

# **SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR PROMOTING THE PROCESS OF INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN GENERAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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One of the greatest challenges for a sustainable development is providing all individuals of a community with equal opportunities, that such opportunities would be created for and offered to individuals of various generations as well as to those within the frame of one generation. The degree to which people with special needs can take part in different processes of social life is the indicator of democracy of every country.

In the world, the changes in the paradigm on issues of educating learners with special needs can be traced back to the 1950s, when the idea about inclusion of learners with special needs in general education institutions began to evolve, but this idea has been actively developed since the beginning of the 1970s. In 1994, at the Salamanca conference a new guideline on ensuring special education in the countries of the world was laid down – the transition to creating such education institutions where any child can become part of it. Inclusive education has become one of the most discussed and topical themes that has become popular internationally (Rouzs, 2006; Eiropas speciālās izglītības attīstības aģentūra, 2011; Malofejevs, 2008; Mitchell, 2010; Nīmante, 2008). Inclusive education is based on the consideration that education, which provides the basis for sustainable and coordinated development of society in the long term, holds the central role in the social policy field (UNESCO, 2008; Mitchell, 2010). Inclusive education is a comprehensive concept that can be applied to any country in the world, affecting a variety of policy and implementation approaches in compulsory, higher and teacher education.

Inclusive education characterizes an education institution, which changes, where each learner receives necessary and significant support in the learning process, no one is particularly highlighted. The main focus here is put on work and joint problem-solving of teachers, staff of an education institution and support specialists' team, adaptive and supportive class environment, and classmates' involvement.

Due to the territorial reform and the reduction in the number of learners, schools with a small number of learners start the process of including learners with special needs without having sufficient resources and understanding about the possibilities of ensuring support during the teaching/learning process and supportive activities: mostly learners are included spontaneously, though there are serious problems of national and local - municipal - range that hinder these processes. According to the author's experience, most often „mechanical inclusion” takes place – a learner with special needs is in a classroom of a general education institution and participates in some attempts to be involved in classroom activities by drawing or coloring something, but learning does not happen. The existence of the problem, arising from the fact that learners are „kept” in general education institutions without receiving adequate support and schools do not carry out proper activities in this respect, is indicated when learners with special needs who have learnt in general education institutions before attend the 4th –7th forms of special schools. These children are pedagogically „neglected”: they cannot read, write and sometimes also speak. Consequently, the issues of changing teachers' attitude and activities in lessons in the aspect of inclusive education and enhancing their understanding about successful inclusive education processes in general education institutions are still topical.

### **Novelty of the research**

The scientific findings of the research, the approbated support system for inclusion of learners with special needs in general education institutions and the developed recommendations are considered to be an important theoretical basis, developed on theoretical and empirical research, that can be used in work of municipal boards of education and education institutions in formation of the support system, inclusive education institution and promoting development of inclusive society.

### **Scientific novelty of the research**

- Requirements of operation and development of the support system have been theoretically underpinned, the essence and contributory aspects of the inclusion process of learners with special needs in general education institutions have been identified,.
- Scientifically substantiated innovative support system that can be implemented in general education institutions where learners with special needs are educated has been developed.
- Evaluation criteria of the support system quality have been developed, theoretically underpinned and tested practically.

### **Practical significance of the research**

- The support system for promotion of successful inclusion of learners with special needs that can be used in municipal boards of education and general education institutions has been tested in practice.
- The support system for promotion of successful inclusion of learners with special needs has been implemented in board of education of Rezekne district and it functioned in general education institutions of Rezekne city and region till 2009 (it functions partly since 2009, because many schools with small number of children were closed due to territorial reform, economical crisis and other circumstances).
- The developed and approbated support system has been used in formation of the National Inclusive Education Support System (ESF and LR MES NCE project “Creating Support System for Learners with Functional Disorders”, 2010)
- The process of inclusive education implementation in general education schools in Latvia has been studied and recommendations have been prepared for inclusion of learners with special needs in general education institutions.

**Research base: 1124 persons involved** – 470 (persons involved in the research on the current situation of inclusive education implementation in Latvia), 205 (teachers of Rezekne district involved in the approbation of Support system), 118 (teachers of general education institutions - participants of teachers' professional development courses, evaluators of the developed support system), 16 (headmasters of general education institutions involved in the approbation of the support system), 19 (special education teachers involved in the approbation of the support system), 245 (learners of general education institutions, class-mates of the included learners with special needs), 51 (learners with special needs included in general education institutions).

### **Content of the monography**

The selection of the research theme and its topicality in the fields of pedagogy and special pedagogy are substantiated in the introduction..

**Chapter 1** „*Essence, Basic Conditions of Development and Possibilities of the Support System for Promoting Inclusion of Learners with Special Needs in General Education Institutions*” deals with the analysis of theoretical sources and

development of the pedagogical-psychological research base, grounded on the literature study.

**Section 1.1** „*Education of Learners with Special Needs from the Historical Aspect*” focuses on the historical aspect of changes in attitude to educating learners with special needs that have taken place in the European countries and in the world, starting with the 1970s when the idea about integration evolved and ending with development of inclusive education whose starting point was in 1994 and the Salamanca conference; making conclusions that development of national special education in every country in all historical periods is related to the socio-economic system (Peters, 2007; Winzer, 1993), the value system, morality, religious and philosophic views of each particular country and society (Liepiņa, 2003; Malofejevs, 2008; Winzer, 1993; Малофеев, 2009), state’s policy concerning its attitude to children with disabilities, legislation on education issues in general (Kravalis, 1996; Peters, 2007; Winzer, 1993; Малофеев, 2009), the developmental level of special pedagogy as a field of integrative knowledge relating to medicine, psychology and pedagogy, and historical-pedagogical processes in the world (Liepiņa, 2003; Kravalis, 1996; Malofejevs, 2008; Peters, 2007; Малофеев, 2009 et al.). Inclusive education has become the global political issue and the object of empiric activity, and inclusion processes are in constant development in the historical aspect (Malofejevs, 2008; Rouze, 2006; Reid, 2006; Winzer, 2007; Малофеев, 2009) since there is a different understanding about implementation of these processes in different countries, and countries constantly seek for approaches and possibilities that are the most appropriate for them (Evans et al., 1999; Winzer, 1993, 2007). A review about the contemporary guidelines and problems tackled on the issue of inclusion in individual countries has been done.

**Section 1.2** „*Historical Aspect of Education of Learners with Special Needs in Latvia and Characterization of the Current Situation*” provides the summary and analysis of the ideas relating to historical development of education of learners with special needs in general education institutions in Latvia.

Latvia was incorporated in the Soviet Union till 1991, learners with special needs were segregated in special schools. In 1997, when the conception of Special Education was confirmed (Speciālās izglītības attīstības koncepcija [Conception of the Development of Special Education], 1997), the development of the legislative base for implementing inclusive education in Latvia was started, and a number of regulations were designed: Regulations on the Implementation of the Conception of Special Education Development (*LR MK Regulations No. 490, 2001*); Regulations on the Provision of General Basic Education and General

Secondary Education Institutions According to Special Needs (*LR MK October 21, 2003, Regulations No. 579*), etc.

The changes in Latvia's legislation that have made the regulations and requirements for implementation of inclusive education more adequate for the present situation in Latvia are analyzed in this chapter.

The consultative council „Education for All” was founded in Latvia in 2005. It is a linking organization between the government and society and facilitates the cooperation with international partners in order to achieve in Latvia the global education development aims set by the World Education Forum and to contribute to introduction of recommendations made by UNO, UNESCO, the EU, European Council and other international organizations into the education field in Latvia. Since the date of its foundation in 2007, a significant contribution to putting inclusive education ideas into practice, as well as to developing methodological recommendations and materials for carrying out inclusive education work at schools has been made by the State Special Education (hereafter the Department of Special Education of NEC of MES) of the National Centre for Education (hereafter NEC) of the Ministry of Education and Science (hereafter MES). It is of great importance that addressing the needs of special education in an inclusive environment is one of the most important directions in education policy. The issue has been defined in the form of concrete tasks in „Guidelines for the Development of Education in 2007–2013”, the priorities of Latvia's National Development Plan (NDP) for 2014–2020, and Guidelines for the Development of Education in 2014–2020 (*Izglītības attīstības pamatnostādnes 2014.-2020.gadam, 2012*). During the period of 2011–2013, within the framework of the project „Creating Support System for Learners with Functional Disorders” implemented by the European Social Fund and NEC, which was aimed at developing the support system on the national level in order to provide learners with functional disorders with qualitative education in Latvia and promote their inclusion in society, the support system for learners with functional disorders has been created in Latvia, which is based on the support system developed by the author of the doctoral thesis in 2005, approbated within the period of 2005/2006 school year – 2008/2009 school year and described in Section 1.5. Information about the review research, carried out by the author, concerning teachers' attitude to implementation of inclusive education in general education institutions and evaluation of the inclusion process is provided at the end of the Section 1.2. The objective of the research was to determine the current situation of inclusion of learners with special needs in general education institutions in Latvia from the point of view of teachers' attitude, support provision and problem solution. 470 respondents took part in the survey,

from whom 94 (20%) were headmasters and persons taking decisions on the strategic level, 376 (80%) respondents were teachers, psychologists, special teachers and other specialists. 145 (30.9%) respondents consider that their schools are ready for implementing inclusive education, 271 (57.7%) think that their schools are partially ready for it, but 43 (9.1%) respondents maintain that their schools are absolutely unready for inclusive education. 150 (31.9%) respondents state that learners with special needs are a normal, ordinary thing in their schools, while answers of 277 (58.9%) respondents testify to the fact that learners with special needs are seen as exceptional cases in their schools. The majority of the respondents - 240 (51.1%) – have a positive attitude to inclusive processes and they are ready to participate actively in the implementation of inclusive education, 172 (36.6%) accept everything passively, while 49 (10.4%) are either openly or latently against it.

**Section 1.3** „*Theoretical Justification of the Inclusion Process*” deals with the interpretation of the essence of inclusive education idea from different viewpoints and approaches: *medical approaches* whose philosophical cognition is the following: there is a norm and something that differs from the norm (Oliver, 1990; Mason & Reiser, 2000; Winzer, 1993, 2007); *economic usefulness approaches* that measures man’s normality in relation to his/her contribution to the production of social gross product (PVO, 2003; World Health organization, 2001; Malofejevs, 2008; Малофеев, 2009); *social approaches* that consider disability as a problem created by society, the emphasis is put on individual’s full integration into society, stating that disability is not a feature characteristic of an individual (Ainscow, 1995, 1999, 2007; Barnes, 2012; Mason & Reiser, 2000; Oliver, 1990; UNESCO, 2005a, 2005b), but rather a complex of conditions, many of which have been created by the social environment. Philosophical principles of inclusive education defined in the Salamanca declaration are emphasized (UNESCO, 1994).

The educational process of learners with special needs is analyzed in the aspect of pedagogical objectives, changes of pedagogical paradigms, didactic models (emphasizing the constructivist didactic model), teachers' attitudes, changes of education institutions' environment and operation (Rye, 2001: 65). Inclusive education is also analyzed from the aspect of schools operation: inclusive education changes three the most essential spheres of school life: culture, policy and practice – teaching and learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), where a joint action of the whole class as a social unit is underlined in the teaching/learning process; education is referable to all learners without singling out some separate group; inclusive education is characterized by three key

elements: presence, participation and achievements in the broadest context of education; it is the de-professionalization that manifests itself as interest of all teachers and their joint work with all learners to meet their educational needs (Thomas, Walker, & Webb, 1998); it is a democratic approach where all the parties participating in the process are involved in school life, in joint decision-making; it is communication that ensures effective mutual communication where all hear each other and every voice is lent an ear to (Thomas, Walker, & Webb, 1998).

**Section 1.4** „*Creation of the Support System for Including Learners with Special Needs in General Education Institutions*” analyzes recommendations for creating the support system and experience of Western European and the world countries, the key issues to be addressed at the strategic level (development of the national support system, its maintenance and resource provision) and the tactical level (development of the support system of municipal and education institutions, its provision) are discussed.

The key approach is to address the support system-building issues at three levels: governments, teachers and learners (Education White paper 6, 2001; Mitchell, 2010; 11.ch. Ras, 2008; Wolfendale, 1987; Birkett, 2004: 14-15) which means - *support for an educational institution, support for teachers, support for pupils*.

The support system models that have been or are being implemented in the world are described and analyzed: the model of the Botswana's support system (1990), the model of the education institutions support by Wolfendale, the model Ghana's (*author's name*) inclusive education support system. UNESCO studies suggest that *there is no single perfect model of inclusive education system creating, but the basic principles of inclusive education of the established models are implemented in the local context (UNESCO, 2009, 144)*, there is no single model showing how an inclusive education institution looks like and operates, because *each country, municipality, education institution develop its own inclusive education support system* (Dyson, 2010; Nīmante, 2008). The concept *support* should be perceived more widely, in the sense of any kind of activity that enhances an education institution's possibilities to adjust its operation according to the diversity of learners (Būts & Einskovs, 2008).

The support structures that influence inclusive education are extremely diverse and often involve a range of specialists from various services who apply different approaches and methods. The developed support systems may function as both a support for inclusion and an obstacle for it (Eiropas speciālās izglītības attīstības aģentūra, 2009). The support systems that maintain inclusion consist of

services, organizations and resource centers of various specialists, and involve different specialists reflecting the needs of the local level. Resources necessary for organization of the support for learners with special needs and promotion of the inclusive practice are the following: human resources, material and financial resources, access to information and knowledge (Miles, 2000).

**Sub-section 1.4.1** „Regulations for Successful Inclusion of Learners with Special Needs in General Education Institutions” emphasizes that changes should be implemented in all levels and the whole system of the field if development of inclusive education is desirable (Booth, 2000).

By initiating and creating the support system in the national, local government's, educational institutions' levels, it is important in advance to carry out informative and educational work to promote a change of public attitudes in relation to including learners and people with special needs in society. The questions concerning the general education system should be discussed, organizing a possibility to spend time and work together.

The formulations of inclusive education, given by many scholars - experts, characterizing a successful education institution implementing inclusive education, imply the following: support is provided and functions inside and outside a school; cooperation between the headmaster and school administration takes place, cooperation with parents and local community is encouraged, cooperation and experience exchange among different institutions are ensured; the ethos is positive and culture is forthcoming there, resources are used flexibly, adults are provided with long-term professional development, the range of highly assessed results is wide, opportunities to participate in various activities, research and development projects (frequently by attracting external partners) are given; confidence that becoming inclusive involves not only paying attention to special education needs, but also carrying out vast general improvements in schools; self-evaluation and the audit of policy and practice take place (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013; Florian, 1998; Guseva, 2012; Jenkinson, 1997; Rieser, 2013; Rouse & Porter, 2001).

Conclusions, made by West European and world countries, are studied. They concern the operation of a successful inclusive school in Europe and other countries of the world that use both internal resources of a school and assistance of out-of-school special schools and services; four basic support-providing forms are analyzed (preventive support; informative-consultative support; differentiation of the curriculum and teaching/learning process; improvement of the learning process and education environment for learners with special needs); the basic strategy for support organization – ensuring with general and specific



information, inclusion in activities, changes in the education system and education institutions – are considered (EADSNE, 1998; Malofejevs, 2008; Pathways to inclusion, 2005). It can be concluded that inclusion of a learner with special needs is possible if the following definite conditions are observed: forthcoming attitude (a learner should feel secure and belonging to the environment); qualitative teacher-learner relationship (to accept a learner, to seek for individual adaptation possibilities); a different value system (cooperation, team work, performance adequate for everybody); inclusion apart of learners' achievements; individual education programs; team work; mediation for all learners in a class, support (neither too much, nor too little, so that a learner would not develop dependence on the support); professional training for a teacher; regular meetings of the parties included, parents' participation and support, learner's choice concerning which school – special or inclusive – he/she would like to attend. Those, who shape the policy of education, can encourage and urge to choose inclusive education by attracting the necessary resources (Roth & Szamoskozi, 2005; UNESCO, 2001).

**Sub-section 1.4.2.** „*Development of the Educational Environment for Promoting the Inclusive Education Process*” focuses on the compliance of the school's education environment (Maļicka, 2004; Rumpeja & Koķe, 2001; Šūmane, 2012; Дьюи, 2001) and learners' special needs in the aspect of inclusion, underlining that the educational environment is a purposefully organized set of physical, social and informative conditions, where learners form and implement their experience: knowledge, skills and attitudes towards themselves and to the world around them (Šūmane, 2012), because, when speaking about including a learner with special needs, an adequate environment should be created in a general education institution – a purposefully organized set of physical, social and informative conditions that enhance development, motivate for activity, provide opportunities to develop one's abilities and to acquire individual experience, allow each learner to work according to his/her abilities and in appropriate pace and time, and transform knowledge into action by applying a diversity of technologies. The first prerequisite is creation of such social environment in an education institution (Špona, 2001) where a learner with special needs would be sure about his/her belonging to this environment and would feel secure to work in this environment (Jonsson, 2006). When learners with special needs get included in general education institutions, the necessity to alter the physical environment may appear, and this is the next prerequisite for successful inclusion. An education institution strengthens the feeling of belonging by adjusting furniture and other equipment to the needs of these learners (North & McKeown, 2005). In order a learner with special needs could successfully acquire the scope of

curriculum possible for him/her, the individual approach is compulsory; it is an important condition for qualitative education assurance, which provides educational opportunities for learners for whom the generally accepted methods of development promotion are proved to be inefficient. Individual approach involves, for instance, ensuring a learner with special needs with individual supplementary aids and information technologies (IT), if a learner is unable to participate in the educational process in the usual way (North & McKeown, 2005).

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

**Sub-section 1.4.3.** „*Teachers' Competence, Psychological and Methodological Readiness for Inclusive Work*” places emphasis on the view that inclusive education can be understood as the *presence* of all learners (access to education and attendance of education institutions), *participation* (quality of the learning experience from the learners' perspective) and *achievements* (learning process and results of the curriculum acquisition) in general education institutions (Eiropas speciālās izglītības attīstības aģentūra, 2011/c). Teacher's attitude, position, and internal readiness are of great importance in the aspect of inclusive education and its implementation (Silverman, 2007).

Inclusive education researchers believe that teachers can be the main factor for successful inclusion if a teacher would see a learner as an opportunity to become a more professional teacher by solving learner's problems (Peters, 1999; Rouse, 2008). A teacher must be with „open minded”, flexible and with high tolerance towards differences and changes in the usual work. Teachers should remember that self-realization of each learner in a class is his/her responsibility, that there is no need to wait when someone will say how to work and what to do with each learner, but it should be sought by oneself. A teacher should acquire a variety of teaching strategies and be able to use them effectively, adapt the material, change working methods, develop programs to help each learner (Stangvik, 1997), work in a team with staff of an education institution and parents to ensure the most relevant environment for a learner. A teacher has to treat all

members of the learning process as equal partners, listen to other professionals, learners with special needs, their peers and respect their views, striking compromises and trying out new situations.

European Agency for Special Education Development published the profile of an inclusive teacher in 2012. There were identified four basic teaching and learning values that form the basis for operation of all teachers in inclusive education. These core values are related to the fields of teachers' competences that consist of three elements: attitude, knowledge, and skills. The profile of an inclusive teacher is based on the following structure of key values and competencies: assessment of learners' diversity – diversity in education is seen as a resource and value; support to all learners – teacher's expectations are equally high for all learners' achievements; work together with others – cooperation and teamwork is the essential approach to work for all teachers; personal professional development in teaching is a learning activity, and teachers are responsible for their own lifelong learning.

**Sub-section 1.4.4.** „*Parents' Involvement in Implementation of the Education Process Objectives*” describes parents' role in the inclusion processes and possibilities of being supported by teachers (Danielsa & Steforda, 1999; Ervwin & Soodak, 2003; Kolmens, 2004).

Learners' achievements in the education process are significantly determined by parents' support and encouragement (Mitchell, 2010; Peters, 1999). Parental involvement in operation of an education institution and a class is obligatory, because parents can be the driving force behind the success of their children; it is very important that a pupil receives appropriate adult support throughout the day. Another important rule to help parents (especially those who deny inclusion) and learners is education of parents, usually mother, in order to realize that inclusion provides social, interpersonal and personal benefits, higher academic results, and enriches the educational environment for all learners. The essence of work in an inclusive education institution is coordination of the needs of an education institution, children with special needs and their parents by carrying out group and individual counseling to learners and families; work with a learner's life at home, at school, in society; problems affecting learner's inclusion in an education institution; mobilization of education institution and public resources in order to give a learner the maximum opportunity to gain benefit by learning at the particular education institution.

**Section 1.4.5** „*Creation of the Support System in the National and Municipal Level*” deals with creation of the possible support system in the national and municipal level; the support providing structures possibly included in the system,

their functions and interactions in the support system, according to the situation and processes in Latvia, are determined. In the suggestions drawn up by UNICEF, taking into consideration the right of learners with special needs in the inclusive education process, it is established that the *government-wide measures* have to be implemented (political will and good governance; measures that promote responsibility, transparency, accessibility, and the rule of law; recognition of the current situation and commitment to organize comprehensive and long-term measures to tackle issues related to social exclusion and discrimination against learners with special needs and disabilities in the educational process. During the development of the doctoral thesis research, the unified national inclusive education support system does not exist in Latvia.

Municipalities and education institutions that have started the inclusive activities either carry out or do not implement the supporting activities in the level of their own understanding, forming their attitude and work system. Latvian government-wide measures of promoting inclusive education and inclusive society are reflected in the Latvian National Development plan 2007- 2013 in the country's growth model „People First” that suggests also to provide individuals with special needs with access to education in all its forms and stages. The country is supported by ESF project funding branch for development of the single nationwide inclusive education support system.

Municipality's support has an important role in creating an inclusive education institutions, and it should be understandable to everyone: local policy makers, headmasters of education institutions and teachers involved in acquisition of common objectives (Meijer, Pljl, & Hegerty S. 1997; Stubbs, 2008). One should be aware that the result of the inclusive process depends not only on a specific education institution where this process has been started, but also on how successfully specialists working in institutions of the specific municipality or the nearest municipalities, MES, services responsible for special education, lecturers and structural units of higher education institutions involved in training teachers and specialists for work in the field of inclusive education, children institutions and organizations, social services and non-governmental organizations will be involved in this process by contributing to developing respective structures in the municipality's department of education and joining in the common support system (Wolfendale, 1987).

The municipality's possible action in creating the support system for inclusive education institutions by forming the School Support Centres (SSC) and support teams (ST) in education administrations is analyzed in the following

section, tasks for the common support system of these centers and teams are considered.

It is emphasized in **Sub-section 1.4.6** „*Development of the Support System in General Education Institutions*” that inclusive education is a teamwork - responsibility and duty shared by the whole education institution (Jonsson, 2006; Mitchell, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2004). The following parties are involved in creating the support system of an inclusive education institution: in the tactical level - subject teachers, psychologists, special teachers, speech therapists and other specialists, parents, learners; on the strategic level - headmasters of education institutions, staff of municipality responsible for a particular field, deputy directors, methodologists and other people who have the decision-making right.

Authorities of education institutions that initiate work on development of inclusive education institution *have to establish their own ST of an education institution*, which, in cooperation with SSC ST employees of the municipal education department (Education White Paper 6, 2001; Ras, 2008), implements the necessary support for all parties involved in the inclusion process. The element of the inclusive education support system - ST should be formed within the particular institution, so that everyone involved could help each other (Reid, 2006). Operation of the education institution's ST is a specific form of cooperation between professionals, involving specialists who solve learners' problems (Samuseviča, 2012).

Composition of specialists forming the education institution's ST - speech therapist, psychologist, social teacher, special educator/special education teacher, a doctor et al. - may vary depending on the needs of learners in the particular education institution and their causing conditions (Hunt et al., 2003). The ST composition, responsibilities and characterization of the support actions has been identified in legislation of Latvia. M. Giangreco, S. Broer and S. Edelman points to the fact that the lack of professionals' support can create a crisis in an education educational institution, because employees of an education institution do not understand what to do (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2003). The inclusion process in an education institution must be also supported by learners, parents, other education institutions and universities.

Tasks of the work process and work organization issues of the education institution's ST specialists are described further in the sub-section.

In **Sub-section 1.5** „*Support System for Promoting Inclusive Education in Rezekne District*”, the support system developed by the author for including learners with special needs in the educational process in general education

institution in Rezekne district has been presented. The system was approbated in 20 general education institutions in Rezekne district from the 2005/2006 school year to the 2008/2009 school year (including), during the project of ESF, MES and The Education Department of Rezekne district with the participation of staff the Norwegian Ministry of Education STATPED (special education support department). Effectivity of the support system (see Figure 1) performance will be demonstrated during the research.

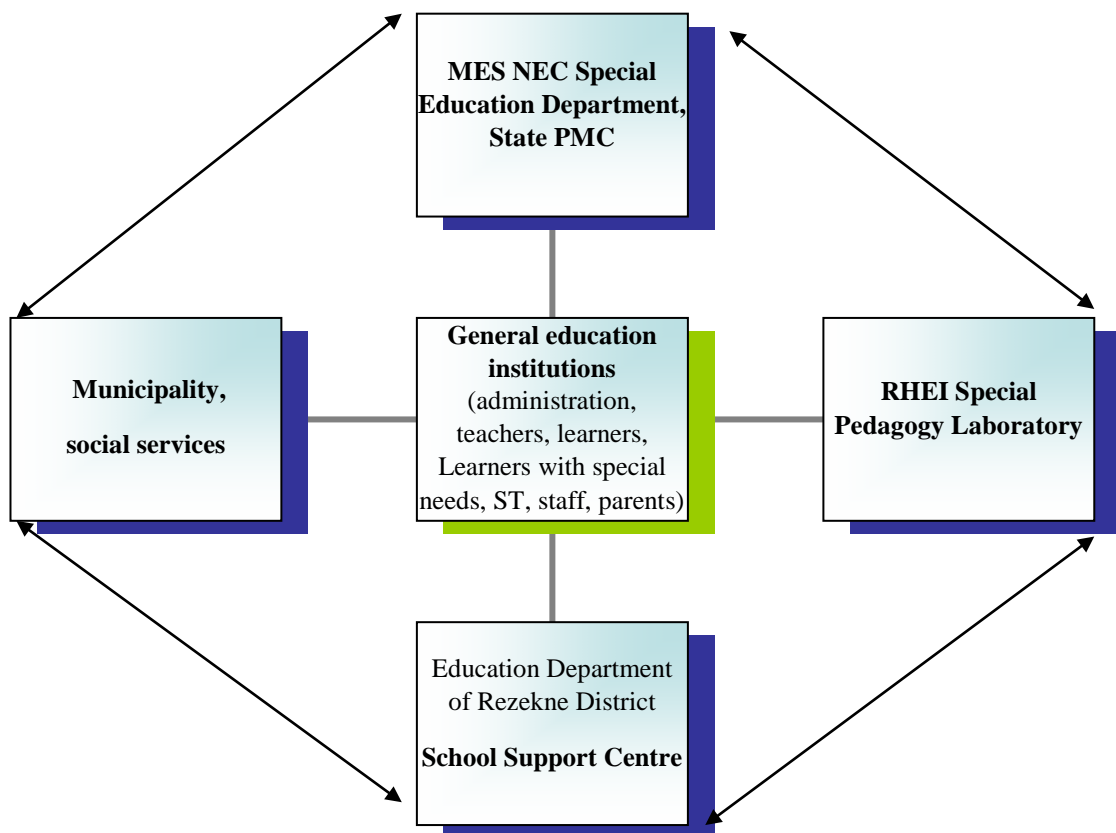


Figure 1. Support system for learners with special needs included in general education system

The developed support system unites in common operation of everyone who are able to support education institutions of Rezekne district and city in the following three aspects: support for teachers, learners (their parents) and a school in general. *The support system* joins together all people (various levels of education implementation activities and responsibility in Rezekne city, district and republic) who are ready to engage in the process for including learners with special needs in the education process in general education institution. Their

cooperation in the inclusion process is evaluated and described. The basic functions of the parties involved in the support system are described in detail in the sub-section.

Since staff of special education institutions do not show a readiness to cooperate, special education institutions are not included in this support system.

The evaluation of the support system according to the criteria of inclusive theory has been made, the evaluation of the support system from different aspects is provided: whether support providers at different levels are included in the system, whether the support is provided individually and systematically, whether applicability and sustainability of the support system is envisaged, etc.

In **Chapter 2** „*Research on the Support System for Including Learners with Special Needs in the Education Process of General Education Institutions*”, the course of the action research has been described, the results obtained from the support system approbation have been analyzed and verified, suggestions and conclusions have been developed and introduced.

In **Chapter 2**, the action research, carried out by the author from 2005 till 2008, has been described; it focuses on development and progress of the aspect of the education process (inclusion of learners with special needs in the educational process in general education institutions) in particular conditions. The action research describes the particular problem in the particular conditions; it is connected with the particular situation in which a problem is diagnosed and solved in the same context, cooperation between researchers and practitioners take place as well as introduction of their activities in practice and continuous evaluation of the situation. The participatory action research method has been used in research.

The author's research program is described, the chronological research plan is given, the stages of the research data acquisition and the target groups selected for the research are justified in the section. The methods applied in the research, their choice and application conditions are characterized.

In order to carry out research and compare the obtained repeated results, in 2005 the author developed a questionnaire for headmasters, special education teachers and teachers of general education institutions that include learners with special needs. The survey was repeated in all phases of the research. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions that allowed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. All questions included in the questionnaires provide information about respondents' overall and working experience with learners with special needs, respondent's and his/her colleagues' attitude towards the fact of inclusion, problems faced by a respondent in an education institution in this respect, assessment of the education institution's environment towards the

included learners, education institution's ST and specialists work and changes that have occurred since the ST started its operation in an education institution, help receiving opportunities at SSC or elsewhere, respondents thoughts about the necessary changes in operation of teachers, support providers and education institution as a whole.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires are recorded and processed in SPSS program. The input data coding system is formed; it is necessary in order to move from the text of specified multiple choices or attitudes expressed in the questionnaire or ratings, to the numeric values, which are then processed by SPSS with assistance of commands and operation mode.

Based on theoretical studies, the support system should provide support for an education institution, teachers and learners (Birkett, 2004), the educational environment should be inclusive and supportive (Herbert, 1974) and practical studies abroad in order to establish the quality of the support system and demonstrate the changes of situation in Rezekne district education institutions by implementing inclusive education and the support system's operation in the educational process in different education institutions. The author prefers the respondents of her survey to be *headmasters of general education institutions* (strategic level - the head of an education institution determines the processes taking place there and supports changes in operation of an education institutions, engagement in the project and the support system), *teachers* (tactical level - the main person in implementation of the inclusive education process) and the ST specialists - *special education teachers* (the ST managers of an education institution), but at the end of research - *learners with special needs* (according to the inclusive education principles, a learner is not just a passive subject for education institution's staff influence, but he/she is actively involved, participate in the learning process and gain achievements) of general education institutions and their *classmates* (classmates' attitude, behavior and action form microclimate of a class on a daily basis, which in turn, determines feelings, behavior and operation of a learner with special needs in the educational environment).

Chapter 2 provides assessment that has been carried out by analyzing the survey answers of teachers of education institutions, involved in the support system approbation, received at the beginning and at the end of the research. The responses describe teachers's personal attitude for inclusive education implementation in relation to learners with special needs, provide comparative evaluation of operation of the education institutions' ST and the education department's SSC that characterizes support received at the same time by a teacher and a learner with special needs. It is also analyzes teachers' evaluation of the



education institutions' environment in relation to inclusion of learners with special needs, because the environment is important for individual achievements of learners with special needs included in the educational process. Respondents' answers to questions showing their attitude towards inclusion of learners with special needs, compliance of the education institution environment with learners' special needs and the ST operation in the support system are significant in the research aspect. The analysis of the results of both Wilcoxon Ranking test and test to determine frequency distribution shows that *there have been significant change*. Comparing the data obtained at the beginning and at the end of the research, the results show that teachers see a problem in the fact that learners with special needs are included in an education institution at both stages at the beginning and at the end, but teachers of general education institutions are more confident about their ability to deal with these problems and work with included learners.

The results of teachers' surveys, verified with Kolmogorov-Smirnov criterion, show that there is a significant difference between the data obtained from the first teachers' survey and those of the final survey, which testifies to the fact that during the functioning of the support system, essential changes have taken place in work of schools in relation to implementation of inclusive education in the context of learners with special needs.

Since the ST-s started work at education institutions, positive changes have taken place in everyday work of schools and teachers. Teachers' attitude towards the fact that the ST has started its operation in an education institution is initially more neutral, but generally positive and hopeful, because there is no real clarity of the role of the ST in everyday life of education institutions. The analysis of Kruskal - Wallis test results show that there are maximally significant differences ( $p = 0,000$ ), depending on the subject taught by a respondent: the major changes are noticed by primary school, language and literature and informatics teachers. Thoughts of primary school teachers, language and literature teachers about the ST operation are more positive at the end of the research. It can be explained by the fact that primary school teachers teach a large proportion of subjects for learners of Forms 1-6, spelling, develop reading and writing skills, computing skills, including learners with special needs, and most often teachers face problems caused by learners' development disorders that they try to solve with the help of the ST. The data obtained at the end of the research indicate that the attitude has changed to the positive side, because now attitude towards the work of the ST in an education institution is responsive, encouraging and positive for around 80% of the surveyed teachers.

The importance of the SSC, concerning the inclusion issues of the education institutions' support operation, has considerably grown. Initially, teachers use the services provided by the SSC specialists relatively little: 44% use them seldom or rather seldom, 22% are not informed about this possibility, while at the end of the research already 67% of teachers use specialists' assistance whenever they need it, 22% - use it often or rather often. At the initial stage of the research, only 1/3 of special education teachers and headmasters turn to the SSC for assistance. At the final stage of the research, already 2/3 of teachers and 1/2 of headmasters use the assistance of the SSC to tackle problems related to learners with special needs. The data analyzed confirm the assumption that the SSC fulfils its functions and can provide support to employees involved in the inclusive education process.

As far as the favorable environment for learners with special needs is concerned, 99 or 69% of teachers think that the environment in their school is favorable for such learners at the beginning of the research, and 138 or 96% of teachers are of this opinion by the end of the research. At evaluating the education institution's environment, the idea that a small number of learners in a classroom, especially typical for small country schools, may be advantageous for learners with special needs in the inclusive education processes is heard many times. It can be concluded that the inclusion process takes place in general education institutions involved in the research, the education institutions' environment is positive for a learner with special needs. The work of the support system has resulted in positive changes in all aspects of school life, however, a lot of work is yet to be done in respect of developing inclusive school's culture.

## **Conclusions**

The topicality of the monograph „Support System for Promoting the Process of Inclusion of Learners with Special Needs in General Education Institutions” is substantiated by the situation in Latvia's general education institutions, where, due to various objective and subjective circumstances, the issue of inclusion of learners with special needs has been brought into focus only now, though it has been already implemented in some schools in Latvia for more than 18 years. There is a discrepancy in Latvia between the MES politically determined direction and the real praxis at schools.

In the result of the theoretical research, the following was concluded:

- 1) research on the organization and process of the inclusive processes for learners with special needs in different countries of Europe and the world, and the analysis of literature sources have proved that, in order

to respond to the developmental and educational needs of learners with special needs, to provide them with support corresponding to the special needs of each learner, definite prerequisites should be taken into consideration:

- *on a national level there should be a unified, nationally financed support system for implementing inclusive education that would embrace support providers at different levels and for different needs;*
- *municipalities, education departments should organize (premises, equipment, maintenance expenses) and maintain by financing provided by the state (specialists' salaries) centers of inclusive education at their education departments (part of national support system) that, by involving specialists of higher education institutions, practitioners of special schools, medical specialists et al., would provide various kind of support for those involved in the inclusion process – for school, teachers, learners;*
- *general education institutions should organize and maintain the support system of their own institution (part of a joint national and municipal support system) that would involve formation of an efficiently working specialists – support team (ST): a special pedagogue, a speech therapist, a psychologist et al., providing this team with premises, necessary materials etc., giving opportunities for teachers' professional development, and accessibility to professional consultants for all those involved. The support system should unite all those who are involved in the process of including learners with special needs in general education institutions at different levels of education implementation and responsibility, thus facilitating receiving education according to learners' needs and ensuring them with support during the educational process which is given by well-educated and motivated ST specialists and teachers, for whom opportunities of receiving consultations, professional development and getting support are accessible in various institutions and organizations;*
- *a prepared, supportive physical environment of an education institution should be accessible for learners with various developmental disorders;*
- *a social environment of an education institution should be prepared and supportive (teachers are morally ready and competent to work with learners with special needs; attitude of general education institution learners and their collaboration with learners with special needs are supportive and inclusive; the support system functions at education*

institutions, attitude of society (parents, employees of an education institution) is positive during the inclusion process and learners with special needs are able to actively participate in all activities of school life);

- *a prepared and supportive informative environment is necessary* (learners and teachers are supplied with teaching aids, supplementary aids and technical aids necessary in the teaching/learning process, which all are tailored to the needs of learners).

The support system developed in the result of literature and document research, the action research done during its approbation and the analysis of approbation results allow concluding the following:

- 1) in the result of implementing the support system developed and approbated by the author, with active participation of all those involved in the system on both the strategic (MES, municipality education department, school administration et al.) and tactical level (specialists of the SSC and the ST, teachers, consultants – experts in special pedagogy), by accumulating theoretical knowledge and practical experience, developing one's competence, learning from the best experience in other countries and in Latvia, teachers' attitude to inclusion of learners with special needs and their practical activity positively change, and their conviction that they can meet the educational needs of included learners strengthens;
- 2) during the process of the support system approbation, the environment of general education institutions has become more favorable for learners with special needs, other learners willingly accept them and help them during the educational process, each according to their own understanding, and there is only an insignificant number of those who try to dissociate themselves from this;
- 3) the ST-s have become more competent to render assistance to teachers, parents, individual help to learners; in case of need, asking for help in Rezekne regional SSC and using opportunities of getting consultations, methodological assistance, services of diagnostics from other specialists (academic staff of Rezekne Higher Education Institution, teachers of special schools, specialists of NEC Special Education Department);

- 4) the scientific strength is ensured in the action research (*Kroplijs & Raščevska, 2004*):
  - *reliability* (the author's lasting stay in the researched environment, application of the triangulation method – the subject has been treated from different viewpoints and a set of diverse data has been collected (staff of an education institution on the strategic and tactical level (administration, subject teachers), specialists (special education teachers), learners (learners with special needs, their class-mates); the discussion of the research with more experienced colleagues (scientific supervisor of the doctoral thesis, academic staff of higher education establishments, experts of Norwegian STATPED), negative cases within the research process are analyzed;
  - *applicability* (a detailed description of the research context);
  - *consistency* (logic and quality of research action program structure and results);
  - *neutrality* (reliable data collecting tools);
- 5) tools for ensuring scientific strength are used in the research (*Kroplijs & Raščevska, 2004*):
  - *impartiality* (all respondents express their views, the research results are contextualized, the author's lasting stay in the researched environment, application of the triangulation technique);
  - *ontological authenticity* (research participants gain a deeper understanding about the theme during the research; participants evaluate their own positions in the relation to the theme);
  - *educational authenticity* (participants gain a deeper understanding about the theme and one another's position);
  - *catalytic authenticity* (the research results are useful and adequate for the research participants);
  - *tactical authenticity* (the research processes and practice generate energy for changes);
- 6) there are significant differences between the results obtained at the beginning of the research and those obtained at the end of the research. Respondents' assessments show a positive dynamics in changes of assessment criteria that may be indicative of the quality of the developed support system – ability to provide support for education

- institutions, teachers, learners and parents in the process of implementing the inclusion of learners with special needs;
- 7) the practical research part provides positive and reliable results that testify to the quality and sustainability of the support system. The author considers that the support system can be used in a broader context, because the support system has been verified in general education institutions of Rezekne district and has produced positive results, and consequently, it can be used in local municipalities and general education institutions for solving similar problems.

As a result of the theoretical and empirical researches, the author has developed recommendations for intensification of the inclusion processes and successful implementation of the processes of including learners with special needs.

### **Recommendations**

for intensification of the inclusion processes and successful implementation of the processes of including learners with special needs:

1. Developers of the normative base of special education (MES, NEC Special education department) would have:
  - 1.1. to maintain the inclusive education support system on the national level, ensuring the further development of inclusive education and opportunities for real activities in normative documents of education, both financially and in practice;
  - 1.2. to promote the process of including learners with special needs in pre-school education institutions by supporting development of pre-school education institutions;
  - 1.3. on the basis of inclusive education support centers organized in Latvia in 2011 or of special pre-school education institutions, to create opportunities for early diagnostics, pedagogical-psychological support and support for families with children with special needs as close to places of their residence as possible;
  - 1.4. to make changes to legislation, introducing the requirement to train special education teachers in study programs (not in 36-72 hour further education courses) and teacher professional development courses only in those higher education institutions that implement teacher training study programs: carrying out pre-course test in order to find out the level of teachers' competence, attitude and experience, and, depending on the results of the test, provide them with respective training;

- 1.5. ESF money should go to implementation of the projects on inclusive education and promotion of society development in general education institutions as a priority, including projects on purchasing IT technologies for implementation of inclusive education process;
  - 1.6. to provide education institutions with unified, nationally financed methodological materials and teaching aids developed by specialists – university lecturers and practitioners and aimed at work in inclusive education ;
  - 1.7. to attract highly professional and experienced teachers for work in MES and NEC with regard to issues of planning, organizing and implementing special education, thereby not allowing ambitious, non-professional people to occupy responsible positions for implementing the policy of special education;
  - 1.7. to promote the cooperation between education institutions and non-governmental organizations;
  - 1.8. to develop a common understanding about inclusive education among employees of education institutions and society.
2. On the level of municipality, education department:
- 2.1. to develop the support system as part of the national support system on the territory of municipality in order to provide support for employees of general education institutions working with learners with special needs, for teachers of these education institutions, specialists, learners and their families by giving them opportunities to carry out comprehensive correction and teaching work and using (possibly) the support system developed and approbated by the author as a model;
  - 2.2. to organize School Support Centres that would coordinate activities of the support system in municipal education institutions, fulfill the functions of making early diagnostics and providing pedagogical-psychological support in municipalities, thus ensuring learners with special needs and their families with specialists' support and intervention to lessen developmental disorders and giving additional opportunities for them to have consultations with consultants, specialists (doctors, university lecturers, teachers of special schools et al.);
  - 2.3. to involve in the support system activities competent university lecturers, working in the field of special and social pedagogy, who would ensure obtaining information on the latest scientific research and findings, methodological aids in Latvia and in the world and would provide teachers, parents, specialists with additional consultative support;

- 2.4. to ensure schools with support for developing inclusive education institution, allocating additional financing to educational institutions that adopt inclusive education practice in order to achieve real, comprehensive involvement of specialists, assistant teachers to meet educational needs;
  - 2.5. to consider the possibility of preserving schools with a small number of learners, which for learners with special needs are one of the best conditions of inclusion, as suggested by the experience of Latvia and abroad;
  - 2.6. to support transformation of pre-school education institutions into inclusive education institutions, so that already at an early period of life a constant specialists' assistance could be rendered to learners with special needs and their parents, which would be later continued by education institutions.
3. On the level of education institution:
- 3.1. to develop the support system in the education institution as part of a municipality or national support system, thus ensuring implementation of the inclusive education process;
  - 3.2. when beginning inclusion of learners with special needs in general education institutions, administration of an education institution should firstly do some preparative work which includes the following:  
for headmaster of an education institution:
    - building a competent and industrious support team (speech therapist, special pedagogue), ensuring its activity during the educational process in school, involvement of the support team in the common inclusive education support system of municipality;
    - preparing staff of an education institution for arrival of learners with special needs at school;
    - gathering information about learners with special needs, clarifying the difficulties accompanying the developmental disorders, including the physical ones;
    - adaptation of education institution's physical environment to the needs of learners with special needs (purchasing special desks, chairs, supports, alterations in furniture and lighting arrangement, adaptation of school entrance, corridors and staircases to the needs of learners, purchasing computers and specialized computers, purchase of specialized software etc.);
    - furnishing the resource centre (working room [or rooms] for the support specialist team) in compliance with the specificity of work;



for deputy director in the education process:

- studying of methodological literature on issues of including learners with special needs and designing and implementing special education programs;
  - designing of adequate special education programs in cooperation with specialists or teachers working group, licensing them in MES and doing further preparation for the program implementation and accreditation;
  - gathering information about the offered professional development programs in special pedagogy, organization of teachers' professional development courses (intensive, 72 hours minimum) in an education institution;
  - involvement of specialists in forming the education institution ST, resolving organizational problems (desirably before the official beginning of the educational process);
  - working with parents of learners, providing opportunity to meet different specialists during meetings who could educate them on issues concerning communication problems, social and psychological difficulties caused by special needs, development mechanisms of disabilities, significance of tolerant attitudes and support and necessity in the educational process;
  - organization of the educational and general activities in an education institutions and out of school before and during the inclusion process, where learners can get information about problems of human development, participate in common events and do practical tasks with learners with special needs;
- 3.3. to promote the change of teachers' attitude - development of positive attitude towards implementation of inclusive education:
- to promote cooperation between teachers, specialists, parents, learners in the learning process in order a learner with special needs who is included in general education institution receives necessary support and help in the educational process;
  - to collect information about education institutions that implement inclusive education and create opportunities for school teachers to acquire and exchange experience with these schools, both in the context of Latvia and European countries, participating also in getting financing for projects financed by the EU, Nordic and other countries;

- to follow information concerning the latest methodological aids and literature and purchase opportunities, ensuring its purchase and use in work with learners with special needs during the educational process;
  - to pay special attention to inclusion of learners with special needs and promotion of their active participation in school activities, cultural life;
  - to facilitate the involvement of the ST specialists and teachers in designing methodological and supplementary aids within the framework of an education institution;
  - to create opportunities within the inclusion process to have consultations with professionals and advisers from various institutions and structural units that function in the common, joint support system;
  - to create understanding that inclusion is a work to be done by joint efforts of the whole education institution, and every person has his/her own experience in solving specific problems which makes sharing experience among staff members significant;
- 3.4. specialists of the support teams may promote implementation of the inclusive education process in relation to each learner with special needs by:
- careful planning the ST specialists' working time – to find an opportunity and time for joint and regular meetings of teachers and specialists, where they could analyze situations of each specific learner with special needs, results of specialists' and teachers' work and develop further tactic;
  - active participating in different activities, acquiring the experience of their colleagues, approbation of scientific and methodological materials, projects connected with the inclusive activity, and providing feedback to an education institution;
- 3.5. when solving specific problems, related to educating learners with special needs in a general education classroom, all possible options for receiving assistance, including the ones outside the education institution shall be used;
- 3.6. *teachers as the major implementers of inclusive education in practice*, and for ensuring it in everyday classroom work with learners with special needs the whole support system on the national, local government and education institution level has been created (because the support system renders support to school, teachers, learners), can promote implementation of the inclusive education process in relation to every learner with special needs by:

- 3.6.1. re-assessing and changing the attitude about implementation of inclusive education, according to the new paradigm of teaching learners with special needs;
- 3.6.2. being ready to learn, experiment, share experience, actively participate in activities pertaining to implementation of the inclusive education in school and outside it by adapting their work in a classroom to the new situation;
- 3.6.3. being open to a dialogue, cooperation with colleagues, parents, support specialists for implementation of a common goal – work of an inclusive education institution, shifting from personal responsibility for the results of one’s work to responsibility for the result of the common work of the whole institution.

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