

# INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR PUPILS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN GENERAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

*Mārīte Rozenfelde*

*Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia*

## **Abstract**

The paper is focused on the analysis of the role of educational environment in the implementation of the inclusive education process for pupils with special needs: the most significant prerequisites for successful learning, development of pupils' interaction culture and value orientation are determined; options for the presence, participation in the learning process and ensuring of achievement for all included pupils with special needs are dealt with.

**Keywords:** *environment, inclusive education process, pupils with special needs.*

## **Introduction**

There is a definite and strong interaction between a human and the environment, which has had a significant impact on the human personality at all times. A human can only develop fully in the social environment, taking over experience of the surrounding social environment; knowledge, attitudes, and skills are obtained, value orientation behaviour is formed, social roles are acquired by a child (Špona, 2001).

According to the opinions expressed by Dewey already at the beginning of the 20th century, the educational environment should contribute to a democratic way of life on a daily basis, as it contributes to the growth of both individuals and society. Dewey's understanding of democracy is based on mutual correlation between a human and the world, where is no contrast, there is no human selfishness that evolved over time. Human life either thrives or fails only in relation to changes in the environment. In accordance with a Dewey's view, the role of the educational environment is to promote the democratic way of life, practicing it daily at school and fostering the development of humanity (Salīte, 2009; Djuji, 2001). A democratic teacher emphasizes values such as mutual respect, cooperation, equality, self-discipline, shared responsibility, mutual trust, listening to the others (Balsons, 1998).

Self-preservation of future society as a unity and its continuous renewal are provided by inclusion of all personalities in society, including pupils and young people with learning difficulties, cognitive and mobility impairments. The educational process should ensure that these persons feel and are aware of their possibilities, role, and importance in society, are able to integrate into the social environment optimally (Integratīva mācību metodika adaptācijai sociālajā vidē kognitīvo un kustību funkciju uzlabošanai, 2012).

**The study aims:** to clarify and update the theoretical framework for the positive, inclusive learning environment for students with special education needs in General Educational Institution.

**Methods:** secondary analysis of scientific literature.

### **Inclusive Environment for Pupils with Special Needs**

“The learning environment is a purposefully organized physical, social, and informative set of circumstances, in which a pupil forms and implements his/her experience: knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards himself/herself and the surrounding world” (Šūmane, 2012).

Fishers (2005) believes that the positive environment is formed by the following components: 1. *loyalty* – to promote a sense of belonging, to accept each person, and to be confident of a group’s ability to think and learn; 2. *trust* – to involve group members in the decision-making process and to entrust each person certain responsibility by agreeing on learning outcomes; 3. *support* – to provide assistance and encouragement in the learning process, committing to promote individual’s growth and learning; 4. *dynamic tension* – to strive for objectives energetically and enthusiastically and to preserve moral principles when confronted with learning difficulties; 5. *expectations* – to set goals, to be clear about assumptions, opinions, and learning outcomes; 6. *communication* – to exchange information about successes and failures and to create joint commitments within a group when sharing knowledge (Fišers, 2005, 188). Iliško (1999) notes that “a favourable environment for a child’s development is created by positive emotional support, maximum usage of all senses during the world’s acquisition process, pleasure gained through activities, stress-free atmosphere, diversity of technologies used in lessons, provision of cognitive, affective and psychomotor areas development, providing active position of a pupil as a researcher in the learning process, and a pupil’s opportunity to choose”.

Since the first key word in modern education is humanity and a pupil is located in the centre of humanitarian education as a spiritual being, teacher’s responsibility is to create the environment that would enable each pupil to develop all talents at his/her pace and time, facilitate to the growth of a pupil, keep a pupil’s thirst for knowledge (Svence, 1998; Swann, 1981), the environment that motivates, allows to enjoy intellectual revelations and pleasure gained through activities (Valce, 2002; Rodzher, 1961; Svence, 1998; Swann, 1981). The structure of the learning environment that facilitates pupils’ learning achievements arises from the definition of the learning environment: optimal conditions for work are provided in the physical environment of a classroom; activities of pupils and teachers are based on the cooperation in the social environment of the classroom; diverse options of the information environment are used manifoldly (Šūmane, 2012).

The most important prerequisites for successful learning and development of pupils’ interaction culture and value orientation are, above all, the learning environment that allows pupils to understand and believe that they can do much by themselves, favourable and optimistic atmosphere in lessons, which creates a sense of safety and security (Herbert, 1974) and provide opportunities for each pupil to try, make mistakes, learn from their own and others’ mistakes without concern (Maļicka, 2004). A positive environment helps to deal with pupils’ behavioural problems (Friend & Bursuck, 2002).

A teacher’s working style has a great importance in social climate formation in a classroom. It determines values, daily mutual relationship culture in a classroom, and, even though indirectly, but affects pupils’ learning and the quality of work very significantly.

Therefore, healthy teacher's attitude and professionalism of pedagogical communication skills are important (Vadone, 1999). If a teacher manages to cooperate with pupils as equal partners, despite the difference in age and experience, the relationship system "subject-subject" forms between them. Interaction takes place the most successfully and the learning process is the most effective in such situation (Šūmane, 2012).

One of many challenges, faced by a teacher working in an inclusive educational institution, is a diversity of pupils. The characteristic feature of diversity is that all children and young people have a lot in common. Strength is hidden in diversity, and all children have strengths. This is a fundamental responsibility of all who teach and all those who support the pupils' rights to learn and teachers in their faith that all pupils are able to learn (Peters, 2004). The educational institution's environment and teachers can seriously influence pupils' performance and achievements as a whole. Although teachers can be successfully guided by different educational philosophies, the classroom environment can be very problematic for immature pupils. There is an environment that promotes and maintains the syndrome of non-occurrence, but there is an environment that helps to guard against it and prevent it. The inclusive education program is designed to help to overcome failures and difficulties which pupils face in an educational institution, as well as the risk of falling behind or being excluded from an educational institution (Roth & Szamoskozi, 2005). The risk of unskillfully organized inclusion is that a pupil is only physically present in a classroom but learns anything (Mācīšanās kā mācīties iekļaujošā vidē, 2005). It is important to encourage development of educational institution's culture and environment that are pupil-friendly and contribute to the learning process, which is efficient, inclusive for all pupils, healthy and safe, as well as promoting gender equality, providing pupils, their families and society possibilities of active participation (UNESCO, 2008). The supportive environment means that everyone has the opportunity to work according to their abilities, each individual is given the opportunity to be heard, if necessary, get help and support (Apeirons, 2007). A teacher organizes lessons and upbringing according to his/her work style.

In order to encourage educational achievements of pupils with special needs in the learning environment, it needs to be taken into account that these pupils develop skills in the process, as a result of exercise, based on acquired knowledge (Iljin, 2005). This means that the learning environment should have conditions where a pupil learns by basing information on knowledge acquired before, practicing in various ways, strengthening and applying new knowledge into practice.

In order to satisfy different needs of pupils most effectively, teachers need to create the learning environment that enables all pupils to fulfil their educational goals and to participate in educational events (Education for All: The Quality Imperative, 2005).

In terms of inclusion of pupils with special needs in general educational institutions, the very first prerequisite for implementing the inclusion process is the creation of such educational institution's environment where pupils with special needs are sure of their belonging to and reliably operate in this environment. Educational institutions cannot become inclusive if there is lack of development during lessons that allows pupils to learn successfully and help them to feel better (Korsakova, Mikadze, & Balashova, 2002).

Inclusion is possible, if certain conditions are taken into consideration: encouraging attitude (a pupil must feel protected, belonging to a group); qualitative relationship between a teacher and a pupil (to accept a pupil, to look for individual adaptation options); different system of values (cooperation, teamwork, performance corresponding to each pupil);

inclusion does not depend on pupils' achievements; individual education programs; teamwork; mediation for all pupils, support (not too much and not too little so that a pupil does not become dependent on help); professional training of teachers; regular meetings of the parties involved, parents' participation and support, a pupil's choice whether to learn in a special or an inclusive educational institution. Education policymakers can encourage and suggest inclusive education by attracting the necessary funds (*Mācīšanās kā mācīties iekļaujošā vidē*, 2005; *Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs in Inclusive Classrooms*, 2001).

The deepest essence of inclusion is to allow the development of interpersonal relationships that will create the environment where everyone can participate fully in significant and experience enriching activities. "Special" pupils cannot be denied the right to be special but the objective of inclusive educational institutions is to accept all pupils as individuals and to recognize their individuality as worthy of respect. Advanced learning in a classroom that responds to special needs has a positive effect on all pupils (Daniels & Ware, 1990; Jonssons, 2007; *Towards Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: A Guideline*, 2009; Wang, 2009).

Humanitarian pedagogues Rogers and Freiberg (2002) believe that deep respect, trust and full acceptance, support for pupils from a teacher in all situations create the best conditions for development of pupils' personalities.

Peters (1999) argues that pupils themselves are an important component of the inclusive activity: with special needs and without them. Pupils without disabilities have to learn to accept their peers with disabilities, learn to help, offer support in a classroom, cooperative learning situations, playgrounds both individually and in peer support groups. Pupils need to be educated on the topic of inclusion: they should read books, watch videos, talk about inclusion, participate in organized sessions to see other inclusive activities. If teachers, administrators, and parents work together, inclusion creates unlimited benefits and helps to develop education for all students in different ways. Pupils with developmental problems develop cognitively, socially and physically. Pupils without developmental disorders learn higher tolerance for people with differences. Rieser and Peasley (Rieser & Peasley, 2002) and Dyson (2006) believe that peers/classmates can also teach pupils with special needs by dividing them in couples for implementation of common tasks. The author gained the following experience in Italy, Modena area, during a visit to educational institutions with an aim to explore functioning of inclusive educational institutions: in a group of classmates (4-5 pupils), one of them supports/assists/cooperates with/explains/is together with a pupil with special needs on a daily schedule. Consequently, inclusive education is the most effective tool for building solidarity between children with special needs and their peers (*The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, 1995).

According to the author's experience, the issue whether classmates will actually accept a pupil with special needs in their group also depends on the time when a pupil has been included (the younger is a pupil to be included, the greater impact has a teacher to guide a pupil's "acceptance" processes in a class: to explain, involve, entrust, accept by oneself, etc., when a teacher has higher attitude influence possibilities than in older classes) and on the location of an educational institution and the number of pupils in a school (if a pupil is included in a small municipal educational institution where pupils have grown up together with the one having special needs, attended the same preschool, later the 1st grade, etc., he/she will have less communication problems because everyone – pupils, teachers, parents, society – is already accustomed to him/her and his/her disorders on a daily basis. Pupils in

large urban schools, that are attended by a large number of pupils from greater environs, have more problems with inclusion.

The author's experience shows that it is not the right approach to start inclusion of a pupil with special needs into a general educational institution in senior classes, especially in cases where teachers lack the necessary experience in work with pupils with developmental disorders. It is the best to start inclusive education when a pupil is young, advisably in the pre-school age – preparatory – group; other pupils and teachers will gain experience, skills and knowledge along the pupil's growing and educating process (Shipicina, Sorokin, Lubovskij, Isajev, Mihalenkova, & Mamaichuk, 2010). In the beginning, teachers should be given the opportunity to work with pupils who have mild and moderate problems and are of the same age as pupils in a class. The staff of the educational institution, in turn, should understand that pupils who need help the most are the priority in daily work, and one should not expect that all problems will be solved by special teachers, assistant teachers, if there are any, or a support team.

The author's personal experience, as well as practice of Aleksejeva and M. Bluša (2002), shows that the socio-psychological adaptation process is important for successful inclusion of pupils with disabilities in general educational institutions. The following three components are significant for such pupils in the encouraging process: support (understanding, awareness, changing conditions according to the pupil's needs, psychological acceptance of pupils and provision of the sense of security from both adults and other pupils, possibilities to choose, pupil's acquaintance and observation, prevention of all the expected difficulties, providing a positive feeling of satisfaction within activities), cooperation (assignment of responsibilities and duties, provision of information exchange possibilities, analysis of information about a pupil, agreement between all persons involved in the inclusion process on common working objectives and tasks, pupils' involvement in working together, coordination of all activities), assistance (a pupil gets help as needed at any time, difficulties are determined and evaluated and an appropriate corrective development activity is launched, a pupil has an opportunity to get a consultation, corrective developing action program is carried out) (Aleksejeva & Bluša, 2002).

Starting the process of inclusive education implementation, many adults may need to change the usual communication style, focusing more not on failures and obnoxious behaviour of a pupil, but rather his/her positive expression and changes. In fact, at the beginning of the process of inclusion, any person has to learn to change attitudes about ongoing happenings around, especially among pupils, to notice and emphasize the positive in order to be able to talk about the pupil-friendly environment (Dyson, Gallannaugh, & Millward, 2002). An adult has to work with himself/herself by changing, if necessary, attitude towards a pupil, people in general, and himself/herself (Wedell, 1973). A pupil needs to be ensured so he/she would feel important, necessary, and valuable. First of all, the meaning of encouraging a pupil is believing in him/her. Support, assistance, and cooperation can be given to a pupil in any situation, it does not require any specific investments (Aleksejeva & Bluša, 2002; Balsons, 1998). However, when starting the process of inclusion, a teacher is also responsible for the control of conditions in a class and check whether they are not deteriorating for the rest of pupils. Therefore, the environment for successful inclusion should be improved because pupils with typical development will become beneficiaries of the following education (Hannell, 2006).

In providing support and encouragement, authorities of educational institutions should also offer integrated training programs. Each educational institution should set up a system to

identify different needs of pupils and ensure that an educational institution works according to these needs. In order to form an inclusive educational institution, the following principles should be adhered: all students are valuable, appropriate training tasks should be offered for groups and individuals, diverse learning styles of pupils should be taken into consideration, pupils' work should be assessed, the best use of resources should be made (Bibby, Davey, Hudson-Vaux, Miller, Morling & Stitt, 2005; The Teacher Council, 2011/3/a, The Teacher Council, 2011/8/b).

Inclusive education can be understood as the presence of all pupils (access to education and attendance of educational institutions), participation (quality of the learning experience from the perspective of a pupil) and achievements (learning process and results of the educational programme acquisition) in general educational institutions (Eiropas speciālās izglītības attīstības aģentūra, 2011/c, 2). Teacher' attitude, position, and internal readiness are of great importance in the aspect of inclusive education and its implementation (Silverman, 2007).

The surrounding environment and its influence have a very important role in the successful development of pupils' self-esteem. Attitude of bystanders and peers helps pupils with special needs to be aware of themselves in the environment. Participation of all pupils, including the ones with special needs, in learning activities is emphasized in the inclusive education process. K. Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse believe that this participation is related not only to teaching and learning, but to all aspects of an educational institution's operation. It applies to all policies and practices of an educational institution and daily interaction between its members (Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2008). Participation and achievements consist of two interconnected and never-ending processes: increased participation reduces barriers to participation, and vice versa: reduced barriers increase participation. Participation is not merely a physical access; it is only one aspect for wider understanding of an educational institution and education. Participation is a right that is common to all, but it involves mutual responsibilities as well. This means that a pupil with special needs has the right and obligation to participate in lessons along with others, as well as the right and responsibility to participate in the decision-making processes. Everyone has the right to be recognized in an educational institution, but it is also the responsibility to assess others as equal participants.

Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse (2008) name three important aspects that explain the notion of participation. They are the following: access and attendance (a pupil gets to an educational institution and spends time there, he/she is adapted to an institution, he/she has access to facilities, places, and learning programmes), cooperation (learning together with other pupils, support within the learning process from both classmates and adults: teachers, support staff and learning from each other, cooperation with educational and other institutions), recognition and acceptance of diversity (it takes place in levels such as pupils and support staff, educational institution's staff and support staff, pupils and pupils with special needs) (Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2008).

It is important for a pupil with special needs not only to participate but also to make progress (Janney & Snell, 2003, p. 103), to gain achievements in this cooperation, satisfaction that he/she has succeeded in something. Rieser and Peasley (2002) believe that a teacher should take this into account when planning teaching and learning work. A teacher should ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to succeed, so a teacher should provide acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills in line with each pupil's abilities. It should be done in order to prove that every pupil has a chance to show that he/she is capable of something. This positive aspect is also affected by a pupil's wish to continue to participate.

The key principles for promotion of inclusive practice are the following: listening to views of pupils, particularly in cases where life-affecting decisions are made; pupils' active participation in activities at educational institutions and in society; positive teacher's attitude towards all pupils and willingness to work in cooperation with colleagues; effective teachers' skills to deal with the diverse needs of all pupils; determined school's management – the management of educational institutions should respect the diversity of the school staff as well as the diversity of pupils, to ensure collegiality and to support innovations; coordinated cross-sector services – each educational institution should have access to cross-sector municipal support services (Ainscow & Kaplan, 2005; Eiropas Speciālās izglītības attīstības aģentūra, 2011/a; Jenkinson, 1997).

Within the inclusion process in general educational institutions, pupils with special needs may need rearrangements of the physical environment as well, and this is another fundamental requirement for successful inclusion (Apeirons, 2007). The entire staff of an institution should be familiar with each pupil's specific care conditions and needs. Individual pupils may need special furniture or other equipment adjustments in the learning process, so teachers should discuss this issue together with pupil's family. If a pupil has personally adapted equipment, orthopaedic aids, a teacher should know how to use, remove, and apply them. Recent studies have demonstrated that usage of information technology, specialized software, interactive whiteboards are of great importance in daily work with pupils who have special needs in order to facilitate their development (North & McKeown, 2005). An educational institution strengthens the sense of belonging by providing a diverse range of adaptations of furniture and other equipment that can be used by pupils with special needs (North & McKeown, 2005). A range of options is offered and a wider variety of comfort levels is satisfied by provision of different types of seats and work tables. Seats can be of different types such as chairs with armrests or edges, soft chairs, for example, sofa pillows or stuffed chairs, benches that can be adapted and used as floor "tables", various options for sitting on the floor, including support for weak spinal muscles. Work surfaces should be both horizontal such as tables or benches, and vertical – blackboards, easels, and walls. The main criteria in this case are easy accessibility and independence. Adults should take care whether furniture and materials available in a class or a group are suitable for specific pupils who are included in the program. Pupil's feet should be on the floor when he/she sits in a chair. Work surface must be about the height of the pupil's waist or slightly above it. Everything that can be reached and used by pupils themselves – hooks, sinks, toilets, drinking dishes – allows a pupil to learn the skills of self-service. Pupils with developmental disorders will learn how to cope with themselves in many ways by using goods that will be the most appropriate for each of them (Danielsa & Steforda, 1999).

A very important aspect in operation of an inclusive educational institution is the information environment compliance with the objectives of an educational institution to ensure support to all pupils according to their needs in the educational process. The information environment involves teaching aids, technical aids and supplementary aids used in the learning process (Šūmane, 2012). Researchers, who analyze information on technology usage opportunities for pupils with special needs, note that information assistive technologies can provide pupils with access to information in the general education environment, give the opportunity to receive instructions for a practical work or daily lessons, help in language learning, provide organizational strategies, opportunities to present their works, develop functional skills and offer a unique experience, for example, in multimedia application (Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs,

2005; Information and Communication Technology in Special Needs Education, 2001). IT usage during lessons can serve as a pupil's motivator to work and a promoter of social interaction (North & McKeown, 2005, p. 16) because working with a pencil and paper is more monotonous in practice than doing the same on a computer together with peers and without the need for removal from a class. Corrections carried out by a computer concern pupils less than corrections carried out by other persons. Technology, of course, is not a panacea and an answer to all the problems faced by pupils with special needs on a daily basis, but its use can be viewed as a necessary support for individual pupils, ensuring their activity within a lesson (for example, just like glasses) (Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs 2005). Any software that promotes language skills, grammar skills, and vocabulary development can help pupils through a variety of methods such as video, audio, games, computer instruction assistance. It has to be noted that not all assistive technology tools are appropriate to pupils with learning problems, so it is important to assess the pupil's individual learning profile (Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs 2005).

Application of individual assistive aids and information technology (IT) may be viewed as provision of the individual approach for a pupil with special needs if he/she cannot participate in the learning process in the usual manner (North & McKeown, 2005; Foreman & Kelly, 2014). The only mandatory requirement is as follows: IT application must not isolate a pupil with special needs from other classmates. A teacher should plan to what extent IT is used in a lesson, how many pupils work independently with or without IT, how many pupils work together with classmates (North & McKeown, 2005). There are many proofs that IT usage has a positive impact on pupils with special needs because IT usage can motivate pupils with special needs to learn; allows a work to be carried out in accordance with a pupil's learning style; combination of colour, images, animations, sound, and humour in programs/exercises can motivate pupils to work; common work on a computer can motivate to social interactions with classmates; hardware and software can help many pupils with physical, sensory and learning disabilities to overcome obstacles; visual instructions and materials for pupils who have problems with information acquisition by listening or reading can be easily created and provided by drawing tools; digital cameras allow pupils to record their experience and achievements in a very direct way (North & McKeown, 2005; Information and Communication Technology in Special Needs Education, 2001).

In the 1990's, the inclusion theory for pupils with special needs was developed and new approaches to reduce barriers to education were thought about when discussions on a new term – universal design (hereinafter referred to as UD) – began. It was described as creation of the environment and products that are available for anyone's usage without adjustments and special assistance. UD is recognized as a new way of thinking, a conceptual and practical model that makes review an institution's and a teacher's work in a classroom: objectives, methods, materials, and evaluation in order to satisfy various pupils' needs, reduce barriers that exist in the inclusive education system, and create physical, informative, accessible and inclusive service environment. UD has three main principles in education:

1. Development of various teaching strategies according to each pupil's needs: diversity of task complexity, variety of training materials (see, hear, touch), media usage;
2. Flexible support methods in the learning process;
3. Various and flexible options that motivate and stimulate pupils according to their individual expertise and interests (Dalton, 2012).



UD principles presume that information must be perceptible, but application – easily understandable (Apeirons, 2008). Consideration of UD principles in all aspects of an educational institution's operation (teaching, extracurricular events, and activities) contribute to the implementation of inclusive education in an educational institution.

### Conclusion

The supportive environment should be created in a general educational institution – purposefully organized set of physical, social and informative factors that promote growth, motivate action, give an opportunity to develop talents, work on individual learning experience, allow each pupil to work according to his/her capacity, at own pace and time, and turn knowledge into action by using technological diversity.

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## INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR PUPILS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN GENERAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

### Summary

*Mārīte Rozenfelde, Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia*

The paper is focused on the analysis of the role of educational environment in the implementation of the inclusive education process for pupils with special needs: the most significant prerequisites for successful learning, development of pupils' interaction culture and value orientation are determined; options for the presence, participation in the learning process and ensuring of achievement for all included pupils with special needs are dealt with.

**The study aims:** to clarify and update the theoretical framework for the positive, inclusive learning environment for students with special education needs in General Educational Institution.

Inclusive education can be understood as the presence of all pupils (access to education and attendance of educational institutions), participation (quality of the learning experience from the perspective of a pupil) and achievements (learning process and results of the educational programme acquisition) in general educational institutions (Eiropas speciālās izglītības attīstības aģentūra, 2011/c, 2). Teacher' attitude, position, and internal readiness are of great importance in the aspect of inclusive education and its implementation (Silverman, 2007).

The supportive environment should be created in a general educational institution – purposefully organized set of physical, social and informative factors that promote growth, motivate action, give an opportunity to develop talents, work on individual learning experience, allow each pupil to work according to his/her capacity, at own pace and time, and turn knowledge into action by using technological diversity.