result, the country has a high level of education in non-formal educational institutions (“separate special groups / units / classes in mainstream educational settings”), which is 55.25% of children with special needs and opportunities. The segregation policy has a high level of manifestation precisely in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Pre-school children with special educational needs in the Czech Republic study in special groups to a greater extent and in completely separate educational institutions, and to a lesser extent in special pre-school institutions. So, segregation in the Czech Republic is more intense, and therefore the level of inclusion is much lower. At the same time, segregation exists in all countries for children who cannot study in general educational pre-school institutions. In the studied countries, there is a variation of inclusion policy depending on institutional factors, conditions of inclusion and access to pre-school education institutions and pedagogical concepts. In the Czech Republic, a purposeful transition to an effective policy for the inclusion of pre-school children has not yet taken place; in the future it will determine the education of these children, influence sustainable development, and equality. In fact, in the Czech Republic, in comparison with Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, there is no full-fledged positive practice of inclusive education. This means that in the Czech Republic, inclusion programs are characterized by a low level of quality and effectiveness in practice, and inclusion factors such as participation, access and support require more dissemination.

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