

# ANALYSIS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

Early childhood education means a sequence of levels of education, where the foundation is the concept of “early childhood.” Early childhood is a foundation for social skills knowledge and advances on the following level of education. The imposition of necessary support measures in the education and care of pre-school process provides successive children with special needs inclusion in next level of education. Qualitative early childhood education and care system development principle is that of making early childhood education available for appropriate needs of children and family. The main tasks of the article are to analyze the statistics of early childhood education available, to analyze the theories of early development and early inclusive education of children with special needs.

**Keywords:** *early childhood education, disabilities, children with special needs, parents, availability of education.*

## **Introduction**

The concept of pre-school education includes two basic components within it, which determine its meaningfulness and significance definition – “pre” and “school”. The availability of pre-school education in education system is formed and provided by various kinds, types of pre-schools, which offer programs of a different content. The purpose of present article is to analyze the system of early childhood education in Latvia, availability, diversity, as well as the possibility of pre-school education in the context of integrated education. In modern world, its system of values, the child is regarded not only as to be the future generation, but all the attention is focused on him/her. Such an understanding of the child leads us to the fact that talking about childhood and children in the education system we consider them not only in the concept of the future, but also as significant active social partners of the present day (Wyness, 2006). Thanks to this holistic approach to the child, nowadays the idea of a child-oriented approach became the most popular. In this regard, a special role is devoted for the family as the fundamental social environment, on the basis of which the initial development of the child is located (Jenks, 2005). In the context of rapidly changing economic conditions, the availability of early childhood education is considered in the context of rapidly changing economic conditions. The future well-being of an aging society, which entails an increase in the expenditure segment determines the need to increase the employment of the working population, which is mentioned in European Employment Strategy (European Commission,

2007). In this regard, one of the major problems is the active involvement of young parents in the labour market, ensuring the availability of early childhood education and care for children from an early age.

European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights provides that “in all actions that relate to children, regardless of who carries them out in a private or public institution, in the first place, it is necessary to take into account the interests of children” (European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, 2007). In the context of education especially the welfare of the child is the basis of the family and of society as such. Many studies (Barnett, 1995, Campbell, Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal & Ramey, 2001) prove that exactly early childhood education is to influence the future progress, social adaptation of the child to the next levels of the educational system. Especially the responsibility for organizing the availability of child care system makes the foundation of values in society and lifelong learning skills.

In Latvia the legal foundations for early childhood education and care institutions, whether public or private, are set in the Education Law, the General Education Law, the Law on Local Governments, and the regulations of the institution approved by the founder, as well as various other regulatory enactments regarding health and safety. The main objectives of pre-school education are regulated by Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 533 “Regulations on the state preschool education guidelines” 31.07.2012. This document defines the aims and objectives of pre-school content, the organization principles of educational process, the expected results of early childhood education and basic assessment principles (see Table 1).

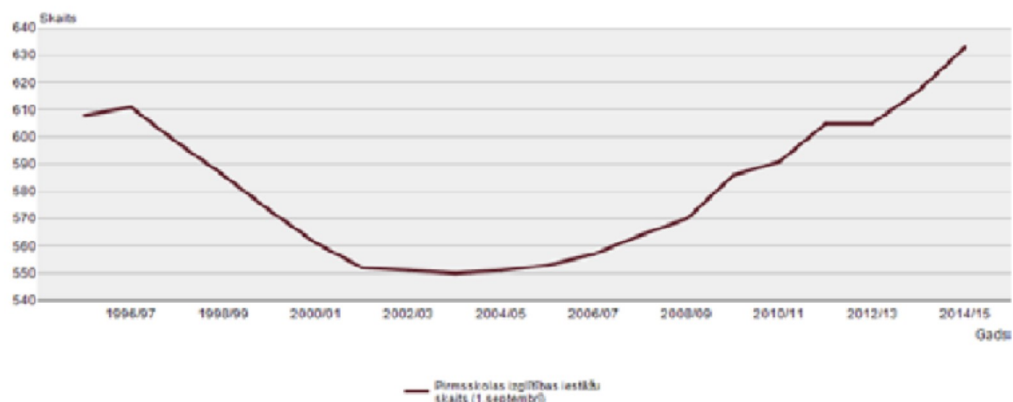
**Table 1.** Objectives and primary tasks of preschool education in Latvia

<b>Aim</b> of pre-school content	to promote versatile and harmonious child development considering his/her development regularities and needs, the necessary knowledge of the individual and public life, skills and attitudes, thus purposefully providing a child the opportunity to prepare for the acquisition of basic education
<b>Objectives</b> of pre-school content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to promote the development of the child’s physical abilities and movement acquisition;</li> <li>• promote the formation of a child’s self-confidence, awareness of abilities and interests, development of feelings and will;</li> <li>• to promote the child’s cognitive development and intellectual curiosity, providing acquisition of knowledge and skills;</li> <li>• to foster the child’s communication and cooperation skills;</li> <li>• to promote development of a positive child’s attitude against himself, other people, the environment and the country of Latvia;</li> <li>• to foster child’s safe and healthy lifestyle habits development.</li> </ul>
The basic implementing principle of pre-school education content	Early childhood education content is to be implemented as a whole through contributing child’s physical, mental and social development.

To objectively analyze the availability of early childhood education in Latvia, as well as of the system as a whole it is necessary to observe this issue in its historical context. Due to economic and political events in Latvia in 90’s of the twentieth century there was a sharp decline in birth rate. In connection with the demographic situation part of the early childhood institutions has been liquidated or reorganized. Due to the stabilization of the economy, supportive government policy for social welfare of families in 2004 increase in birth rate was ascertained. At this point, the question about the availability of pre-school education throughout the territory of Latvia arises.

After a period of contraction in the early 1990s, the recovery of service provision was set in motion later that decade and has continued ever since (see 1 Figure; Source: The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia [http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/Sociala/Sociala\\_\\_ikgad\\_\\_izgl/IZ0010.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cdbc978c-22b0-416a-aacc-aa650d3e2ce0](http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/Sociala/Sociala__ikgad__izgl/IZ0010.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cdbc978c-22b0-416a-aacc-aa650d3e2ce0) ).

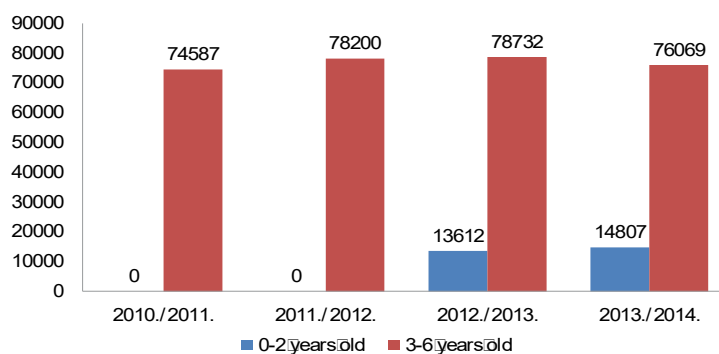
IZG01. IZGLĪTĪBAS IESTĀDES UN IZGLĪTOJAMO SKAITS (maģibu gada sākumā)



**Figure 1.** Number of pre-school education institutions (1 September)

The availability of early childhood education should be considered basing on the interests and the needs of children and their parents. The main important principle of availability is the regional accessibility. Education Law defines that each municipality is obliged to provide children with a declared place of residence in municipal administrative territory to obtain early childhood education in the nearest educational institution to child's residence or an educational establishment nearby. The proximity to the place of residence, the possible amount of time the children's stay in kindergarten, as well as the age at which one can give a child to kindergarten, all this give parents the opportunity to be socially active and full-fledged in the labour market. The system of educational institutions, both private and governmental ones since 2012 offer parents a wide age range from 0 to 7 years (see Figure 2).

Number of children BY EDUCATION ISCED level according to 2011 CLASSIFICATION



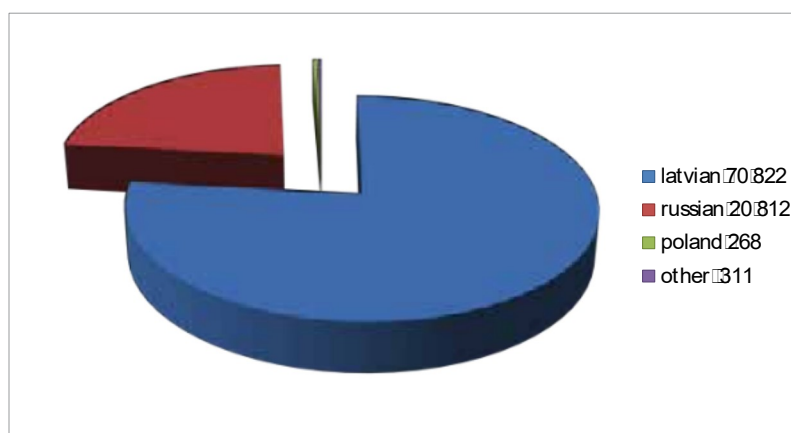
**Figure 2.** Number of children by education

Source: The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. [http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/Sociala/Sociala\\_\\_ikgad\\_\\_izgl/IZ0021.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cdbc978c-22b0-416a-aacc-aa650d3e2ce0](http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/Sociala/Sociala__ikgad__izgl/IZ0021.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cdbc978c-22b0-416a-aacc-aa650d3e2ce0)

The need to provide a complete, high-quality early childhood education contributed to the appearance of various types of early education and care institutions.

Latvian pre-schools are mostly under local authorities, but the number of private educational institutions, operating according to the current regulatory requirements, also increased. There is also a variety of play centers, esthetics schools, where classes are held either during the day or a few hours a day. Mandatory preparation for school groups are also organized at schools.

Preschool institutions operate by various worldwide well-known methods based on pedagogy and educational philosophy, such as Waldorf pedagogies, Montessori, some local authorities are arranged for and running the program “Step by step”; There are also religion-based pre-schools, established at different religious denominations, which are financed by private funds, there is a linguistic diversity as well, mainly by offering learning in the Russian language or bilingually (Russian and Latvian), but there are also pre-schools with Polish, Ukrainian, English, Hebrew and other learning languages (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Languages in preschool education institutions

Source: The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. [http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/Sociala/Sociala\\_\\_ik-gad\\_\\_izgl/IZ0050.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cdbc978c-22b0-416a-aacc-aa650d3e2ce0](http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/Sociala/Sociala__ik-gad__izgl/IZ0050.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cdbc978c-22b0-416a-aacc-aa650d3e2ce0)

Strategic planning of early childhood education policy in Latvia combines two main areas: early childhood care and education. Namely this holistic approach is the basis of high-quality early childhood education, which takes into account the interests of children, the demands of parents, family and is an investment in the future of society. Providing access to education for all children, Education Law determines children with special needs, as one of 4 target groups, who have the right to receive an education. According to the Secondary Education Law, special needs are the need to receive the kind of support and rehabilitation that enables a learner to learn the educational program, taking into account his/her individual health status, abilities and level of development. In accordance with Latvian Cabinet of Ministers and the provisions of 2 December 2008 No. 990 “Regulations on the Classification of Latvian Education” it is being implemented in nine special education program types: (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Special education program types

Special education program type	Educational program code
Learners with visual impairments	educational program code 51
Learners with hearing impairments	educational program code 52
Learners with physical disabilities	educational program code 53
Learners with somatic diseases	educational program code 54
Learners with language disorders	educational program code 55
Learners with learning disabilities	educational program code 56
Learners with mental health problems	educational program code 57
Learners with mental disabilities	educational program code 58
Learners with severe mental disorders or several severe disabilities	educational program code 59

The education system provides special or inclusive education, which one parents/legal representatives may choose for their child themselves. Early childhood education system offers parents special pre-school educational institutions (making 7% of the total number of secondary educational institutions). Students with special needs can learn special education programs in mainstream schools, in special education classroom or in groups and integrated into mainstream education classes or groups (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Availability of special education programs in Latvian special educational institutions

Type of disorder	Number of licensed special education programs in special educational institutions (except pre-schools)	Number of licensed special education programs in special educational institutions
Visual impairment (code 51)	6	16
Hearing impairment (code 52)	6	5
Physical disabilities (code 53)	7	17
Somatic diseases (code 54)	7	25
Language disorders (code 55)	10	40
Learning disabilities (code 56)	28	27
Mental health problems (code 57)	12	9
Mental disabilities (code 58)	114	18
Severe mental disorders or several severe disabilities (code 59)	78	8
<b>Total number of education programs</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>165</b>

Source: statistics of Ministry of Education. IZMinf\_070414specizgl; Informative Report "About Special Education Funding Guidelines"

Latvia, providing secondary education, in total is running 101 different types of special educational institutions established by local government, wherein there are (*Statistics of Ministry of Education IZMinf\_070414specizgl; Informative Report "About Special Education Funding Guidelines"*):

- 40 special pre-school educational institutions (statistics of Ministry of Education on 20.08.2013.), with total number of learners in school year 2012-13 – **3497**;
- 49 special educational institutions (mainly boarding schools one of which is

sanatorium boarding school) (statistics of Ministry of Education on 20.08.2013.) with total number of learners – **5336** (statistics of Ministry of Education on 01.09.2012.);

- 5 special educational institutions – rehabilitation centers) with **549** learners (statistics of Ministry of Education on 01.09.2012.), in which there stay and obtain education a large number of learners with special needs living in the corresponding administrative territory.
- 7 special educational institutions - development centers. The total number of children included in these educational institutions according to statistics of Ministry of Education on 01.09.2012. is **943**.

Children with special needs are to be provided with support measures and developing environmental adaptation according to the needs of children. One of the conditions in acquiring of pre-school program is the development of an individual education plan, which provides an individual approach in education and care. The way in which health and human sciences have progressed and evolved in the past years, in addition to general social changes, consolidation of a broad approach towards early child inclusion: from theories focused on the nature versus nurture dichotomy, perceiving children's development as an open process (*tabula rasa* where all is possible and results from adult influence, positive and negative) to a more determinist approach. Key theories dealing with child development and learning processes, such as the developmental approach of Gesell, Ilg, & Ames (1943), the operant conditioning of Skinner (1968) and the genetic epistemology of Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), have had a great influence on early childhood inclusion. A common, implicit element regarding education strategies and possibilities for very young children with special needs is their focus on the child and their limitations, considered independently from the environment they are living in.

### Discussion

Early childhood care and education availability is the matter of early childhood education diversity ensuring the child's well-being as such. Children with special needs are the target group, which has the right to receive early childhood education and care in a single system. Its actuality is denoted by the opportunity of the equal service availability if children with special needs are able to be located in an environment that promotes their development and not only satisfies some basic needs. Early childhood education is an educational level on which multi-faceted development of the child's personality takes place, as well as health strengthening, preparation for acquisition of primary education. Pre-school age is a period when a child's mental and physical development is the most sensitive. Especially in early childhood the perception of the world which will serve as the basis for the future lifestyle is founded. John Bowlby in his "Theory of Attachment" emphasizes the importance of childhood (*Boulbijs, 1998*). The theory is based on the emotional experience gained in childhood, as a premise for the further development of human and his/her relationship with the world. The inner world of an adult person, personality is the emotional experience accumulated in childhood. For a child with special needs perception and relationship with the environment is even more important. In order to make early childhood care and education available for children with special needs it is necessary to provide teachers with all the necessary knowledge. The full child's development, in particular in children with special needs, is directly related to the holistic approach, which implements educational and upbringing processes in conjunction with care. Under such an organization of early childhood education the full development of an individual can be predicted and, as a consequence the inclusion of people with special needs in social environment. Today's education policy aims to actively involve children in

mainstream educational institutions. Organization of educational process becomes the main task of integrated education, as developing environment is a major component of this process. Environmental adaptation, space layout, the possibility to use latest IT provides children with special needs with the acquisition of high quality early childhood education programs and further inclusion into society.

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### Summary

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The main problem of early childhood education in Latvia is organizing the availability of this service. Availability must be considered in the following areas:

- Geographical location, the availability relatively by density of population in big cities and in small municipalities;
- Needs of the family: the organization of groups of young age, the presence of groups with different residence time for child in the kindergarten;
- Interests and needs of the child: learning process should be closely connected with the process of care. Organizing the teaching process so that developing the child's skills and abilities through developing environment prepares him/her for the socialization in the society;

- Teachers need knowledge about the methods of working with children with special needs in all age categories;
- Parents with children with special needs have to create such conditions that they can get all the necessary consultations of specialists: teacher, speech therapist, doctor, psychologist, physiotherapist at any time and in one place, which would significantly affect the integration of such children;

The quality of early childhood education is provided by the versatility of the services, taking into account the interests, opportunities and the needs of all children, regardless of their place of residence, age, mental or motor peculiarities, development and health status. Early childhood education and care directly affects the future development of the personality of a child, its progress in school, socialization, and forms the model of relations with the outward things.

A positive fact is that in recent years the changes in program content guidelines took place, moving away from the acquisition of purely academic skills as a central objective of early childhood education to the socialization and collaboration as a child's development and the most important skills for improvement at this stage. As a link to the primary school from the point of view of policy planning and implementation it is very important to continue to work on the legislative and institutional framework content. This should be done through perceiving early childhood and primary school as equal partners, particularly taking into account the child's interests, rather than installing requirements to one grade of education that the other should do.