

COMPETENCE OF LATVIAN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS TO INCLUDE NEWCOMERS IN EDUCATION

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Abstract. *The 21st century is the time of globalization, and migration has become the norm. As a result of these trends, the education systems must be inclusive in order to ensure the right of all children to education, regardless of their background. Preschool teachers play an essential role in the implementation of inclusive education. They have the opportunity and tools to form a foundation for further education by creating a positive and supportive environment where all children can feel welcome. In order to promote inclusion, preschool teachers must have certain competences for the inclusion of newcomers in education. The paper presents a structural model of preschool teacher competence for the inclusion of newcomers in education and the results of the preschool teacher questionnaire. The research results show that Latvian preschool teachers' competence to work with newcomer children is insufficient and needs to be improved.*

Keywords: *competence, inclusion newcomer, preschool teacher.*

Introduction

The 21st century is a time of change, with globalization becoming increasingly important in today's world. Rapid technological developments enable people to be mobile in different areas of the world. This increases the opportunities for migration. Living in a changing world, people may choose or be forced to leave their home country due to social, political or economic circumstances (Alhallak, 2019). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers in Latvia. According to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP, 2021), 148 asylum seekers were registered in Latvia in August 2021. By August 2022, this number had increased to 22,119, which is 1,310 % more than a year earlier (CSB, 2022).

The research topicality is determined by the rapid increase in the number of newcomers in Latvian educational institutions. 4.7 million Ukrainian refugees have registered for temporary protection or similar assistance schemes in the EU. 41,812 of these refugees reside in Latvia. A total of 170 asylum seekers and 195,354 stateless persons are registered (UNHCR, 2022). There are 4,405

Ukrainian war refugee children registered in Latvian educational institutions (1,329 attending preschool education institutions, 3,076 attending Forms 1 to 12) (CSB, 2022). The large number of newly arriving refugee families poses challenges to the capacity of host countries' educational institutions (Busch, Buchmüller, & Leyendecker, 2023). The challenges need to be addressed as education is one of the main ways to help newcomers integrate into the host country (Grosa, 2022). Preschool education is particularly important in helping children develop their cognitive and social skills.

The inclusion of newcomer children in the educational system is based on meeting their emotional, social and learning needs (Jalušič & Bajt, 2022). A teacher is one of the supportive mechanisms for the social adaptation of newcomers to the new learning environment, being a support for safety to mitigate the effects of the past (Soylu, Kaysili, & Sever, 2020). However, teachers lack the training and resources to fully integrate newcomers into the host country (Stevens, Siraj, & Kong, 2023). Several studies have been conducted on how to ensure the inclusion of newcomers in a preschool education institution and how preschool teachers can engage with parents of newcomers (Tobin, 2020; Sønsthagen, 2020; Anderstaf, Lecusay, & Nilsson, 2021).

Teachers' readiness to integrate newcomers into education is determined by the set of existing competences that teachers have to successfully integrate newcomers into the educational process (Bilgili, 2019). Well-trained and competent teachers are essential to ensure children's well-being, learning and development by providing high-quality curricula that are relevant to their interests and needs (Manning et al., 2017).

The aim of the paper is to analyze the competence (knowledge, skills and attitude) of Latvian preschool teachers to work with newcomers. The analysis is based on the identified structure of preschool teachers' competence to include newcomers in education.

Methods: literature analysis, questionnaire survey, data analysis in SPSS.

Theoretical Framework

Working with newcomers is a complex process that requires intercultural competence, teacher's individuality and foreign language competence. Intercultural competence is the ability to create an environment where people from different cultures can feel safe and respected. It includes knowledge of different cultures, empathy and respect for people from other cultures, and the ability to adapt to different cultures (Uibu & Tagamet, 2022).

The analysis of the literature identified aspects that influence the teacher's actions towards newcomers. The ecological theory of Uri Bronfenbrenner on the influence of the social environment on human development is an essential component of any analysis of the learning environment (Ettekal & Mahoney,

2017) and one of the techniques used to understand the complexity of the perspective of teacher competence to include newcomers in education and its impact on the individual (Chen, 2019). The microsystem involves the teacher's interaction with pupils, other teachers and the school administration. Teachers are the ones who interact the most with newcomers, so their attitude and behavior are essential for the inclusion of newcomers in the educational process (Søe, Schad, & Psouni, 2023). The more teachers believe they can implement inclusive practices, the more positive is their attitude towards inclusion (Megalonidou & Vitoulis, 2022). The mesosystem includes collaboration with colleagues and the institution's administration. The exosystem is a broader system that includes the teacher's interaction at the community level with parents and organizations. The macrosystem combines social, cultural and political aspects, but the chronosystem is the environmental changes over time (Chen, 2019).

Teachers who are able to understand and recognize children's emotions can respond better to their needs and provide a supportive learning environment (Pan et al., 2023). Moreover, teachers' emotions involve dynamic interactions between personal, professional and social environments. In order to describe preschool teachers' attitude towards newcomers, three factors of the preschool teachers' cultural value scale are used: acceptance of cultural differences, adaptation of cultural differences and rejection of cultural differences (Yılmaz & Ömeroğlu, 2023).

The age and level of education of newcomers affect their integration into the educational process. A teacher who is familiar with the psychological characteristics of preschool children and is tolerant to the different (Lamb, 2019) can provide newcomers with the support and security (Bouchane et al., 2018) needed to overcome migration trauma (social isolation, depression, somatic problems, anxiety) and adapt to a new cultural context (Grosa, 2022). Although parents and preschool teachers strive for the same goal, their differences in values can make collaboration difficult (Toren, 2021).

The environmental aspect is important for the implementation of the pedagogical process with newcomers: a teacher encourages newcomers in the new environment in order to reduce the newcomers' confusion and tension, arising from their different previous social, cultural and linguistic experiences (Picchio & Mayer, 2019). Teacher's empathy is a way of showing support and care to newcomers, and this may help them feel accepted and safe (Lamb, 2019); they need to ensure warm and positive relationships with newcomers (Stevens, Siraj, & Kong, 2023). However, if staff in preschools is unprepared to deal with the challenges, posed by welcoming newcomers (Silva et al., 2020), they may find it difficult to show empathy. This problem combines a lack of cultural understanding and foreign language skills, which hinders communication between a teacher and a newcomer, as well as between a teacher and a newcomer's family (Lunneblad, 2017).

The quality of the child-teacher relationship is important for the social and emotional development of a child (Šumatić et al., 2023), so that teachers could build positive relationships with all their children, regardless of their cultural background. This requires intercultural competence, as communication is often impeded for cultural rather than linguistic reasons (Jiang, Liu, Guo, & Wang, 2022). It is important for teachers to be culturally competent so that they can recognize and correct communication problems that arise between different cultures. In order to ensure that teachers in Latvia meet the requirements of the new competency-based education, it is important to expand teachers' communication skills. This means that teachers need to learn foreign languages and become familiar with different cultures and social environments (IZM, 2017).

Oral text is the basis of communication for preschool children. By the age of 5, children have thousands of words in their vocabulary, which they use every day and have memorized, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Some children learn the basics of language effortlessly (Feldman, 2019), while others have problems (physical, mental) understanding oral text (Ketelaar et al., 2022). Consequently, teachers need to have sufficient knowledge of the newcomer's language to be able to communicate with them in a constructive way. Research conducted in 2016 (Gelişli & Yazici, 2016) found that pre-service preschool teachers have difficulties communicating in a foreign language. One of the techniques to prevent conversational problems in the preschool stage and to promote communication is the drawing technique (Efe et al., 2023). The communication process and the daily routine of preschool children require a high level of emotional competence from teachers (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Teachers' emotions are not only internal; they are also influenced by the environment in which they work (Chen, 2019). Teachers' emotional competence determines their mental health and the teacher-child relationships (Schelhorn et al., 2023; Wang & Burić, 2023; Frenzel et al., 2018), as well as contributes to preschoolers' emotional capacity (Agbaria, 2021). Emotionally competent teachers can better understand pupils' needs, manage their own and others' emotions, work as a team and make decisions (Im, Peng, & Hutagalung, 2023). Preschool teachers highly value their emotional intelligence (Im, Hutagalung, & Peng, 2021) as it determines the quality of teaching and learning for children (Cheng et al., 2022). Teachers with less experience and younger teachers have higher emotional intelligence than older and more experienced teachers (Milojević, 2022). Motivation plays a key role in the emotional self-regulation of the pre-service teachers (Sukowati et al., 2020) and is related to emotional competence, which determines the teacher-child relationships (Schelhorn et al., 2023; Wang & Burić, 2023; Frenzel, et al., 2018) and the quality of teaching and learning for children (Cheng et al., 2022).

In order to provide quality education to newcomers, specific competences are also needed, which are based on teachers' skills and attitude, professional and general knowledge to promote inclusive education. Teachers' personal experience can equip them with valuable information that helps them to develop their own knowledge and beliefs, in turn contributing to their empowerment. Having a positive attitude towards newcomers is the most important aspect of the teacher's competence in working with them (Megalonidou & Vitoulis, 2022). The first years of a child's life are crucial for his/her social, emotional and cognitive development. Teachers play an important role in this development. Research (Hsien, Brown, & Bortoli, 2009) has found that there is a correlation between teachers' attitude and their educational qualifications: the higher the educational qualification, the more positive is the attitude towards newcomers. Both academic and pedagogical skills and personal qualities are essential for the successful inclusion of newcomers (IAC, 2021).

Experience and education are the core competences (foundation, base) from which knowledge, skills and attitude are built (Figure 1).

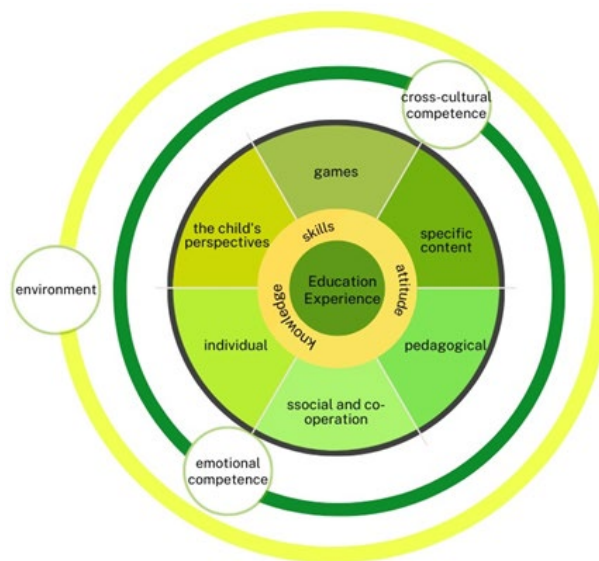


Figure 1 Structural model of the preschool teachers' competences for the inclusion of newcomers in education (by the author, 2023)

Teachers' pedagogical knowledge consists of declarative and procedural knowledge (Mathers, 2021), as well as specific knowledge, covering expertise about a child (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016). This knowledge includes demographic information (age, ethnic identity, religion) about a child (Patel et al., 2023). Teachers' knowledge and beliefs depend on previous professional and personal experience in relation to the present and future (Schwartz et al., 2022). Teachers' beliefs influence their actions and shape their behavior (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). Teachers' personal experience can provide them with valuable information that helps them make better decisions and solve

problems (Leijen, Pedaste, & Lepp, 2020). Overall, it can be concluded that teachers' knowledge and beliefs are factors determining their actions and behavior, which in turn are manifestations of human attitude (Ajzen et al., 2018).

Skills and knowledge are closely related to the teacher's work environment and are thus more subject-specific or age-group specific (Mulder, 2014). On this basis, a meta-competence emerges, which is a complex construct comprising several competences: pedagogical competence - the organization and management of the daily educational process; specific content competence - the field of training; individual competence - personal skills and individual psychological characteristics; play competence (Stevens, Siraj, & Kong, 2023) - encouragement and assessment of children in the process of playing activity; competence of a child perspective - teachers' understanding and knowledge of children's learning and development; collaboration and social competence - teachers' collaboration with different social groups (colleagues, administration, parents, children) (Lillvist et al., 2014). These competences constantly interact.

Emotional competence and intercultural competence are pervasive competences that continuously contribute to the full and positive functioning of the competence required by a preschool teacher for the inclusion of newcomers. In turn, different aspects of the environment, such as cultural norms, social expectations and political pressures, may have a significant impact on how, why and when teachers develop, manage and express their emotions (Chen, 2019) and apply their intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is important in language learning because it is closely related to communicative competence (Jiang, Liu, Guo, & Wang, 2022).

Research Methodology

Based on the theoretical findings and the results of the discussion, a questionnaire for teachers' self-assessment on the inclusion of newcomers in education was developed according to the situation in Latvia. The Teacher Intercultural Competence Questionnaire (TICQ) (Timoštšuk, Uibu, Vanahan, 2022) was used as a basis for assessing teachers' intercultural competence (covering attitude, knowledge and skills). It consists of 20 questions: 10 questions on skills, 5 questions addressing the attitude and 5 questions related to knowledge. The questions were adapted for Latvian preschool teachers. The questionnaire was supplemented with questions on what influences and contributes to teachers' competence to work with newcomers. Based on the theoretical analysis and the results of the discussion, the questionnaire was structured in 5 blocks: 1) 5 questions describing the respondents; 2) 16 statements describing knowledge, skills and attitude - closed questions; 3) cooperation with colleagues (institution staff) - semi-open questions; 4) foreign language activities - listening, reading, speaking - semi-open questions; 5) increasing teachers' motivation to include

newcomers - semi-open questions. According to the aim of the paper, only the second block of the questions is analyzed.

The survey was conducted in the e-environment (Google Forms) from 01.02.2023 to 01.04.2023. 152 Latvian preschool teachers participated in the survey. Data were coded and analyzed in SPSS. Cronbach's alpha was applied to test the internal consistency of the survey; $\alpha=.908$ indicates very good reliability and internal consistency of characteristics.

Results

The survey results show that there is a correlation between attitude and skills; a correlation between skills and knowledge and knowledge and attitude is not strong (Table 1).

Table 1 Correlations between the respondents' knowledge, skills and attitude to working with newcomers (by the author, 2023)

	Skills	Attitude
Attitude	.311	
Knowledge	.276	.216

The results support the theoretical insight that attitude, knowledge and skills influence each other (Hu, Fan, Yang, & Neitzel, 2017) and teacher attitude is a mediator between knowledge and practice (Hu, Fan, Yang, & Neitzel, 2017).

The self-assessment of knowledge, skills and attitude can be influenced by the respondents' experience and level of education. Statistically significant differences were found in the ratings of attitude ($p=.027$) depending on the teacher's work experience: the respondents with more than 40 years of experience (Mean Rank 107.44) and the respondents with 21-30 years of experience (Mean Rank 85.23) have higher self-assessed attitude; these teachers have worked longer in the profession and gained experience and knowledge that help them to maintain positive attitude. The respondents with 11-20 years of experience have the lowest self-assessed attitude (Mean Rank 56.52); they may have faced challenges related to work experience that could affect the attitude. Statistically significant differences were found according to the respondents' level of education in the self-assessment of skills ($p=.043$): the highest self-assessment is for the respondents with a 1st level higher education (Mean Rank 93.36), the lowest self-assessment is for the respondents with a Master's degree (Mean Rank 66.80).

The statements describing skills, attitude and knowledge were analyzed. Table 2 shows the mean ratings for the statements concerning skills.

Table 2 Self-assessment of the statements describing skills for inclusion of newcomers (by the author, 2023)

Statement	Mean
I integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of newcomers into my lessons.	2.816
I build supportive relationships with the parents of newcomers.	3.322
I include examples of newcomers' experience in my play-based activities.	2.803
I organize events to increase children's knowledge of other cultures.	2.901
When planning the educational activities, I take into account the customs of newcomers.	2.763
I consult with other teachers or the administration to better understand the issues related to teaching newcomers.	3.230
I check the educational materials I use in the teaching process to ensure that cultural and ethnic biases are excluded.	3.191
I make changes to the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed.	3.355

The results show that teachers in Latvia are quite open to incorporating newcomers' cultural values and lifestyles into their lessons. Statistically significant differences ($p=.036$) can be observed between teachers' level of education and the frequency with which teachers incorporate newcomers' cultural values and lifestyles into their lessons. Higher self-assessment is found among the respondents with a 1st level higher education, but lower among teachers who are completing a higher education qualification at the time of the survey. Students who complete their education and work in a preschool at the same time lack knowledge and experience in creating a multicultural environment. For example, teachers with higher education have slightly more indicated that they integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of newcomers into their lessons (47.4% vs. 42.8% with lower education) or make changes in the educational environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed (48.7% vs. 42.8% with lower education). These differences could be related to the fact that teachers with higher education are more aware of cultural diversity and its importance in education (Hu, Fan, Yang, & Neitzel, 2017).

One out of three teachers (32.9%) do not take into account newcomers' customs when planning the educational activities, and (32.9%) do not include examples of newcomers' experiences in their play-based activities. Consequently, teachers (30.2%) do not integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of newcomers into their lessons. To ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have an equal opportunity to succeed, teachers carry out a variety of actions: 91.5% make changes to the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed; 88.1% build supportive relationships with the parents of newcomers; 85.6% consult with other teachers or the administration to better understand the issues related to teaching newcomers. This is a good indicator

because teachers learn better and gain experience from teachers in their community (Sumane & Aboltina, 2023). Teachers are responsible for providing quality education for all children, including newcomers (Norozi, 2022). To do this, 82.9% of teachers check the educational materials to exclude cultural and ethnic biases. To promote the full exclusion of cultural and ethnic bias in the educational materials, it would be necessary to educate teachers about cultural diversity and its importance in education (Mahmood, 2013), to develop and disseminate inclusive teaching materials (Laxton et al., 2021), and to conduct research on the impact of cultural and ethnic bias on learning (Glock, Kovacs, & Pit-ten Cate, 2018).

There were statistically very significant differences depending on the respondents' work experience ($p=.006$): the respondents with 1-5 years of work experience (Mean Rank 92.56) are the ones most likely to make changes to the learning environment so that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed. Younger teachers are probably more exposed to new ideas and trends in education (Zafarullah al., 2022). They are also more motivated to prove themselves and succeed in their work. Teachers with 11-20 years of experience are the ones least likely to make changes to their learning environment (Mean Rank 64.27). Experienced teachers may be more attached to traditional teaching methods and approaches (Deng, 2023). They may also be more concerned about how change may affect their workload and career (Hogg, Elvira, & Yates, 2023).

The results on the teachers' attitude are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Self-assessment of the statements describing attitude towards the inclusion of newcomers (by the author, 2023)

Statement	Mean
Newcomers enrich the environment of my institution.	2.974
Newcomers enrich learning.	2.921
Newcomers enrich Latvian culture.	2.559
I think my institution could be more multicultural.	2.579

The ratings of the statement *Newcomers enrich the environment of my institution* showed statistically significant differences ($p=.036$) according to experience: the respondents with 11-20 years of teaching experience were less likely to agree with the statement. We assume that this is the time when a teacher is most critical of what is happening.

Greek teachers believe that the inclusion of newcomers in the education system is beneficial for both children and society (Megalonidou & Vitoulis, 2022). In contrast, many Latvian teachers have less favorable attitude towards newcomers, for example, the respondents strongly disagree or tend to disagree that newcomers enrich Latvian culture (76%) or enrich learning (40%). The attitude is related to teachers' lack of knowledge and confidence in working with

newcomer children with different types of learning needs, and this affects the quality of teaching and learning (Kurniawati et al., 2017; Špona, 2019). Teachers' attitude towards diversity is an important factor for the successful inclusion of newcomer children (Prudnikova et al., 2023), and their knowledge of the dimensions of cultural diversity is important for newcomer children from different cultural backgrounds. In turn, children's cultural experiences and the implementation of learning in relation to their experiences provide an opportunity to organize a more meaningful educational process (Gay, 2000). As the attitude is the starting point for the development of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006), the low results obtained pose risks for the successful inclusion of newcomers: many teachers are not open to intercultural relations and diversity. The attitude may also be influenced by the Latvian experience: the effects of the Soviet era, when the national identity was restricted, are still felt. Although some research has found a correlation between teachers' attitude and their educational qualifications (the higher the educational qualification, the more positive the attitude towards newcomers) (Hsien, Brown, & Bortoli, 2009), this was not found in the present research.

Table 4 shows teachers' self-assessment of their knowledge for the inclusion of newcomers in education.

Table 4 Self-assessment of the statements describing knowledge for inclusion of newcomers (by the author, 2023)

Statement	Mean
I am knowledgeable in teaching strategies that incorporate components of ethnic identity diversity.	2.520
I have an understanding of the aspect of cultural diversity in pedagogy.	2.882
I am knowledgeable about how the experience of newcomers can affect their learning.	2.888
I am aware of various resources that can be used in the educational process of newcomers.	2.783

No statistically significant differences were found according to age and work experience.

Teachers need to be aware of potential problems and implement specific strategies, knowing the children's cultural background, to ensure both active learning for newcomer children and the adaptation of new cultural contexts to the educational process (Soylu, Kaysili, & Sever, 2020). Teachers need to be open to the new and, based on the experience and knowledge gained, improve their teaching practice through a variety of individual and group work activities (Prudnikova et al., 2023). In general, Latvian educational staff are interested in learning about diversity issues that include the diversity of ethnic identities. However, there is still a need for further education in this area, as the results of

the survey indicate insufficient knowledge and a need for further training. Attention should be paid to knowledge of teaching strategies that include a component of an ethnic identity diversity: 4.6% of the respondents indicated that they were not knowledgeable and 46.1% rather not knowledgeable in the use of such strategies. This fact is worrying because teachers' lack of knowledge limits the implementation of inclusive education (Kurniawati et al., 2017), affects the planning of the educational process and often fails to meet children's expectations (Santos & Miguel, 2019), and undermines a meaningful process based on constructivism in line with children's educational needs.

Conclusions

1. Preschool teachers' readiness for the inclusion of newcomers in education is a meta-competence, and it includes several competences: pedagogical competence for the organization and management of the educational process; specific content competence, individual competence, playing competence, competence of a child perspective and social competence. These competences interact with each other and with transversal competences such as emotional competence and intercultural competence.
2. The results of the preschool teachers' self-assessment support the finding that attitude, knowledge and skills are interdependent and indicate that their quality is influenced by the respondents' experience and level of education.
3. The results show a contradiction: while the respondents stress that they are open to integrating newcomers' cultural values and lifestyles into the curriculum, one out of three respondents indicates that they do not include newcomers' customs and experiences into their play-based activities, which poses risks for the successful inclusion of newcomers in education.
4. The analysis of the preschool teachers' self-assessment of their knowledge and skills suggests a need for improvement.

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