

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA: THE AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH — RETROSPECTIVE AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The implementation of inclusive education has been explored from various perspectives. Much of the focus has been on the challenges faced by children with special educational needs (SEN) and the potential negative effects on their peers in the classroom. However, there seems to be a gap in research that examines not only the negative aspects but also the positive outcomes of these interactions. Does the presence of children with SEN have a negative impact on their peers, or does their interaction foster positive effects on the classroom environment? The aim of the study is to uncover the authentic experiences of young people in inclusive education when studying with SEN from a retrospective and future perspective, and to highlight their recommendations for those who are currently studying with their classmates with special educational needs.

Methods. The study adopts a social constructivist approach, which proposes that individuals build personal understanding based on their experiences, attitudes, and interactions with others and the world. A qualitative research method was applied, structured interviews were conducted, focusing on three key areas: the informant's positive experiences with a SEN classmate, perceived barriers to communication, and recommendations for current students in classrooms with SEN peers.

Results. Analysis of the empirical data revealed that interacting with SEN classmates positively influenced the informants' personal growth, helping them develop

social skills for engaging with SEN individuals. Communication barriers were identified, primarily stemming from a lack of understanding of the nature of SEN disorders and behaviour. However, none of the informants expressed negative attitudes towards their SEN peers; rather, their responses reflected empathy and a genuine willingness to understand and assist them.

Conclusions. Empirical research indicates that students studying pedagogy generally view inclusive education positively, though they acknowledge challenges based on their personal experiences of learning alongside peers with special educational needs. Drawing from these experiences, reflections, and acquired knowledge, informants recommend several key practices for students learning with SEN classmates: fostering a positive attitude, understanding their differences and needs, supporting their participation in activities, and assisting with tasks.

Keywords: inclusive education, youth experience, students with special educational needs, school, classroom environment

RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Inclusive education is gaining more and more attention around the world, including in Lithuania, especially when UNESCO announced at the World Education Forum in 2015 that equal opportunities and inclusion are among the key challenges for the future of education (until 2030). This was reinforced in the United Nations General Assembly resolution adopted the same year, *A/RES/70/1 – Changing our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015). This was echoed in Lithuania, where *Lietuvos Respublikos mokslo ir studijų įstatymas* [Law on Science and Studies of the Republic of Lithuania] stipulated that from September 1, 2024, all state and municipal schools must accept children with special educational needs. Article 14 of the Law states that

the educational process involving pupils with minor and moderate special educational needs may be carried out by a single teacher, or by a teacher with the participation of a person providing educational assistance, or by more than one teacher, and the educational process involving pupils with severe or very severe special educational needs may be carried out by a teacher with the participation of a person providing educational assistance, or by more than one teacher (Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo įstatymas, Nr. I1489. Pakeitimo įstatymas Nr. XIII-3268 (priimtas 20200630, redakcija įsigaliojo nuo 20240901, Article 14(2)) (translated by the authors).

But here's the problem—parents/carers can insist on enrolment, but it can become an unbearable burden for the school, because often children with high and very high needs have complex disabilities, and there are no health or other professionals available at school. Therefore, new amendments were made to the Law of Education (Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo įstatymas, 2020, 2024, Straipsnis 33-35) was added to the law, and it reads:

If a school is unable to meet all the educational needs of an enrolled pupil, and it is assessed, in accordance with the procedure established by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, that due to a disproportionate or unreasonable burden on the enrolled pupil, it is not possible to provide appropriate educational accommodation in the school, the head of the school shall make a reasoned request to the founder, and the founder shall “propose the selection of a school from among not less than two mainstream schools that provide appropriate educational accommodation and transport of the pupil to and from school” (Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo įstatymas, 2020, 2024, Article 33-35.) (translated by the authors).

It would seem that the problem is solved—inclusive education has the legal prerequisites for implementation. The definition in the law (Lietuvos Respublikos mokslo ir studijų įstatymas [2009 m. balandžio 30 d. Nr. XI-242 [su pakeitimais iki 2024 m.] is very clear and it states that the education system should enable every person to develop, extend his/her capacities and abilities, receive appropriate assistance, experience success in learning, social, cultural and/or other activities, and not be discriminated against on the basis of the diversity of his/her educational needs and/or the need for educational assistance. But this is where we get stuck—there is a lack of educational support professionals, teaching aids, educational environments, etc. Thus, the question arises: is it really only the implementation of inclusive education that is problematic and the presence of special educational needs (SEN) children has a negative impact on the other pupils in the classroom, or is it the interaction with SEN children that has a positive impact?

NOVELTY OF THE RESEARCH

In fact, both inclusive education and the integration of children with SEN have been studied from different perspectives: from a value perspective (Ališauskienė & Miltenienė, 2018; Lesková & Yochanna, 2024 and others), conceptually (Galkienė, 2021; Houg, 2017; Miltenienė et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020 and others), from the Catholic approach (Barton, 2000; Targamadze & Gervytė, 2014; Voidogaitė, 2024 and others) from the perspective of students without disabilities to whether inclusive education fosters high achievement (Szumski et al., 2022).

The above-mentioned research on inclusive education and integration of SEN children has not fully revealed the experiences of pupils who have studied with SEN children. In fact, similar issues were addressed in the article *Experiences of youth studying together with classmates with special educational needs and disabilities* (Asakavičiūtė et al., 2024). The authors note that the analysis of the research material has revealed the need to educate the public: the phenomenon of disability shapes attitudes towards the “other” person. It is clear that all participants lack the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to communicate and cooperate with students with SEN. Ultimately, their findings call for a holistic approach to inclusive education that considers not only the academic aspects but also the social and emotional

well-being of all students involved (Asakavičiūtė et al., 2024). This study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of inclusive education, shedding light on its potential experience benefits and challenges. By addressing these findings comprehensively, educational institutions and policymakers can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

However, although the article explored the experiences of learners with SEN children, it did not focus on what prevented them from interacting with SEN children and what advice they would give to students who are now learning with SEN classmates. The study carried out by a group of researchers on *The views of pupils, parents and teachers on the implementation of inclusive education in schools* (Miltenienė et al, 2022) is also worthy of note in the context of the issue addressed in the paper. They surveyed pupils in grades 5 to 8 (or 5 to 10 in secondary schools) and pupils in grades 2 to 4 of gymnasiums and their parents and school teachers. For the virtual questionnaire, the Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow's (2002, 2016) model of inclusive education was used that focused on the formation of inclusive education culture and policy and the implementation of inclusive education. The questionnaires were modified for individual groups of respondents and 30581 respondents from 61 schools participated (the selection of individual groups is correct). Two observations should be noted:

When evaluating the culture of inclusive education, pupils have the highest opinion of the peer support they receive at school, and the teachers' attention to the child's personality, his/her individuality, and the support they give to the pupil is also quite highly valued by pupils (the highest opinion is held by pupils in grades 5–6, the lowest by pupils in grades 7–8 and in grades I and II of gymnasiums) (Milteniene et al, 2022, p. 41)

and "... however, pupils still face bullying in schools, and the tendency of school staff to isolate pupils who are experiencing behavioural difficulties". (Miltenienė et al., 2022, p. 41). Differences in parents' views on equal opportunities for pupils are observed (more so in the upper grades) It is understood that the respondents of the study are still in school and cannot reflect on their experience as school leavers, but their assessment of the inclusive education culture and their observation of peer support and the teachers' selective attitude to children, as well as the bullying that still exists, signal problems that exist and need to be addressed at school.

What is new in this article is that it focuses on the positive experiences of the informants, without highlighting possible negative experiences, but rather clarifying the barriers to interacting with SEN peers, and focusing on advice for students currently studying with SEN children.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Informants' experiences may have been influenced by their interactions with SEN children within their family or close environment. This aspect was not explained. The study also did not inquire about the attitudes of parents and other family members towards learning with SEN classmates. The attitudes of the school community, class-

mates, their parents and teachers towards SEN classmates were also not investigated. This might have had influence on the formation of informants' attitudes towards inclusive education and their recommendations for current students.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Social constructivism was chosen as the methodological approach to the research because each person's experience and field of vision is unique to him or her, and because the individual's interactions with the environment create cognitive structures that allow us to understand the world. Furthermore, the social constructivist perspective draws attention to many things that are taken for granted and believed to be objective reality, are socially constructed, and can change as society changes. The social constructivist approach, as presented by André Kukla (2000), is that people form their personal understanding and "it is not the mirror of their acquired knowledge" (p. 6). It is constructed on the basis of his/her attitudes, experiences, interactions between people, relationship with phenomena and objects.

Empirical research is also constructed in a social constructivist approach. This approach allowed us to delve into the authentic experience of each informant, which is important because a person constructs social reality, evaluates and models his or her attitudes and actions through it. There is no doubt the authentic experience of one or another person can help to shape another person's attitudes towards a person, a phenomenon, etc. However, it should be borne in mind that this is not automatically transferable—each person has his or her own filtering mechanisms, as the unique experience of another person also has a specific impact on the social construct of knowledge. It serves as an instrument to construct the social reality of the individual. But, if properly presented, the experiences of others can be influential in the construction of a person's social reality.

RESEARCH AIMS AND PURPOSE

The aim of the study is to uncover the authentic experiences of young people in inclusive education settings with children who have special educational needs, exploring both retrospective reflections and prospective perspectives and to highlight their recommendations for current peers with special educational needs.

The subject of the study is the informants' experiences of learning with SEN children in schools of general education.

Research question: based on their own experiences of learning with their SEN peers at school, what advice could be given to current students in educational studies?

Research methods: review of scientific literature and research on the selected aspect, empirical qualitative research—structured written interviews.

From a theoretical point of view, the study is significant because it focuses on the authentic reflective experiences of the informants when learning with SEN children and opens up spaces for further research. From a practical point of view, one of its values is the application of the research findings to improve the implementation of inclusive education in schools of general education.

PARTICIPANTS

9 informants were selected for interviews. They were selected on the basis of certain criteria: a student of pedagogical studies, with at least one year of studying experience, with school experience with peers with special educational needs in the same classroom. The informants agreed to participate in the study anonymously on their own free will. Geography of the study: informants represent schools in the municipalities of the country's cities and districts by place of residence.

Organisation of the Research and the Instrument of the Research

The study was carried out between January and March 2025. The method of data collection was written interviews. The methodological approach to both the formulation of the questions and the analysis of the research results is social constructivism.

The interview consisted of two parts—the first one focused on communication with classmates with special educational needs and the second one aimed to find out their advice on communication with classmates.

The first part is further divided into three headings:

- Were there SEN children in your class? Please indicate what disability you think they had?
- What positive experiences have you had in school with SEN classmates?
- What bothered you about interacting with your SEN classmates and why do you think that was?

The questions were designed to emphasise positive experiences, while also addressing negative experiences specifically in the context of communication barriers. Informants were invited to share their experiences of studying in schools of general education alongside children with special educational needs and to provide suggestions for improving the experience for current students

Following Patricia Leavy (2017) a qualitative content analysis of the empirical research results was carried out: “Content analysis generally involves initial immer-

sion into the content to get a sense of the ‘big picture’ determining the units of analysis, coding, analysis, and interpretation“ (pp.146-147). A content analysis of the informants’ responses has been carried out and categories and sub-categories have been identified.

RESULTS/DATA ANALYSIS

The study clearly identifies three parts—the informant’s positive experience of going to school with a SEN classmate; his/her perceived barriers to communication with a SEN classmate; and his/her recommendations to current students who are in class with SEN students.

Empirical Research

A category is formulated on the basis of each highlighted part of the questionnaire administered during the interviews. Three categories were identified:

- The informant’s positive experience with SEN classmates;
- Barriers to the informant’s communication with a SEN classmate;
- Informant’s recommendations to current students on how to communicate with a SEN classmate.

In the first category—positive experiences of communicating with SEN classmates, six sub-categories were identified:

- *Changing attitudes towards SEN children*—“I’ve learned that you can’t judge a person’s abilities just by how fast they read or write. Although she often hesitated about her spelling, her thoughts were interesting and original.”(4), “I learnt that everyone can have difficulties, but that doesn’t mean they are weaker or less worthy.”(5)
- *Developing empathy*—“I realised that by interacting or dealing with such students, it is possible to develop a sense of empathy”(3), “By interacting with SEN classmates, I learnt to be patient and more attentive to the needs of others”(5), “SEN friends were often surprisingly creative or sincere, and interacting with them developed empathy and compassion.” (6).
- *Communication skills*—“The student with ASD was very talented in maths and was good at solving logic problems, but had difficulty participating in group activities. I noticed that if I explained the activities clearly beforehand and gave him some time to adjust, he was much more willing to participate” (6), “In class we often worked in teams. During the teamwork, I tried to be supportive of these people, to see their strengths and to praise them for them. I had to help a classmate learn to read more coherently. For others, in different classroom situations, I had to help them calm down, comfort them, support them when their emotions were running high or when they were feeling rejected or guilty all

the time.”(8) , “I learned to be more understanding and empathetic towards others. I have learned not only to listen, but also to hear and accept the other person.”(2).

- *Social skills*—“I’ve learned that sometimes the most important thing is not verbal communication, but just being there. For a classmate with an intellectual disability, it helped a lot when I patiently explained tasks to him, sometimes several times, and encouraged him. I saw that it made him feel less stressed and more confident.”(6), “ I also saw how important it is to encourage and support others, because even a little help can make learning and everyday communication much easier.”(1).
- *Self-awareness and maturity growth*—“Interacting with classmates with SEN has given me valuable experiences that have helped me to become more empathetic, patient and understanding of people’s different needs. I realised that every child has their own strengths and that the right environment and support can help them to develop them.”(1), “I realised that each person needs an individual approach and that understanding can help to create a welcoming, accepting environment. “(6), “I have learned patience, understanding and that people with ADHD can be very creative and fun.”(7), “I have learned that everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, but that everyone can contribute to a common activity.”(1).
- *Overcoming life’s challenges and adapting to situations*—“to be inspired by seeing how they overcome everyday challenges. I know of a case where the parents of a boy with a mobility impairment bought an apartment for him when he turned 18 and he was very independent.”(3), “overcoming anxiety about interacting with SEN classmates and understanding how to behave to prevent him from going into a fit of aggression.”(2).

Analysing each sub-category of the first category, it seems evident that interacting with SEN classmates had a positive effect on the informant’s personal growth and they learned how to interact with SEN classmates, thus forming their social skills for interacting with SEN people.

In the second category—Barriers to the informant’s communication with a SEN classmate – three sub-categories were identified:

- *Nature of disability*—“Some students found it difficult to express themselves because they had a hearing impairment, and it was difficult to understand them in terms of what they were saying.”(3), “ Sometimes I didn’t understand why she was so worried about reading or why there were so many mistakes in her texts. The teachers didn’t always seem to understand her situation and didn’t treat her in the same way as the others.”(4), “There was a pupil in the class with reading difficulties and we often lost a lot of lesson time when she had to read aloud in front of the class. Often, this led to bullying from the other pupils because of this child’s difficulties.”(9).
- *Incomprehensible behaviour of a SEN classmate*—“It was quite difficult to work in groups/pairs with this pupil during lessons—he often changed his opinion or answers, interrupted others.”(2), “It was difficult to find a common language because SEN friends sometimes avoided communication or behaved in unusual ways. I think this was due

to a lack of knowledge of how to deal with the situation, not because of bad intentions.”(5), “Personally, I was very disturbed by a child with behavioural and emotion regulation difficulties. It was often impossible to concentrate, to focus on academic subjects when there was constant conflict, disrespect, spitting, yelling, etc. in the classroom.”(8).

- *Not knowing yourself and not being able to handle situations*—“I wanted to help a dyslexic classmate, but I didn’t know whether it would be more helpful to read aloud to him or just wait patiently for him to read the text on his own.”(1), “Sometimes it was disturbing that I didn’t know how to react or help in the right way—I was afraid to say the wrong thing.”(5), “Sometimes it was difficult to understand why some SEN pupils behaved in a certain way, for example, why a pupil with ASD sometimes refused to take part in the classroom activities, even though they seemed to be fun and exciting.”(6), “Sometimes it was difficult when he interrupted conversations or lessons. I think that more knowledge about ADHD would have helped me to understand his behaviour better.”(7)

The informants’ reflection on the barriers in their communication with their SEN peers showed that their communication was disturbed by a lack of knowledge about the nature of the disorders and the behaviour of SEN children.

The third category—recommendations on how to communicate with SEN classmates—can be divided into four sub-categories based on the informants’ suggestions:

- *Be understanding of their needs*—“Be understanding and patient, and understand their different needs.”(1), “It is important to be understanding and patient, because each of us has our own challenges.”(2), “Accept that everyone is different and has a different pace, listen to the SEN student and have no preconceived ideas.”(3), “Understand that dyslexia does not change a person’s intelligence or creativity.”(4), “Accept differences—diversity in the classroom makes us all stronger.”(5), “Some SEN pupils may take longer to complete tasks, react differently to situations or have specific needs. It is important not to be angry and to understand that they may need more time or clearer instructions”(6).
- *Inclusion* —“We are all equal and want to be accepted, so we should not be afraid to interact with or include SUP classmates in our activities”(2), “Often, SEN students can feel excluded from the classroom because it is harder for them to join in with the activities. Take the initiative and invite them to join in —sometimes even a little encouragement can help them feel accepted”(6).
- *Having a positive attitude towards SEN classmates*—“Do not criticise or gossip about others. Everyone wants to work and function in a friendly and supportive environment.”(2), “Be friendly—sometimes even a simple understanding can help a lot.”(4), “Be patient and understanding, help them to concentrate, but don’t judge, remember that everyone has strengths.”(7), “Both during my time as a pupil, and in today’s school, pupils are used to judging, and then to think or understand. I would like you not to leave these children behind. They need special help, and maybe it is the help of their classmates that will help them to overcome all the challenges” (8).

- *Providing help*—“not being afraid to offer help”(1), “I would recommend helping if the SEN student asks for it.” (3), “Asking teachers boldly how you can help is always better than being unaware and unsure what to do.”(5), “Not turning away, but helping the pupil because they need help and encouragement, but not forcing it.”(9).

The informants’ reflections on their experiences at school were summarised in recommendations for pupils who are now studying with SEN classmates. Some laconically suggested not to turn away, to help the SEN classmates, others tried to justify their suggestions. It is noteworthy that none of the informants’ responses showed a negative attitude towards the SEN children, and their responses can be more attributed to their empathy for other children and their willingness to understand and help.

DISCUSSION

Judging from the public domain and research (Barton, 2000; Miltenienė et al., 2022 etc.) the evaluation of inclusive education at school deems to be ambiguous. Some have a positive attitude towards learning with SEN, because not only do they acquire social skills in communicating with other children, but they also develop empathy, an understanding of social reality, etc., while others have the opposite view—they believe that learning with SEN children distracts the teacher’s attention and causes disturbances in learning.

While there are certainly a variety of situations that can arise, when reflecting on learning with SEN classmates, informants noted that there were disruptions, but there was no one who had a negative opinion about it. There are probably several reasons for this: the informants are studying pedagogy and understand that learning with SEN children is inevitable, they see the positive sides of learning together, etc.

However, in any case, it is appropriate to investigate the obstacles to learning together and help teachers eliminate them, because in order to improve the effectiveness of education and self-education, it is necessary to identify the barriers that occur and look for opportunities to neutralise or eliminate them. Similar views could be observed in Antonio Luque de la Rosa and Rafaela Gutiérrez Cáceres (2022) research who indicate that the students hold generally positive opinions and attitudes toward the inclusion of disabled students. The findings of Kathy Cologon (2012) also support a similar idea by suggesting more engagement in self-reflection on attitudes and beliefs, as well as development of practical skills of SEN children, which consequently may lead to more positive views of inclusive education. Other researchers (Vlcek & Somerton, 2024) claim that there should be more collaborative engagement between all stakeholders to support SEN students. Experiences of youth studying together with SEN classmates were explored by Vaida Asakavičiūtė et al. (2024). However, their study did not connect the informants’ reflective experiences of learning alongside

SEN children with recommendations for current students. This aspect is important, as the insights of those who have recently been in general education classrooms and are now studying pedagogy are valuable and insightful.

During the empirical study, the positive experience of the informants emerged, which had an impact on their personal growth, but it is appropriate to delve more deeply into the situations and factors that could have had a positive impact on this, and to look for opportunities to use these factors to strengthen the positive experience. In addition, other studies should link the informant and the dominant attitude towards learning together with SEN in the school (at least in the classroom). Nevertheless, it is crucial to investigate the challenges of inclusive education and support teachers in addressing them. Enhancing educational effectiveness and promoting self-education requires identifying barriers and exploring ways to mitigate or eliminate them. The current empirical study revealed that informants generally had positive experiences, which contributed to their personal growth. However, further research is needed to explore the specific situations and factors that positively influence these experiences and to identify ways to reinforce them.

CONCLUSIONS

People and their groups construct their understanding of phenomena and human cognition, so their evaluation of inclusive education is not straightforward. Some support its implementation and report its positive impact on students, while others believe that learning together with students who have special educational needs causes disruptions and reduces learning effectiveness (disruptions occur, and teachers spend more time attending to SEN students).

For the successful implementation of inclusive education, certain important prerequisites are required: legislative, school policy, community and societal attitudes towards children with special educational needs, organisational culture, elimination of bullying in school life, preparation of teachers and educational support specialists to work personally with children with special educational needs.

Empirical research suggests that the assessment of inclusive education by students studying pedagogy is generally positive, but they also highlight certain obstacles, based on their authentic experience of learning with classmates with special educational needs at school:

- The positive trends in the reflection of informants on learning with classmates with special educational needs are: change in attitude towards SEN children, development of empathy, formation of communication skills, acquisition of social skills, self-knowledge and growth of maturity, overcoming life challenges and adapting to situations.
- The obstacles indicated by informants in the authentic experience of learning with classmates with special educational needs are focused on understanding the nature of disability, incomprehensible behavior of a SEN classmate, ignorance and inability to deal with a SEN classmate.

Based on their authentic experiences, reflections, acquired knowledge, and life experiences, informants recommend several key practices for students learning with SEN classmates: to have a positive attitude towards the classmate, to understand his/her differences and needs, to help him/her get involved in activities and to assist him/her during tasks.

Moreover, future studies should examine the relationship between informants' attitudes and the broader school culture regarding inclusive education, particularly within the classroom context. To achieve this, both qualitative and quantitative research approaches are recommended. Expanding the scope and diversity of participants—including parents, teachers, educational support specialists, and even SEN learners—would enrich the findings. Quantitative studies should build on existing research to address relevant questions comprehensively. Ultimately, this research could inform the development of a scientific study, which would lead to practical recommendations and a comprehensive guide for effective inclusive education practices.

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