



Supporting Preschool Teachers and Candidates in Inclusive Preschool Setting – Presentation of Naturalistic Teaching Project

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Abstract:

Although mainstream teachers have wide knowledge about children with special educational needs (SEN), improvement of practical skills regarding education and development of these children is always needed. Improving teaching skills related inclusion and best practices are very important, as well as exchanging inclusion-related information and experience with other countries. Naturalistic teaching is defined as a process that helps children to gain developmental goals through interactions with the teacher embedded in natural environment and situations. It is a process, which provides developmental opportunities for all young children with SEN at-risk groups and with typical development to acquire skills or reinforce them. This paper presents the characteristics of Naturalistic Teaching as well as the key elements of it. The main questions and strategies are also described such as strategies that can be used with both children with and without SEN. Naturalistic Teaching Project is also presented as a good example of international information changing in the field of preschool inclusion.

Keywords:

preschool, inclusion, Naturalistic Teaching, interactions, development

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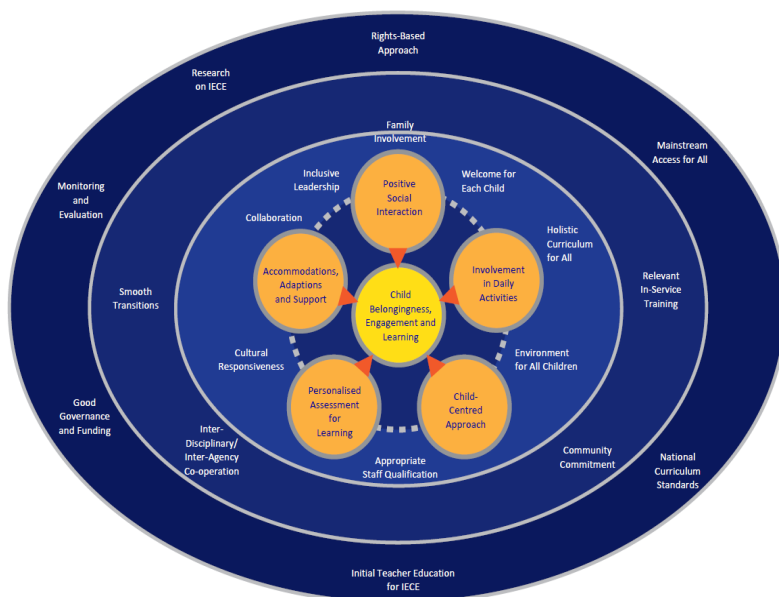
Introduction

Nowadays inclusive education in preschool education is a widespread international practice (cf. Ferguson, 2008; Ainscow, Dyson & Weiner, 2013). It is also a widely accepted principle that children with special educational needs (SEN) should be truly accepted members of the classes, take part in activities in the most natural environments. Based on these facts, teachers should be encouraged to develop methods and learning environments that fit the best and meet the needs of children with SEN (Frankel et al., 2010).

Successful preschool inclusion has many factors, that should be taken into consideration: such as external factors (e.g. laws, documents, physical environment), parents, the child or children with SEN, peers, teachers, and other professionals supporting the development of children (Böddi, 2020). So, it is very important to study inclusive settings from the view of the ecosystem model (cf. Ginner Hau et al., 2022), and to monitor all the factors that influence inclusive preschool groups. Figure 1 shows a possible model that approaches Early Childhood Education from the aspect of ecosystem framework.

Figure 1

The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017, p. 37)



“The inclusion of all children requires both attendance and involvement. Involvement is closely related to engagement, defined as being active in everyday activities, and to the interaction between the child and the social and physical environments (Granlund 2013). Consequently, factors that are important for inclusion apply not only to the individual child but also to the entire group of children and to the practitioners. These factors also apply to social interaction, to the physical and material environments, and to collaboration with families or caregivers.” (Ginner Hau et al., 2022, p. 974)

It is also a well-known fact that teachers’ as well as teacher candidates’ willingness and attitudes towards inclusion are influenced by their knowledge, experience, concerns and perceived preparedness regarding inclusive education and taking care of children with SEN (e.g. Rakap et al., 2017; Böddi et al., 2019; Miesera et al., 2019; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Hastings & Oakford, 2003). However, educators’ training related to inclusion shows connection to their attitudes and practices they use (Kwin et al., 2017).

This paper focuses on one of the key elements, which is the role of mainstream teachers who take care of and educate a whole group of preschool-aged children, containing both typically developing children and children with SEN.

“A key element in the successful implementation of the policy of inclusion is the views and attitudes of teachers who have the major responsibilities for implementing it. It is argued that teachers’ attitudes (beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and ideas) are critical in ensuring the success of inclusive practices. Preschool teachers’ knowledge, emotions and skills concerning inclusion are of particular importance because of their special role in inclusive education and because children with SEN receive inclusive education primarily within preschool institutions (Artan and Balat 2003).” (Seçer, 2010, p. 44)

From this view it is needless to emphasize that teacher training has also a crucial role in successful inclusion (cf. Miesera, et al., 2019). The lack of training can lead to difficult educational situations, negative attitudes towards inclusion, and to the feeling of less competence in the field of teaching children with SEN (Bryant, 2018; Böddi et al., 2019). From another view we can say that teachers’ methods are a key of importance regarding preschool inclusion. For example, the Building Blocks Model (Sandall et al., 2001, cited in Lundqvist, 2023) emphasizes that curriculum modifications and adaptations, embedded learning opportunities and explicit, child-focused instructional strategies are the components that determine how successfully an inclusive preschool setting works (Lundqvist, 2023).

“Teachers with more positive attitudes towards inclusion are more likely to implement instructional practices known to facilitate effective inclusion of

young children with a range of learning needs (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelyly, 2003; Sharma et al., 2006, 2008). Moreover, teachers who hold positive attitudes towards children with disabilities and their inclusion positively influence the attitudes of typically developing peers towards children with disabilities (Sharma et al., 2008).” (Cig & Parlak-Rakap, 2017, p. 98)

The above-mentioned framework and facts emphasize the importance of providing practical knowledge to preschool teachers and teacher candidates regarding inclusion to prepare them for handling successful inclusive preschool groups.

Naturalistic Teaching Process

“Naturalistic instructional approaches are used to provide intentional and systematic instruction to young children with disabilities during typically occurring activities” (Snyder et al., 2015, p. 69) These methods were developed to support teaching children with SEN who attend educational institutions with mainstream curricula. They contain both embedding and embedded learning opportunities (Snyder et al., 2015). Naturalistic Teaching Process is an example of the above mentioned naturalistic instructional approaches.

Naturalistic Teaching is an educational process that helps children to gain developmental goals through the meaningful embedding of the goals aimed for the child in the daily routine and activities of the child. It also provides opportunities for all young children with SEN at-risk groups and with typical development to acquire skills and reinforce them, where education is presented in the child’s daily natural life.

This educational method has four characteristics (Figure 2). It is important to emphasize that this method can be used among both children with and without SEN. It is based on behavioural approaches (where you use the teaching techniques) and social interactions between the teacher (or other adult) and the child. In this process children’s natural environment (e. g. preschool classroom, schoolyard, home etc.) is considered as meaningful learning environment. As well as everyday life’s situations, such as daily routines, activities and transitions are the situations when teaching is executed through adult-child interactions.⁵

⁵ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/module-book/6-module-1-naturalistic-teaching-process> p. 5.

Figure 2*The four characteristics of Naturalistic Teaching⁶*

When a teacher plans a Naturalistic Teaching process they should take into account the leading role, the needs, and skills of the child as well as the way of supporting and the method of expressing the skill that is planned to be improved (Figure 3).⁷

⁶ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/module-book/6-module-1-naturalistic-teaching-process>

⁷ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/module-book/6-module-1-naturalistic-teaching-process>

Figure 3*Planning in Naturalistic Teaching*⁸

The three key questions are the so called “3WH”-s:

1. **WHAT?** What is the skill to be taught? For answering this the teacher should be aware of the child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). It is emphasized to choose correct and realistic goals for the child. It should be functional, generalizable, and measurable.
2. **WHERE?** Where should be the goals achieved or a teaching process be executed? As it was mentioned before, teaching can happen during daily routines, activities, or transition situations during children’s everyday situations.
3. **HOW?** This is based on the previous two answers. “The answer to the question of how is the environmental arrangements, natural teaching strategies and techniques that the teacher will use”⁹ Both environmental arrangements and strategies have exact techniques to be used by the teacher (cf. Figure 4).

⁸ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/module-book/6-module-1-naturalistic-teaching-process> p. 28.

⁹ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/resources/assets/upload/modules/module-1-naturalistic-teaching-process-ea0Ra.pdf?v=1.12> p. 32

Figure 4*Arrangements, strategy, and techniques in Naturalistic Teaching¹⁰*

It is a key element in using the process of Naturalistic Teaching that the adult (usually the teacher) should show responsive adult behaviours. These are simple, memorable behaviours that support children to accomplish skills that are aimed. These behaviours should be responsive, sensitive, expressive, and directive.¹¹

Conclusion

Success of preschool inclusion depends on teachers who educate and take care of children in their groups. Lack of inclusion-based knowledge can cause negative attitudes and helplessness among teachers, however providing them strategies can improve their skills and self-efficiency.

Naturalistic Teaching is a process that is embedded in everyday activities and natural environment and can be used with both children with SEN and typically developing children. These are useful methods that can be easily adapted to all kinds of preschool settings.

¹⁰ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/module-book/6-module-1-naturalistic-teaching-process> p. 32.

¹¹ <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/module-book/2-module-3-responsive-adult-behaviors>

It is also important in teacher training to exchange international information and experience to improve teacher training and to incorporate new methods that can be taught to teachers and teacher candidates.

Naturalistic Teaching Project (Project Naturalistic Instruction: Exploding and Transferring Evidence-Based Strategies for Early Childhood Inclusion Professionals – Project Naturalistic Instruction -2021-1-TR01-KA220-VET-000034720) is a good example for international cooperation in the field of preschool inclusion. This project provides free web-based written and visual materials regarding preschool inclusion. It also provides preschool teachers and early childhood educators to complete the training based on the materials and receive a certificate about it. The materials are provided in Turkish, English, German, Hungarian and Macedonian with the contribution of the project partners.¹² Hopefully such projects and international exchanges of experience and useful practices are going to develop the success of preschool inclusion in all countries.

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¹² <https://www.naturalisticteaching.com/en>

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