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8 Play for children with disabilities: the users' needs in the Lithuanian context

8.1 Introduction

According to Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, in 2015 Lithuania had 253.400 persons with disabilities, who are receiving welfare from the state, of which 48% were men and 52% were women. Out of this number, 15.000 were children. The main reasons for children's disability (and special education needs, SEN) in Lithuania are mental disorders, behavioural disorders, hereditary problems, deformations, anomalies of chromosomes and nervous system diseases.

The report by Lithuanian Education and Science claims that the number of children with SEN is increasing in general in higher educational institutions (6,6% in universities and 19,3% colleges in 2006, compared to 2005). And yet, the number of children with special needs in educational system declines with each stage of education (most – 15,1% – of the SEN children are in pre-schools, with only 0,3 going to universities, in comparison with general number of children and young people in schools and universities).

Statistical data points out that even though the general numbers of inclusive education are growing, the tendencies overall are not showing positive results in the long run. Even though the number of children with SEN in educational institutions is growing, they have a pattern of falling out of the system in their young adulthood, thus resulting in decrease of socialization, communication problems and limited career options.

This tendency points out a structural, holistic problems in Lithuanian social care and educational systems, opening such flaws as insufficient resources, not adequate inclusion process, lack of good practice model for social care professionals.

Research by Lithuanian College of Democracy concludes that the users' needs about play for children with disabilities and with special education needs (SEN) are not met in Lithuania.

This claim is met by the following case study. The first part of this case study discusses the current situation and statistical data relevant to the topic of children with disabilities, the second part of the study discusses the improvements and upgrades done in recent years, and the last part of the study describes the rare positive examples of how play is included in daily schedules of children with disabilities and SEN.

8.2 Outline of Lithuanian social security and education of children with SEN

The report by Lithuanian Education and Science ministry summarizes the possibilities of social integration of persons with special needs and the statistics about availability for them to learn (formal and non-formal education) and work. The report concludes that the number of children with special needs in educational system declines with each stage of education (most – 15,1% – of the SEN children are in pre-schools, with only 0,3 going to universities, in comparison with general number of children and young people in schools and universities).

The report concludes that the number of children with SEN is increasing in general in higher educational institutions (6,6% in universities and 19,3% colleges in 2006, compared to 2005). It recommends to attend more carefully social inclusion and integration programmes, dedicated for people who finish high schools, because there is a huge risk that children with SEN are not adequately included to the job market and educational institutions after they complete their secondary education.

The report can be used to see the main tendencies of educational needs for children with SEN, and, while having data about the decrease of children reaching one or another stage of education, include more non formal education tools (including play) as a method for better experience in educational process for children.

The report by Lithuanian Children Rights Protection Office describes a current situation of children disability and with SEN in Lithuania, presenting statistical data about the amount of children in general and in various educational institutions, including special care schools.

The paper describes the main problems providing social care services, including:

1. General intolerance in the public regarding persons with SEN.
2. Lack of funding for basic needs of the children.
3. Lack of specialists who could work with persons with SEN in schools and other institutions.
4. Lack of specialists working with children with SEN on a district and local levels.
5. Not adequate funding for making public spaces available for persons with SEN.
6. Lack of specialists in rural areas.
7. Limited amount of social care institutions.
8. Not enough available transportation options.
9. Lack of funding for leisure activities and support for necessary tools for inclusion (toys, educational materials).
10. Poor system for inclusion in public schools, not adequate qualifications for educators.
11. Limited career options for young persons with SEN.
12. Lack of coordination between different institutions.

Both of the reports conclude that that special needs are not addressed properly in Lithuania, the inclusion process is complicated. The institutions working with children who have special needs focus on improving the basics (transportation, accessibility, materials and tools, availability of specialists), and at the moment, has very limited resources to focus on the content, individual programmes or socialization, including play.

8.3 Case study: good practice models and improvements in Lithuania

Even though the general situation is not showing too much positive results, small but steady progress is made. Using experience from countries with advanced social security, learning from good practice models and adapting them in Lithuania has become one of the main goals for upcoming years.

Center of special education and psychology in 2010 has prepared a research paper.

“Variety of educational forms of People with SEN”. Using situation analysis, analysing good practice models in Denmark, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and case studies they made a recommendation to use in Lithuanian educational schools.

The goal of this chapter is to describe what kind of educational assistance is provided for children with SEN in Lithuania and in Denmark, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and what kind of experience is provided for these children in educational institutions.

The research does not focus on the play, but describes general experiences of children with SEN and possible recommendations for improving the situation while adapting the good practice models of Denmark, the Netherlands and United Kingdom through interviews with 18 experts.

The paper relies on 4 case studies of Lithuanian children, who were educated both in state primary and middle schools and in schools for children with special needs. The paper claims that main difference between two types of educational institutions is the individual support for the children. Their behaviour is changed to the positive side, according to the parents and the teachers, when they are placed in a special needs school. There, according to respondents, they have more positive experience, without possibility to be bullied or left behind academically. They also state that home-schooling provides even more positive results.

The role of play in the research is rudimentary, it is seen as additional leisure activity, with little to no focus on it in children’s schedule.

The case studies in this paper offers a viewpoint on special needs education in Lithuania, which emphasizes not inclusion but a certain level of marginalization (sending children into special care home instead on working individually with them in local communities).

To solve this, a methodological tool “Individualizing educational programmes for students with SEN” was created. It’s a set of recommendations for teachers, who work with children with different needs and abilities.

The paper summarizes the recommendations for preparing an individual plan and differentiated education for children with SEN. The text argues that schools should not use a general plan and educate each child individually, according to their own needs and abilities.

It is structured to reflect these points and creates an elaborate recommendation for making an individual plan for each child. The text introduces play as a tool for learning, and encourages teachers to use play as a tool for active research, productive group work.

The methodological tool is created in response to the need by teachers and special needs educators, who were seeking to gain knowledge about effective and inclusive work with children who have SEN. Including play as a method in it as a learning tool is a one step towards a more inclusive and open education.

It is one of the first methodological tools, dedicated to the topic, in Lithuanian language, which shows that the situation is improving and that the good practice models are gaining more accessibility and availability.

8.4 Socialization and daily activities of children with disabilities and SEN

In the last segment of this paper we are going to discuss examples of positive socialization and daily activities of children with SEN.

In an “Analysis of children with SEN in public schools” participated 164 teachers, 50 children with SEN, 66 parents who have children with SEN. All participants come from middle schools in 1 district.

Methods used in the research were: structured interview with SEN children, SEN child parents, questionnaire with teachers. Data processed using statistical methods.

The research concluded that almost half of the children with SEN are living in families at social risk, half of the participants were not participating in after-school programmes, spend their time passively, usually – watching TV. Data gathered by the research has contradictions – teachers are insisting that families that have children with SEN are taken care of, has individual help, while parents argue on the contrary.

Parents spend very little quality time with children (either watch TV together or do chores), and make little effort for helping children with their homework. Children with SEN and their parents claim that they receive no or not enough care from special pedagogues, social educators, speech therapists. Teachers claim that their help for children with special needs is adequate, yet they also mention that the lack of time, good practice models, knowledge and methodological tools are the main problems, why the help for children is not of good quality.

Children and parents agree, that they receive less than adequate help from teachers, and that the help they receive is not enough for quality education. Teachers claim, that there is not enough possibilities offered by school administration to improve their qualifications to offer quality education for children with SEN.

The research focuses on the basic needs of children with SEN, and does not cover play as a method and tool for improved educational quality. The research results provide information that children with SEN are offered not enough leisure or educational possibilities due to lack of qualifications, methodological tools and good practice models.

Another research paper, called “Socialization model of children with SEN” is dedicated to summarizing the socialization possibilities of children with SEN. It introduces the main factors and conditions needed for creating a model for positive inclusion.

Research objects were 4-21 year old children with SEN socialization process in social care institution.

Organizing, carrying out and analysing the research took 10 years. 60 children with SEN and 120 educators from 4 different institutions were included in this longitudinal study. The goal of the research was to provide a model for socialization, created according to the socialization strategies, sources, good practice models and previous research. Analysis of previous research/content, statistical data analysis, empirical observation methods were used during the time of the research.

The article claims that the main threats for positive socialization for children with SEN is the attitude of general society, but current tendencies of creating inclusive socialization models provide opportunities for children and young persons with SEN to have in general more positive experience socializing.

The research states that skills related to play offers improvement in social behaviour, and that creating an environment where play is encouraged is important in order to empower children for positive socialization. Social games are also important as a formative force for positive behaviour.

The research states that play and other leisure activities are directly correlating with the developmental issues - the more delayed is the development, the less the child is interested in play, common activities, socializing; also, they have more expressive style of communication and lack of abstract thinking. The research recommends creating an environment where play is encouraged as a tool of improving and forming child's behaviour.

“Emotional development of children with mental disability through didactic games” presents a pedagogical experiment which was carried out from October, 2007 to February, 2008 in NGO “Vilties spindulelis” with 6 visitors of the NGO. It describes children's needs for appreciation, support from an adult and being a leader. The researcher analysed quarterly plans of work with special needs children, it noticed that no plan included such goals as “to develop empathy”, all of them were concentrating on simpler tasks (to develop love for nature and animals; to learn how

to take care of plants; get to know more about birds). Thus pointing out that educators who are described in the research paper focus on specific tasks, not a holistic strategy. During the interviews, none of the staff members describes didactic games or play as a method for developing empathy or other positive outcomes, its function is limited for breaks and energizing. That should be seen as a barrier.

The paper focuses on didactic games to:

1. Develop empathy through mimicry
2. Express thoughts and developing communication skills
3. Develop empathy through music
4. Learn about expressing emotions through pictures
5. Learn about helping others

Paper recommends to:

1. Improve the education programmes and include more complex tasks for educators
2. To introduce play gradually and in small groups.

Results of an experimental research convince us of that, didactic games influence not only emotional development of children, but also on development of the person as a whole. Thus, under influence of a purposeful management in didactic games children with mental disabilities have an emotional progress more intensively.

“Emotions of children who have average cognitive development disorders through theatrical games observes closely the impact on children of theatrical games. Methods used in the paper is the analysis of literature and previous publications, content analysis, conversation, case study.

The overall topic is: developing emotional intellect in children with average cognitive development disorders through theatrical games.

The paper argues that using various arts (painting, music, dance, storytelling and theatre) is essential in teaching children with SEN on how to communicate their emotions, because usually, average cognitive disorders go hand in hand with aggression and other socially disruptive behaviour.

Behaviour of 4 children was analysed during the research, providing that children are more responsive, calm and trust themselves better if theatrical games are introduced in their daily routines. Conditions for positive socialization is encouraged, because children are learning to express their emotions in positive and non-disruptive ways, to relate to others better, to communicate more in general.

The paper notices that theatrical games are used as a tool for inclusion less than other art forms (music, dance, visual arts). Theatrical games relatability to playing, the natural activity of children, offers a wide array of possibilities for education and socialization.

Another study, “Deaf and blind children, communicating through games” takes a look into the communication of 6 children with disabilities. She uses such methods as analysis of literature and previous publications, quality research, case study.

The study reveals that deaf and blind children communicate through body language and through acoustic methods – gestures, mimics, touching. Research concludes that children who are deaf and blind, during game time communicates only directly with their teacher. They need to have a constant structure and repetition - routine helps them to communicate better. Children do not communicate between themselves, only with their teacher, without using verbal cues.

“Inclusive education using play therapy in pre-school” discusses children’s need to express themselves and own feelings and having a safe environment where they can explore their surrounding and understand themselves better. Overall, the paper discusses the importance of play for development of a pre-school age child.

The specifics of the play therapy method application under the inclusive education conditions in the pre-school education group.

Barriers for children to have a full experience in play are described as: not enough different forms of support and help for children with disabilities and lack of new methodologies and learning of how to teach for educators.

The facilitators for improved experience for children are not rushing the child - the child has to feel safe and take initiative. Also, using different types of play therapy:

- Psychoanalytical play therapy (letting the child to forget their problems)
- Expressive play therapy (letting the child to express their feelings)
- Interpersonal play therapy (letting the child to develop their relationships)
- Non-directorial play therapy (play without structure)

The recommendations for improving the experience are:

- Being a part of a community
- Having social relationships and forming friendships
- Partnership between family, specialists and community
- Implementing human rights

This paper defines a good practice model of using play as a tool for inclusion of children with disabilities.

8.5 Conclusions

The number of children with special needs in educational system declines with each stage of education (most – 15,1% – of the SEN children are in pre-schools, with only 0,3 going to universities, in comparison with general number of children and young people in schools and universities).

The number of children with SEN is increasing in general in higher educational institutions (6,6% in universities and 19,3% colleges in 2006, compared to 2005).

Attending more carefully social inclusion and integration programmes, dedicated for people who finish high schools, is essential, because there is a huge risk that

children with SEN are not adequately included to the job market and educational institutions after they complete their secondary education.

Special needs are not addressed properly in Lithuania, the inclusion process is complicated. The institutions working with children who have special needs focus on improving the basics (transportation, accessibility, materials and tools, availability of specialists), and at the moment, has very limited resources to focus on the content, individual programmes or socialization, including play.

Special needs education in Lithuania emphasizes not inclusion, but a certain level of marginalization (sending children into special care home instead on working individually with them in local communities).

The situation is slowly improving with more and more methodological tools introduced into educational system, which are created in response to the need by teachers and special needs educators, who were seeking to gain knowledge about effective and inclusive work with children who have SEN. Including play as a method in it as a learning tool is a one step towards a more inclusive and open education.

The basic need to play of children with SEN are not met in most cases in Lithuania, and does not cover play as a method and tool for improved educational quality. The research results provide information that children with SEN are offered not enough leisure or educational possibilities due to lack of qualifications, methodological tools and good practice models.

With more resources and good practice models, promoting positive socialization and individual support for children with SEN, the needs will be understood and addressed better, thus promoting the need for various forms of play.

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