

## PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND PREPARATION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The implementation of inclusive education depends on teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs. In 2022, a kindergarten survey was carried out, which included the topic of inclusive education. A total of 918 teachers across Estonia participated in the survey. The study aimed to map preschool teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs and inclusive education and determine how teachers evaluate their knowledge of implementing inclusive education. Kindergarten teachers tended to favour inclusion: they agreed they could include children with special needs in leisure and learning activities. However, they found difficulties mainly with children with behavioural problems and identified other difficult situations that arise with children with special needs in the mainstream group. Most teachers with a professional education said they had the knowledge and skills to deal with children with special needs. However, teachers without a professional education could not say the same.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, preschool teachers, attitudes, professional preparation, children with special needs

**Discipline:** pedagogy

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**Absztrakt****ÓVODAPEDAGÓGUSOK ATTITÚDJEI ÉS FELKÉSZÜLTSEGE AZ INKLUZÍV NEVELÉS MEGVALÓSÍTÁSÁRA**

Az inkluzív nevelés sikeressége a pedagógusok sajátos nevelési igényű gyermekekhez való hozzáállásán múlik. Jelen tanulmányban egy 2022 évi Észtországból készült óvodai felmérés bemutatására kerül sor, mely az inkluzív nevelés témakörét érintette. A felmérésben Észtországból összesen 918 tanár vett részt. A tanulmány célja, hogy feltérképezze az óvodapedagógusok sajátos nevelési igényű gyerekekkel és az inkluzív oktatással kapcsolatos attitűdjét, és felmérje, hogy hogyan értékelik a pedagógusok az inkluzív nevelés megvalósításával kapcsolatos tudásukat. Eredmények: az óvodapedagógusok inkább az inklúziót részesítik előnyben: s egyetértettek abban, hogy a speciális igényű gyermekeket bevonhatók a szabadidős és tanulási tevékenységekbe. Nehézségekről elsősorban a magatartási problémákkal küzdő gyerekek esetében számoltak be, ezen kívül más nehéz helyzeteket is azonosítottak, amelyek a többségi csoportba járó speciális igényű gyerekeknél adódnak. A legtöbb szakképzett pedagógus azt mondta, hogy rendelkezik a sajátos nevelési igényű gyerekekkel való foglalkozáshoz szükséges tudással és készségekkel. A szakképzettséggel nem rendelkező pedagógusok azonban nem mondhatták el ugyanezt.

**Kulcsszavak:** inkluzív nevelés, óvodapedagógusok, attitűdök, szakmai felkészítés, speciális igényű gyermekek

**Diszciplína:** pedagógia

**Introduction**

All people, including children, have the right to quality and inclusive education (European Commission, 2018), globally recognised to promote equality and quality education for all children (Francis et al., 2021). According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive education is defined as strengthening the education system's capacity to reach all learners and provide education for all. Nelis & Pedaste (2020) have defined inclusive education in the context of primary education as "a human rights-based approach to accessing good education, where children experience social integration and a sense of belonging within a broader social network, regardless of their specific needs" (p. 145). Inclusion must be ensured through children's active, meaningful participation and an individualised approach that supports children's potential development (Nelis & Pedaste, 2020).

Estonia also follows an inclusive education approach, which aims to ensure that all learners can

receive education in an educational institution close to their residence, together with other children of the same age (HTM, 2021b). The inclusion of children with special needs starts in the preschool years when several special needs still need to be effectively identified. Kindergarten teachers have a neutral attitude towards inclusion (Lee et al., 2015) and are willing to adapt their behaviour to implement inclusive education (Scanlon et al., 2022). Teachers do not object to children with special needs attending the same kindergarten group as other children (Scanlon et al., 2022) but prefer to conduct lessons with all children together, as working individually with children with special needs increases teachers' workload (Häidkind, Šuman, & Vint, 2022).

Kindergarten teachers are generally more optimistic about including children with special needs than schoolteachers (Häidkind & Oras, 2016). This could ensure the implementation of inclusive education in kindergarten.

In Estonia, 25.6% of kindergarten children have special needs (Lang et al., 2021). The law on pre-school education (KELS, 1999) offers two options for children with special needs: special and adapted groups. However, if a child's special needs are undiagnosed, the child will usually go to a mainstream group. A child with special needs is placed in a special group even if there is no special or special-needs group in the local kindergarten. According to the EHIS, 85% of children with special needs in Estonia attend a mainstream group (Lang et al., 2021), so all kindergarten teachers must be prepared to support the development of children with special needs.

#### **Factors influencing the implementation of inclusive education in kindergartens**

Inclusion of children with special needs is a complex process that requires a variety of factors to be successful, e.g. a well-coordinated (support) team (Yeo et al., 2016) and teachers with a diverse education who know how to use different methods to include all children (Shuelka, 2018). Francis Wardle (2009) stresses the need for professional education: professional education provides the kindergarten teacher with the necessary knowledge and skills and creates a positive attitude that teachers without professional education often lack. In both schools and kindergartens, teachers are expected to take an individual approach to children and to plan and implement meaningful work based on the level of the child (Häidkind & Oras, 2016). Teachers should acquire relevant skills through professional development (Wardle, 2009). However, Häidkind, Šuman, & Vint (2022) point out in their study that in Estonia, kindergarten teachers often lack knowledge of special educational needs, which is why special educational needs support services are essential in kindergartens.

In addition to teachers' knowledge and skills, the implementation of inclusive education is influenced primarily by their positive attitudes (Abu-Hamour

& Muhaidat, 2013; Barton & Smith, 2015; Forlin & Sin, 2017; Kaur, Norman, & Awang-Hashim, 2015) and the perception that people are different (Vuran, 2014). Teachers' knowledge and attitudes are closely related: positive attitudes are associated with both acquired knowledge (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Sari, 2007; Scanlon et al., 2022) and perceived success in teaching children with special needs (Woolfson & Brady, 2009; Yeo et al., 2016). Negative attitudes are also a significant barrier to inclusion in kindergarten (Lee et al., 2014), as teachers with negative attitudes perceive their lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with children with special needs (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Teachers with positive attitudes are better able to accommodate the specificities of special needs and adapt instruction (Swain, Nordness, & Leader-Janssen, 2012). The more kindergarten teachers believe they can implement inclusion, the more positive their attitudes toward inclusion (Lee et al., 2014). Teachers with negative attitudes, on the other hand, have lower expectations for children with special needs and underestimate the child's knowledge (Lee et al., 2014; Markova et al., 2016), and therefore do not see the need to support the child (Kitsing, Täht, & Kukemelk, 2015). In their study, Lee et al. (2015) found that kindergarten teachers generally have a neutral attitude towards including children with special needs. However, Häidkind and Oras (2016) found that kindergarten teachers have a more positive attitude towards inclusion than classroom teachers and, therefore, have better prerequisites for including children with special needs in kindergarten. The differences in the attitudes of kindergarten and classroom teachers can be explained by differences in children, staff and working environment (Häidkind & Oras, 2016).

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion also depend on the type of special need (Markova et al., 2016; Sari, 2007; Yeo et al., 2016). Teachers do not perceive a problem with including children with

milder special needs (Yeo et al., 2016). They have no objection to having children with speech, language, physical or sensory impairments in the kindergarten class but have negative attitudes towards emotional and behavioural difficulties (Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Lee et al., 2015; Levins et al., 2005; Markova et al., 2016).

### **Benefits of inclusive education**

Inclusive education ensures that all children have access to education (UNESCO, 2009). It is as essential in primary education as in general education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009). To understand this, kindergarten teachers must see the positive aspects of inclusion.

Implementing inclusive education is essential for ensuring the human rights of children with special needs and has many other benefits. Inclusive education benefits everyone: children with special needs, age-appropriate development, kindergarten teachers, and society. Children with special needs benefit the most: being with other children boosts the self-confidence of children with special needs (Alexander et al., 2016), develops their social skills and independence (Räis, Kallaste, & Sandre, 2016), and has an impact on children's academic skills in preschool and later their performance in school (Kwon et al., 2017). Starting with inclusion in kindergarten ensures early identification of special needs and timely support for a child's development (Häidkind & Kuusik, 2009). Preschool is the best time to start engaging with child development, as this is when a child's brain development is at its fastest (Shonkoff & Richmond, 2009).

In an inclusive environment, all children develop empathy, tolerance, and positive attitudes toward people with special needs (Alexander et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2017; Yeo et al., 2016). Talking to peers about the differences of children with special needs is essential to enabling them to understand

children with different needs (Horne & Timmons, 2009) and to develop positive attitudes.

Although many teachers often see the negative side of inclusion (Lee et al., 2014; Markova et al., 2016), they also benefit from it. Implementing inclusive education provides new experiences and lessons for teachers, making them better by developing their pedagogical skills (Alexander et al., 2016). The perceived negative side of inclusion is mainly linked to teachers' lack of awareness and experience (Lee et al., 2014), as more complex situations require informed interventions.

### **Methodology**

The research aims to map preschool teachers' attitudes towards children with special educational needs and inclusive education and determine how teachers evaluate their knowledge of implementing inclusive education. To fulfil the objective, we formulated the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' attitudes towards including children with special needs?
2. What are the differences in teachers' attitudes depending on their level of education?
3. What kind of situations make inclusion difficult, according to kindergarten teachers?
4. What advantages do kindergarten teachers see in the implementation of inclusive education?
5. What knowledge and skills do teachers need to implement inclusive education?

The research deals with one theme block from the preschool survey 2022. All Estonian kindergartens that wanted to compare their kindergartens with others could participate in the study. An online survey was conducted among the preschool teachers of participating kindergartens for data collection.

### **The Sample**

Nine hundred eighteen kindergarten teachers from 75 kindergartens across Estonia participated in the survey. The gender distribution of the

sample is predominantly female: 916 (99.8%) women and only 2 (0.2%) men. 706 (76.9%) of the teachers work in Estonian-language kindergartens, 105 (11.4%) in Russian-language kindergartens and 107 (11.7%) in kindergartens that are both Estonian- and Russian-language. Regarding age, most respondents fall within the 30–59 age range (30–39 – 21.6%; 40–49 – 24.5%; 50–59 – 29.5%), while the 60–69 age range was 14.7%. There were significantly fewer teachers under 30 (8.6%) and over 70 (1.1%).

The most significant proportion of teachers (73.8%) were professionally educated, with 57.1% having a higher education and 16.7% having a secondary education. Non-specialist higher education teachers account for 20.1%, and non-specialist secondary education teachers for 6.2%.

#### Assessment tool and procedure

In 2022, Tallinn University carried out a kindergarten survey focusing on the following topics: organisational culture and management, learning approach, multilingualism and multiculturalism, children with special needs, digital competencies, and the impact of COVID-19. The survey was open to all kindergartens in Estonia that wanted information about the problems and challenges of their kindergarten as an organisation and the work of kindergarten teachers. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to all kindergartens in Estonia. If a kindergarten expressed a wish to participate, a link to the online survey was sent to the teachers of that kindergarten. The questionnaire took about 15 minutes to complete. Both teachers and kindergartens participated in the survey voluntarily and anonymously. This article deals with the thematic block on children with special needs and inclusion in this study.

A questionnaire developed by professors of special education at a university was used and verified by a pilot study. The thematic block on special needs and inclusive education consisted of

9 statements for which the teachers had to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which they agreed with the statement (“1 – strongly disagree”, “2 – rather disagree”, “3 – both agree”, “4 – rather agree”, “5 – strongly agree”). The statements were designed to determine teachers’ attitudes towards preparedness for inclusion and social inclusion and teachers’ assessments of their knowledge and skills. In addition to the statements, teachers had to answer three open-ended questions: “What are the difficult situations for you when a child with special needs is in a mainstream group?” “What advantages do you see in having a child with special needs in a mainstream group?” “What knowledge and skills do you lack in supporting a child with special needs in a mainstream group?”. The survey did not explicitly ask for experience with children with special needs.

#### Data analysis

To analyse the data, we used SPSS Statistics version 28. We analysed the responses to the statements using descriptive statistics. We used ANOVA one-factor analysis of variance to analyse the difference between six groups of teachers with different educational backgrounds. As a post-hoc test, the Bonferroni test was used for pairwise comparison of means at significance level  $p < 0.05$ .

We combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyse teachers’ responses to the open-ended questions. To carry out the analysis, we used the Excel program to compile the responses into a single table. In analysing the data set, we focused on the content and contextual meaning of the responses. By repeatedly reading the responses, we tried to identify themes and concepts relevant to the study and coded them according to the research questions. Meaningfully similar codes were grouped into columns in a table and used to form categories for each research question. Responses containing items from more than one category were assigned more than one code;

therefore, the total frequency of codes is greater than the number of responses given. Responses that did not fall into the defined categories were grouped under the category “other”. Based on the frequencies of the categories, we created frequency tables, which form the basis of the graphs used in the article and provide a quantified overview of the frequencies per question. To ensure more excellent reliability, we performed independent recoding as co-investigators. As a second part of the analysis, we described and interpreted all categories qualitatively, including using relevant response extracts as quotes.

## Results

### Attitudes of Estonian kindergarten teachers towards inclusive education

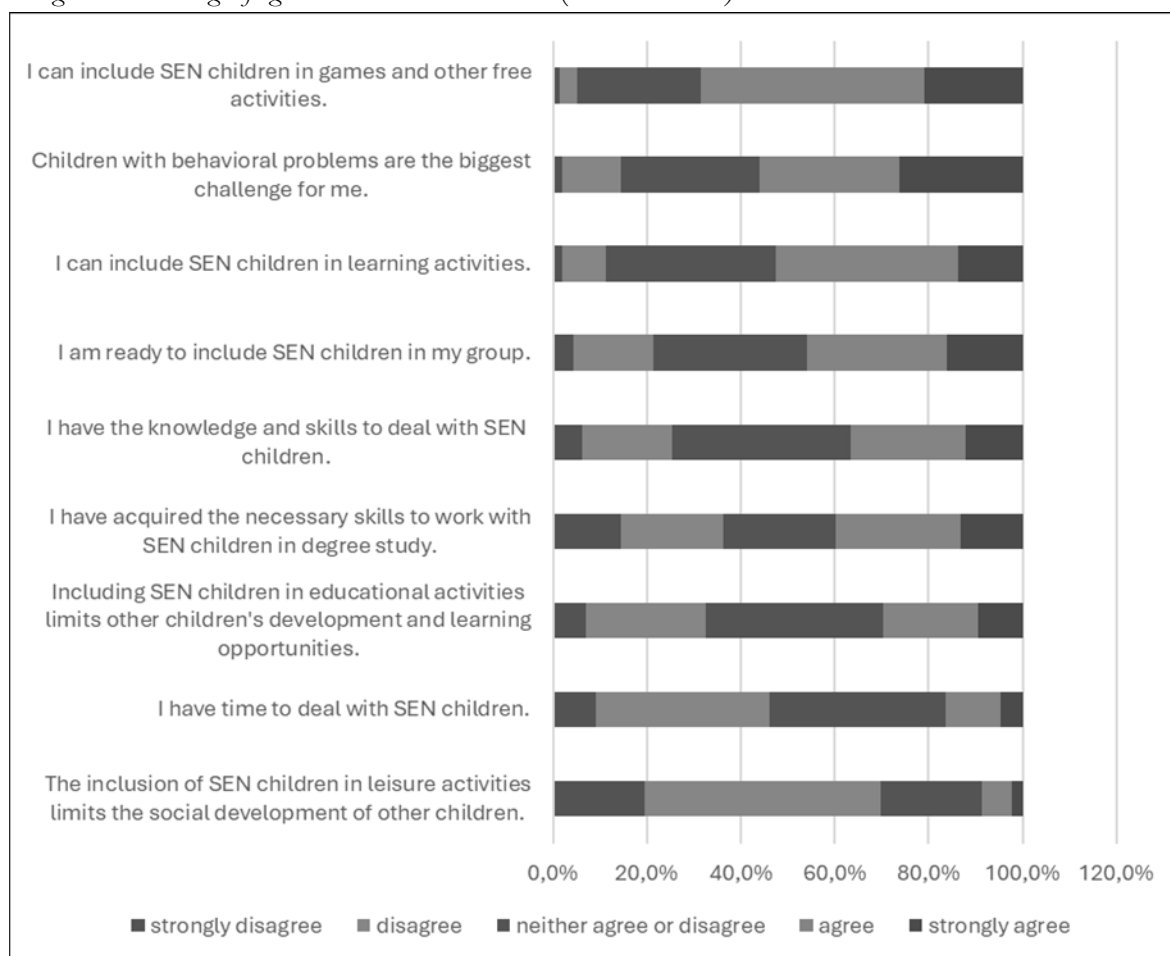
To determine kindergarten teachers' attitudes, we analysed how teachers agreed with statements about including children with special needs (see Figure 1). Slightly less than half (45.8%) of teachers thought they were ready for inclusion of children with special needs (hereafter, we will use the abbreviation SEN children) in their group, while a fifth (21.3%) disagreed. Teachers with professional and other higher educations agreed with this statement the most, while teachers with pedagogical and other secondary educations agreed the least. At the same time, kindergarten teachers rated their ability to include SEN children relatively highly: 68.5% of teachers thought they could include SEN children in games and other leisure activities, and 52.6% of teachers thought they could engage SEN children in learning activities. Teachers with a professional higher education degree rated their ability to involve PA children highly, while teachers with other secondary education rated it least.

Differences between teachers with different levels of education were analysed using one-factor analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA). There was no statistically significant difference for the statement “I am ready to include SEN children in

my group”,  $F(1, 917) = 1.714, p = .129$ . Statistically significant differences were between groups of teachers with different levels of education for the statements “I can involve SEN children in learning activities” and “I can involve SEN children in games and other free activities”,  $F(1, 917) = 3.090, p = .009$ ;  $F(1, 917) = 2.290, p = .044$ .

The fact that teachers are not directly opposed to the inclusion of SEN children in kindergarten was also shown by the statement, “The inclusion of SEN children in leisure activities limits the social development of other children”, with which only 8.8% of teachers agreed. At the same time, nearly a third (29.7%) of teachers agree that children with SEN limit other children's development and learning opportunities. No statistically significant differences between the groups of teachers with different educations were observed in the statement “Including SEN children in educational activities limits other children's development and learning opportunities” and “The inclusion of SEN children in leisure activities limits the social development of other children” ( $F(1, 917) = 1.215, p = .300$ ;  $F(1, 917) = 1.609, p = .155$ ). The implementation of the principles of inclusive education is supported by the teacher's knowledge and skills in dealing with children with special needs. 36.7% of teachers agreed with “I have the knowledge and skills to deal with SEN children”, while 25.4% disagreed. 39.8% of teachers agree that they had acquired this knowledge and skills in degree study, and almost as many teachers disagreed (36.4%) with this statement. For these statements, the ANOVA test showed a statistically significant difference between the education level groups ( $F(1, 917) = 7.070, p < .001$ ;  $F(1, 917) = 7.318, p < .001$ , respectively). There is a statistically significant difference between the group of teachers with professional higher education and other secondary education ( $p < .001$ ) and between teachers with professional higher education and pedagogical but not professional higher education ( $p = .028$ ).

Figure 1. Percentage of agreement with the statements. (Source: Authors)

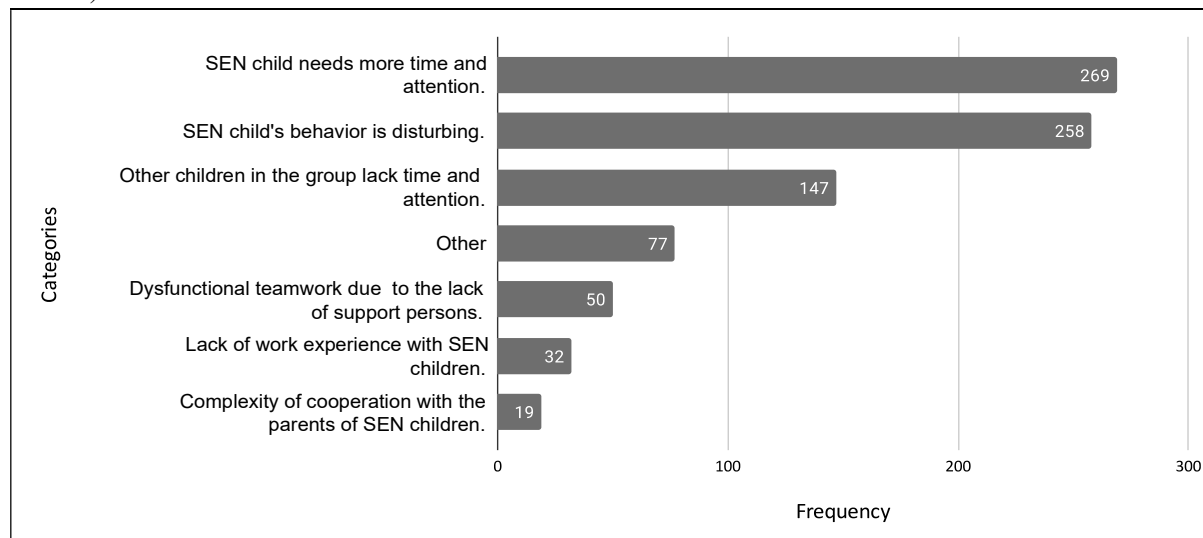


### Challenging situations if there is a child with special needs in the group

56.1% of respondents agreed with the statement, “Children with behavioural difficulties are my biggest challenge” (see Figure 1). To determine whether children with behavioural difficulties are the only concern, we asked the kindergarten teachers, “What are the difficult situations for you when a child with special needs is in a group?”.

The problems highlighted by teachers were grouped into six categories (see Figure 2). The category “No experience of working with children with SEN” ( $n = 32$ ) included responses indicating that, as the respondents had not previously had children with SEN in their group, they did not have the relevant experience and could not answer this question.

Figure 2: Challenging situations for teachers when a child with special needs attends a mainstream group. (Source: Authors)



The keyword for more than a third of respondents was “attention”. It was pointed out that a child with special needs more attention and that it is difficult to find time for this in a group with many children (category “SEN child needs more time and attention”, 27.1% of respondents,  $n = 269$ ). Many of the responses that fall into this category are related to the teacher’s attention to individual activities with children with special needs, which teachers perceive as challenging to find both the time and the place for, and the teacher perceives that children miss an essential part of the process: *A child with special needs requires significantly more adult time resources, such as guidance, explanations, and individual work to support and engage the child in the group.*

At the same time, several teachers said that having fewer children in the group also helps to include children with special needs. Many of them wrote that if there are children with special needs in the mainstream group, the number of children in the group should be smaller. With fewer children in the group, the child with special needs feels more

comfortable, and all children receive more attention.

They also stressed that the child with special needs takes up so much of the teacher’s time and attention that the other children do not have enough, and it is the other children in the mainstream group who suffer (category “Less time and attention for other children in the group”,  $n = 147$ ). In this category, we placed responses associated with giving attention to all children in the group. Several teachers indicated that they find it very difficult to divide their attention and time between the child with special needs and other children in the group: *Other children may not get enough attention because a lot of the time goes to one child.*

It was also pointed out that problems with attention-sharing were experienced during the learning activities.

In addition, it was noted that it is difficult to divide the teacher’s attention between all the children in common activities, as it is challenging to simultaneously consider the abilities of a child with special needs. Teachers feel that other children in



the same group often suffer as a result – their learning opportunities are therefore reduced, and the time allocated to the child with special needs comes at the expense of their peers: *The child with special needs limits the learning opportunities of the other children; all the attention is focused on him, but others have their own needs, too.*

Teachers felt that the situation where they do not have everyone's attention, and others must wait is unfair to the children and creates negative feelings in both the teacher and the other children: *If they get more attention, it is unfair to the other children; it makes them sad.*

Teachers who responded also highlighted the complexity of delivering lessons and the need to focus the attention of all children: *It is very difficult to keep children's attention on everyday activities when a SEN child is running around.*

Situations have occurred when one group teacher's full attention is focused on the child with special needs, and another adult must deal with all the other children: *Individual guidance for a child with special needs (in learning activities, following group rules, moving from one activity to another) is sometimes so resource-intensive that it takes up all the adult's attention for a while. During this time, the other adult in the group must manage the rest of the group independently, which can be pretty tricky.* Activities outside the group room, where efforts of more than two teachers are needed, have also proved difficult.

Moving on to specific problematic situations, around a quarter of respondents (n = 258) indicated that they found it most difficult for teachers to cope when a child has a special need that manifests itself in frequent and unpredictable disruptive behaviour (category "SEN child's behaviour is disruptive"). Many pointed out that it is the unpredictable, aggressive behaviour of a child with special needs that is very stressful for the teacher and the peers and that other children in the group often must endure both disruption and physical violence. Teachers with relevant experience

described different disruptive situations and their impact: *Behavioural problems due to the child's special needs and aggression towards teachers and other children make it difficult. These situations are the most challenging and require excellent resilience from the teacher.*

Several teachers (n = 50) pointed out that if teamwork does not work, it is difficult with children with special needs, often because the team lacks a support person (category "When teamwork does not work, there is no support person"). Based on their experience, teachers believe that if a child with special needs is in the group, there should be a support person or an assistant teacher.

Problems have arisen in groups, which have several children with special needs and not enough team members: *The problem is when there is already more than one. If there are more than one, there is a problem when there are more than one. If one teacher and one teaching assistant cannot deal with them adequately, the other children in the group are neglected. A child with special needs requires much attention, causes more problems, and requires more documentation and developmental interviews.*

Respondents assume that there should be extra staff to deal with difficult situations and to ensure the safety of other children, but often there is not: *Difficult situations arise when a child with special needs starts to hurt others, and there is no one available to deal with him or her – then the whole group suffers.*

Teachers mentioned that in a group of more than 20 children, it is hard to deal with children with ADHD or autism spectrum disorder. They need a lot of individual attention and intervention due to the specificity of their behaviour, for which there are often not enough adults in the group: *It depends on the special need. Some special needs are easier than others. At the moment, ADHD is the most difficult. Finding enough time to dedicate to a child in a large group is challenging, and the child's behaviour can be impulsive and disruptive to other children.* Teachers highlighted the need for someone from the group team to support the child daily: *The best teacher for such a child is THEIR teacher, a teacher's aide, or an assistant.*

Finding support workers is difficult and time-consuming, and there are often vacancies for special educators and speech therapists in kindergartens. It was noted that "a solid team that knows the child and where there is a trusting relationship" helps to prevent problems and ensure safety. At the same time, the responses show that it is often a stable team that is lacking.

One of the categories is "it is difficult to cooperate with parents" (n = 19). Teachers felt that parents do not recognise the child's problem, are not prepared to notice signs of special needs, go to tests, or cooperate with the kindergarten: *Problems arise when the teacher tries, but the parent does not cooperate.*

It was also noted that if a child with special needs is in the group, the teacher would also need to spend more time working with the parents to ensure that there is a coherent set of policies and practices to support the child's development. Unfortunately, due to other work commitments, teachers are short on time.

One of the aspects identified as a problem is that it is difficult to explain the specificities of children with special needs to other parents in the group: *How can we make it clear to other children and parents that a child with special needs is different and, at the same time, not share confidential information?*

The "other" category (n = 77) included a wide variety of situations that did not fit directly into the above categories, as well as the experiences of the few teachers, who can cope successfully and do not see a problem with having children with special needs in the mainstream group. The complex situations linked to the specificities of the child's diagnosis, the effects of environmental inappropriateness, come in: *If the special need is the need to act/learn at one's own pace in a calm and quiet environment, this is almost impossible to achieve in a mainstream group. A child with special needs may experience stress and low self-esteem as his/her knowledge/skills may be below those of other children.*

The survey also included teachers who have highly pessimistic attitudes and seem to be unable to respect the fact that a child with special needs attends mainstream classes: *Everything is difficult when a child with special needs is in the group.*

At the same time, it can also be pointed out that when asked, "What are the difficult situations when there is a child with special needs in a mainstream group?" Eight teachers replied that they did not see any significant problems. There were also opinions that one or two children with mild special needs in a group were not a problem.

Hope that modern teacher training can help to prevent and solve problems was expressed in the optimistic response of one teacher who felt she could draw on the knowledge she had acquired at university: *There are currently no SEN children in my group. However, after training, lectures, and internships at university, I can confidently say that I can handle SEN children and know how to handle certain situations.*

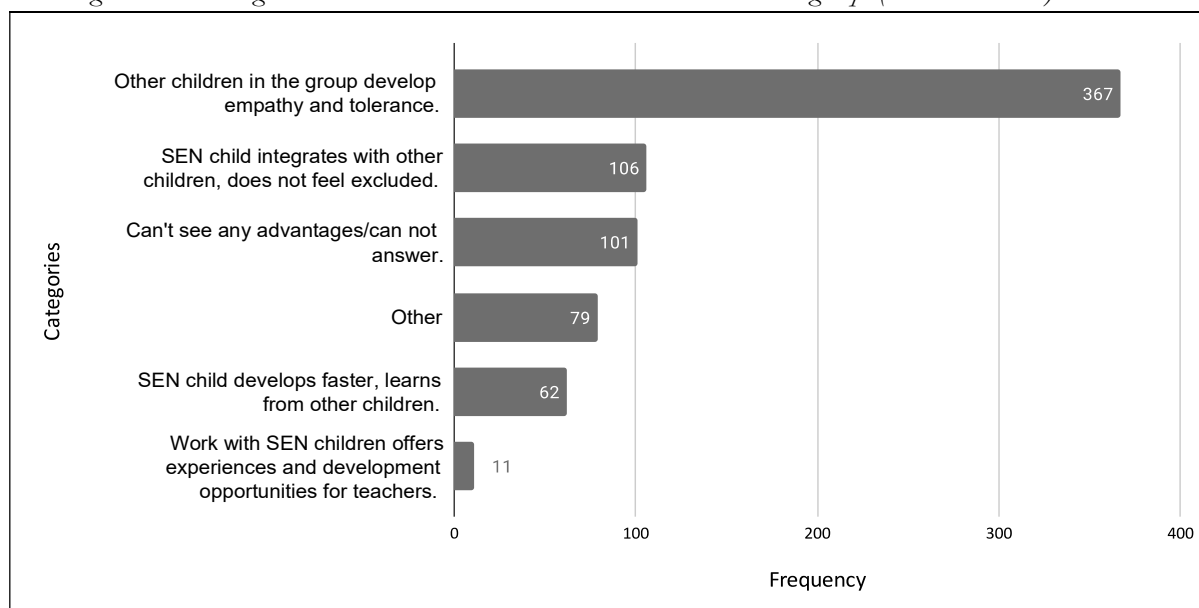
#### **Advantages of having a child with special needs in a mainstream group**

Teachers' responses to the question "What advantages do you see in having a child with special needs in a mainstream group?" comprise six categories (see Figure 3).

One hundred one respondents (11%, category "do not see benefits/do not know") indicated that they do not see any benefits and that a child with special needs should not attend a mainstream group.

However, most respondents also identified a fair number of advantages. More than half of them related to the impact on the special needs child's peers. The highest number of responses (39.98%, n = 367) fell into "other children in the group develop empathy and tolerance". Here, the development of the ability to respect peers was particularly emphasised: *Children learn to respect other children and get used to children with special needs.*

Figure 3: Advantages teachers see when a SEN child attends a mainstream group. (Source: Authors)



The development of tolerance – tolerating differences and different people – was also a recurrent theme in teachers' responses: *Tolerance is the most important thing, and accepting and tolerating different people in future is essential.*

Teachers see it as a value to start to understand people's differences from an early age and to accept the different people among us and the need to support them: *All children need to know that different people among us must be supported and helped.* There was much emphasis on supporting children with special needs in the group to develop empathy with their peers and an understanding that the demands placed on them are and should be different: *Children quickly understand that people and the demands made on them are different.*

Several teachers appreciated the opportunity for children to learn to interact with different people in different situations, care for them, and help them reach agreements. The importance of children's knowledge of how to support people with different special needs was also stressed. One hundred six respondents (11.55%) highlighted as an advantage

the importance of integrating children with special needs and being part of the everyday life of the kindergarten so that the child does not feel excluded and experiences equal treatment and a sense of total worth. Inclusion also supports the communication skills of children with special needs and contributes to the development of positive self-esteem: *A child with special needs can feel valued and treated equally.*

Sixty-two respondents (6.76%) highlighted the positive impact of attending a social group on the development of children with special needs – their development is faster. They also highlighted the positive impact of attending a social group on the development of motivation and independence of children with special needs. They have noticed that children with special needs learn social and behavioural skills from their peers, often by imitating them.

In addition, there were also a large number (79) of mixed responses, grouped under the category "Other", where no substantive benefits were identified. Some respondents indicated that it all

depends on the special needs and severity of the condition but did not mention any advantages.

**Need for teachers’ knowledge and skills in supporting children with special needs in mainstream groups**

36.7% of teachers agreed with the statement “I have the knowledge and skills to work with children with SEN”, but a quarter of respondents (25.4%) felt they did not have enough knowledge and skills to work with children with SEN. We have analysed the teachers’ answers regarding their need for knowledge and skills (see Figure 4).

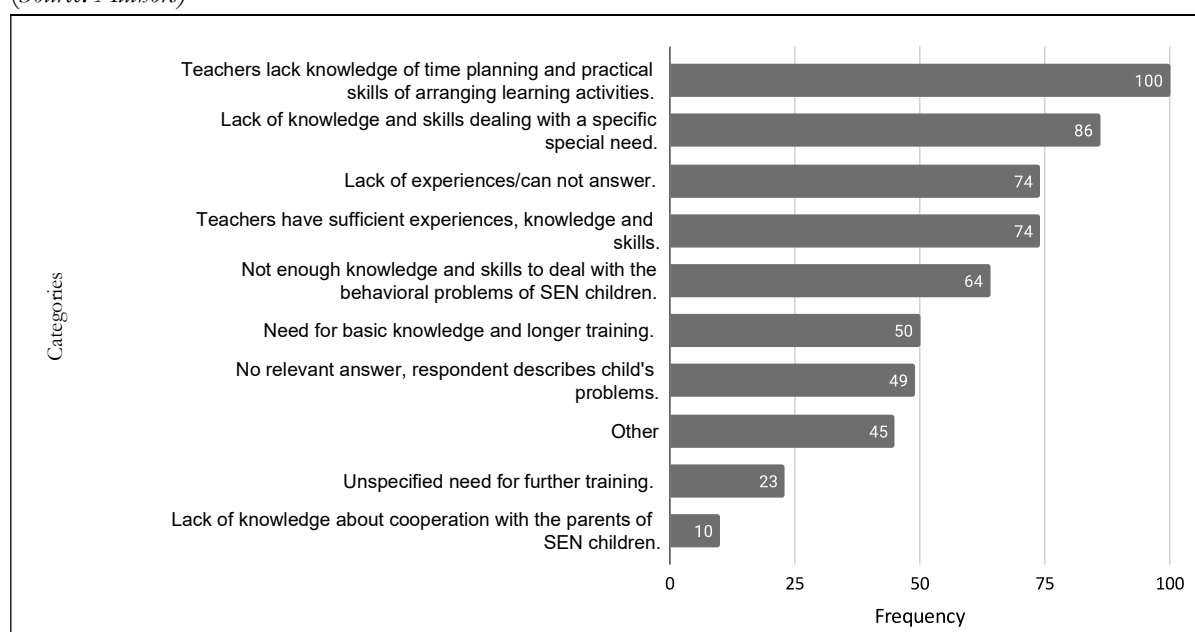
The most significant proportion of responses (n = 100) can be categorised as “Lacking knowledge of time planning and activities and specific practical skills”, i.e. lacking general, special educational and didactic knowledge and skills. Many teachers struggle to allocate time and attention in a group including children with special needs. They would

like to gain more knowledge and skills on how to plan time more effectively: *Planning time when time is limited and sharing oneself with all the children so that children’s development does not suffer.* Several teachers would like to acquire didactic techniques and methodologies that are effective in the development of children with special needs: *Elementary techniques that are certainly not useful or that would undoubtedly support the teacher.*

There is also a need for knowledge and skills on how to manage and engage children with special needs in the learning process and how to get and keep their attention: *How do they focus their attention in the morning circle/learning activities, how do they get to participate for a short time, actually listen, not disturb others, etc.*

Eighty-six responding teachers (category “Lacking knowledge and skills related to a specific special need”) acknowledged that they lacked knowledge and skills related to a specific type of special need.

Figure 4: What knowledge and skills do teachers lack when supporting SEN children in a mainstream classroom? (Source: Authors)



A very large number of teachers point to the lack of knowledge about working with, contacting, and engaging with children with ADHD and autism spectrum disorder: *The groups seem to have the most children with ADHD and autism spectrum disorder. It is just getting them involved in the complex learning process.*

Respondents also point to a lack of knowledge/skills to deal with children with sensory impairments and physical disabilities. It was also pointed out that teachers need more skills and knowledge if a child has speech problems, especially in cases when there is no speech therapist in the kindergarten. Speech and language difficulties are often challenging for teachers of children with a foreign language. Several respondents acknowledged that they are not sufficiently familiar with all special needs, but that if a child with special needs came into the group, they would certainly like to gain more knowledge in this area: *If a child with a special need (already identified) should come to the group, I will think about everything I need to know.*

Teachers mentioned that they would like to know more about allergies, diabetes, and epilepsy to better support these children in the group. Interestingly, many Russian-speaking teachers, in particular, wrote that they would need knowledge about medicine and psychology, although it was not specified what specific knowledge they would need. A few Estonian-speaking teachers also admitted a lack of knowledge in psychology.

Teachers who have several children with special needs in their group stated that more knowledge should be gained about how to make the group work: *The most challenging thing is to consider all the special needs simultaneously.*

The responses of 64 teachers (6.76%) fall into the category of “Lack of knowledge and skills on how to deal with the behaviour of a SEN child”. Most teachers’ needs in this category were related to dealing with specific situations and/or to a desire for practical advice: *Practical tips for everyday situations: “what to do if...” and “what not to do if...”*

Teachers specifically mentioned the problem of aggression and the inability to cope with a situation, where the child is a danger to himself/herself and others. Several respondents wrote that they would like to have knowledge/skills and concrete techniques to deal with different situations of problematic behaviour: *In the case of children with behavioural difficulties, I would need some tips on getting the child to work and to listen.*

In the “Need for basic knowledge and long-term training” category, 50 teachers responded that they felt they could benefit from all their knowledge, as they also lack basic knowledge and professional training: *All the skills are lacking because I have not had the necessary training.*

The responses of 10 teachers can be grouped under the category “lack of knowledge about working with parents” who wanted more knowledge about how to get in touch with parents, give them better advice and explain that their child has special needs: *How can parents be better advised, when they are in the denial phase and do not recognise that the child needs a different approach and help?*

A few teachers were also interested in the causes of behavioural problems.

The category “Unspecified training needs” included 23 responses stating that training is needed but was not specified. There were 45 responses in the category “Other” that did not fit directly into the categories outlined above, where teachers have different opinions, e.g., that teachers do not need to have knowledge of special educational needs – the work with children with special needs should be done by professionals.

5.2% of teachers (n = 48) did not give a specific answer to the question of what knowledge and skills teachers themselves lack in supporting children with SEN in the mainstream classroom but simply described problems that teachers see with SEN children in the classroom. They mentioned the problems with teamwork and in several cases the lack of a support person. Responses in this

category suggest that the teachers who responded found it challenging to think about the lack of knowledge and what they could do to ensure that the child with special needs received necessary support in the mainstream group and was integrated with peers. Likely, there are still teachers who have not been able to adopt the attitude of inclusive education and are convinced that it is not the role of the teacher to support a child with special needs.

Seventy-seven teachers (8.34%, in the “No experience/do not know” category) stressed that they had no experience with children with special needs and, therefore, could not specifically identify what knowledge they lacked.

While 12.1% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement “I have the knowledge and skills to work with SEN children”, 74 teachers (category “Do not feel lack of knowledge, have enough experience”) specifically stated that they felt that due to their experience, they did not sense a lack of knowledge/skills. Long-term work experience was highlighted as a factor that has given them the confidence to work with children with special needs. The help of the support specialists in the kindergarten and the well-functioning network of collaborators were also mentioned as additional factors that prevented the perception of the lack of knowledge.

### **Discussion**

Our research aims to map preschool teachers’ attitudes towards children with special educational needs and inclusive education and determine how teachers evaluate their knowledge of implementing inclusive education. To fulfil the goal, we analysed how kindergarten teachers agree with statements about inclusion, what situations teachers find difficult, what advantages they see in implementing inclusion, and what knowledge and skills they think they lack. Firstly, we wanted to know teachers’ attitudes towards including children with special

needs. In general, the preschool teachers of Estonian kindergartens have a positive attitude towards inclusion, as also pointed out by Häidkind and Oras (2016). Estonian kindergarten teachers are particularly supportive to the social inclusion of children with special needs: they do not consider it a problem if a child with special needs is together with other children and participates in leisure activities. This indicates that teachers have a positive attitude towards inclusive education (Scanlon et al., 2022). Teachers are the most positive about changing their behaviour (Scanlon et al., 2022): Estonian kindergarten teachers also believe they can include children with special needs in games and leisure activities, and slightly fewer teachers think they can include children with special needs in learning activities. Indeed, the positive attitude of many teachers suggests that the conditions are in place for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2013; Barton & Smith, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2022). However, nearly one-third of kindergarten teachers in our study believe that including children with special needs limits other children’s opportunities to develop and learn, indicating a negative attitude among these teachers.

Secondly, we wanted to know what differences there are in teachers’ attitudes depending on their level of education. As expected, there was a significant difference between the attitudes of teachers with different educational levels. Teachers with professional education were more optimistic about inclusion than teachers with non-professional education. The more positive attitude of teachers with professional higher education shows that the necessary knowledge and skills obtained in advanced education also ensure a more positive attitude (Wardle, 2009). Kindergarten teachers with secondary education also admitted that they do not have enough knowledge and skills to deal with children with special needs. Inclusion in such groups does not occur, as teachers also perceive

their lack of knowledge and experience (Burke & Sutherland, 2004).

Thirdly, we wanted to know what situations make inclusion difficult for kindergarten teachers. Teachers pointed out that inclusion is complicated because a SEN child needs significantly more time and attention. Also, in the research of Häidkind et al. (2022), it was found that individual work with children with special needs increases the workload of teachers, which is why teachers would like to teach all children together. Teachers understand that individual activities should be carried out to support the development of children with special needs. However, finding time and place for this in the regular group is difficult. Several teachers added that if the group is smaller, more attention is given to the child with special needs. This highlights the need to reduce the number of children in kindergarten groups.

Like previous studies (see Markova et al., 2016; Sari, 2007; Yeo et al., 2016), this study also revealed that challenging situations for teachers are related to a type of special need. The behavioural problems of children with autistic traits and attention deficit disorder were highlighted separately, because of the potential risk to peers. The negative attitude of teachers towards behavioural problems has also been found in several previous studies (Levins et al., 2005; Markova et al., 2016). Many teachers have also been in a difficult situation when the child's diagnosis is not known and guidelines for the child's development are missing. It will place higher demands on the teacher's knowledge and skills. Cooperation with support specialists is essential in implementing inclusion (Yeo et al., 2016); Estonian kindergarten teachers understand this. According to the teachers, difficult situations arise when teamwork does not function, and more support staff is needed. Unfortunately, Estonia has a shortage of support specialists (Land et al., 2021).

Fourthly, we wanted to know whether teachers see the benefits of inclusive education. When a

child with special needs attends the group, the overwhelming benefit is that other children also develop empathy and tolerance. Yeo and colleagues (2016) came to a similar conclusion. One-third of teachers felt that children must understand that people are different and need different support. To achieve this, children need to be explained the nature of special needs, which will help them understand different children better (Horne & Timmons, 2009). It is also essential that children with special needs who attend a mainstream group integrate with other children, do not feel excluded and develop faster (Alexander et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2017). Another positive aspect of inclusion is that the child with special needs provides the teacher with an opportunity for development (Alexander et al., 2016), as pointed out by several Estonian teachers. However, several kindergarten teachers fail to see the benefits of having a child with special needs in the mainstream group, in which case the inclusion of children with special needs is very difficult (Lee et al., 2014).

Fifthly, we wanted to know what knowledge and skills teachers say they need to implement inclusive education. Teachers, who wrote that they had no problems with a SEN child attending a mainstream group, said that rich experience, cooperation with the group team and home, and good preparation from the university helped. Indeed, successful inclusion experiences make teachers' attitudes towards inclusion more positive (Woolfson & Brady, 2009; Yeo et al., 2016). These teachers also did not feel a lack of knowledge and skills in working with children with special needs, as they already had sufficient experience. However, some respondents felt they lacked the knowledge and skills to work with children with special needs. This lack of knowledge and skills can significantly hinder implementing inclusive education (Burke and Sutherland, 2004).

Häidkind and Oras (2016) emphasize the need for kindergarten teachers to know about teaching

children with different levels of needs, planning and implementing accessible teaching. In the present survey, the teachers identified a particular lack of knowledge about didactics and specific methodologies: how to do time planning, if there is a child with special needs in the group and how to carry out learning activities, as well as a lack of specific practical techniques of working with SEN children and including them in joint activities. A study by Häidkind, Šuman and Vind (2022) also confirmed that kindergarten teachers lack specific pedagogical knowledge.

Based on this study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Most teachers would benefit from further training regarding the work with SEN children. In particular, teachers without professional education need training, as only awareness can help to raise positive attitudes towards inclusion and enable the implementation of inclusive education (Burke & Sutherland, 2004).
2. More than half of kindergarten teachers think that challenging situations are related to children with behavioural difficulties. Therefore, universities should offer more long-term training on this topic, with opportunities for discussion and sharing experiences with colleagues and for dealing with difficult situations, e.g., through role-play. The number of children in a group should also be reviewed, as most teachers point out that it is complicated to cope with difficult behaviour, especially in a large group.
3. However, many teachers have not developed positive attitudes towards the idea that a child with special needs should be in a mainstream group. Longer in-service training would also be needed to develop positive attitudes, as many previous studies show that teachers with better knowledge have more positive attitudes (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Sari, 2007).
4. Many teachers do not realise the benefits of inclusion, and more should be done to raise awareness of these benefits, both through in-service training and media.

In conclusion, although a large majority of kindergarten teachers in Estonia have a positive attitude towards inclusion, much remains to be done to fully implement inclusive education: providing teachers with a range of in-service training and supporting the development of the necessary skills.

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