Play for Children with Disability. Case Study from Lithuania

Eglė Celiešienė, Giedrė Kvieskienė

1 Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Lithuanian College of Democracy, Studentų St. 39, LT-08106 Vilnius, Lithuania, egle.celesiene@gmail.com
2 Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Studentų St. 39, LT-08106 Vilnius, Lithuania, giedre.kvieskienė@leu.lt

Abstract. The indices of sustainable education and equal facilities for children with disability interface with the play and creativity game in education arena are widely discussed and controversially perceived in practical workshops and theoretical literature. Creative and inclusive education for children with disability is designed to meet their needs and facilitate their social integration and development. Education is the central axis of integration and growth of children integration and growth encouraging additional focus on simulation and education based on creative and interactive games design.

Keywords: sustainable education, free play, play for children with disability.

Introduction

Mutual learning and analysing the best practice on the provision of support for children with SEN are lacking at the European theoretical and practical levels. The available articles are confusing due to marked absence of pan-European data on the prevalence of SEN, varying definitions of SEN between countries and divergent methods of SEN identification. Correspondingly, there is a case for a harmonised classification framework of SEN in Europe. According to the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, in 2015, Lithuania had 253 400 persons with disabilities (men accounting for 48 percent and women for 52 percent of the total) receiving disability pensions1. Compared to 2014, the number of disabled children also changed very insignificantly and amount-

ed to 15 000. 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. Statistical data points out that even though in general the numbers of inclusive education are growing, the overall tendencies are not showing eventual positive results. 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 positive socialization, social communication problems and limited career options. Typically developing children engage in solidary and social play and find play pleasurable (Smith, Pellegrini, 2012; Vickii, 2013). Play has different forms – locomotor, object, language, modelled, free play, toy sociodramatic – readily recognised by children and adults. For some children, disabilities affect how often and what they play or whether they play at all. Studying play in disabled children is challenging, because of existing debates in play and disability research. In play research, debate focuses on potential developmental functions of different play forms. In disability research, inconsistencies exist in classifying disabilities, and in recruiting disabled research participants. This tendency points out structural and holistic problems in the Lithuanian social care and educational systems, opening such flaws as insufficient resources, not adequate inclusion process, and lack of good practice model for social care professionals.

The research conducted at the Faculty of Social Education of the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, and Lithuanian College of Democracy concludes that the users’ needs for more information and practices about play for children with disability and with special education needs (SEN) are not met in Lithuania. The Catalogue of Social Services 2006-04-05 No A1-93 lists the following types of day care services: day care centres, rehabilitation institutions for the disabled (social rehabilitation centres, rehabilitation centres for the disabled children; work centres for the disabled etc.), and support centre for the family. If children live in institutions (boarding or special schools), their families do not receive any help or support at home. If disabled children live at home, they receive education, help and support at home (Ruškus, Eskytė, 2009). The means of providing systemic assistance to pupils from unfavourable social and economic environment are considered by the schoolchildren welfare commission. If a pupil faces huge learning difficulties, upon the agreement of parents (guardians) children may be registered to have special education needs. In that case, a primary education curriculum is adapted to needs of a concrete pupil and the latter receives the assistance of a social pedagogue, psychologist, special teacher or other specialists. Pupils with special education needs receive more funds: their pupil’s basket is about 35 per cent bigger than that of other pupils. Welfare professionals are with strong self-regulation, skills for planning, guiding and assessing, and use not only their own intellectual resources about the learning of curricular issues but also in their performance and creativity games as a teacher. Like any new game, it will take you time to plan, prepare and introduce a game and adapt teacher’s activities.
However, all children can help you do this, and it is ‘best practice’ to involve the children in how they think you could adapt your games and activities. Making adaptations could be an activity in itself. Everyone needs to think creatively – and have fun doing it2.

**The subject of the article:** play for children with disability and SEN in Lithuania.

**The objective of the article:** to summarize the situation in Lithuania related to play for children with SEN.

**Outline of Lithuanian social security and education of children with disability and with SEN**

It is difficult to overrate and categorize the play needs of every child are unique. Children with multiple disabilities pre-sent more challenges because the interaction of disabilities influences different developmental domains in play. The play and other alternative methods in education institutions of Lithuania like in other countries for social integration of children with special needs and with SEN and for their education (formal and non-formal education), are underused. The proportion of special educational needs of students integrated into general education classes varies enormously by school type, size and location; OECD Reviews of School resources: Lithuania 2016 (Shewbridge, Godfrey, Nusche, 2016). Additionally, more could be done to encourage collaboration between teachers and professionals, including through increased opportunities for joint professional development and, particularly, extension of specialist professional support to early years’ providers to ensure that needs are identified and supported at the earliest possible stage in a child’s education. The proportion of special educational needs students integrated into general education classes varies enormously by school type, size and location. ORCD 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 into the job market and educational institutions after they complete their secondary education. The report highlights the main tendencies of educational needs for children with SEN, and, while having data about the decrease of the number of children reaching one or another stage of education, suggests more non formal education tools (including play) as a method for better experience in educational process for children. A further point was made in relation to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and the need for teachers to be supported to deploy a wider range of strategies for creative games and free plays for managing behaviour in the classroom. The report by the Lithuanian Child Rights Protection Service describes the current situation of children disability and with SEN in Lithuania, presenting statistical

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2 Inclusive Childcare, Toolkit. Available at: https://www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=6717&p=0.
data about the total number of children and the number of children in various educational institutions, including special care schools. Our idea is to split play methods for disabled children and can more use education arenas for learning and play individually and with other community members in two ways:

- Through the institutions of the European Union and through private initiatives of NGOs for disabled people (Ruškus, Eskytė, 2009);
- Through the main NGOs such as: the Lithuanian National Forum of the Disabled; the Lithuanian Union of Persons with Disabilities; the Lithuanian Welfare Society for People with Intellectual Disability “Vilts”; the Lithuanian Association of the Deaf; and the Lithuanian Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired and NGO Confederation for Children.

The research describes the main problems faced by social care services, including:
1. General public intolerance for people with SEN.
2. Lack of funding for basic needs of the children.
3. Lack of specialists who could work with people with SEN in schools and other institutions.
4. Lack of specialists working with children with SEN on a district and local levels.
5. Inadequate funding for making public spaces available for people with SEN.
6. Lack of specialists in rural areas.
7. Limited number of social care institutions.
8. Lack of available transportation options.
9. Lack of funding for leisure activities, free play and support for necessary tools for inclusion (toys, educational materials).
10. Poor system for systemic inclusion in education arena and inadequate qualification of educators.
11. Limited career options for young people with SEN.
12. Lack of coordination between different institutions.

All research and statistical data conclude that children with special needs are not included properly in the Lithuania education arena; the inclusion process is complicated and inadequate. The institutions working with children who have special needs focus on improving the basics (transportation, accessibility, materials and tools, availability of specialists), and now, have very limited resources to focus on the content, individual programmes or socialization, including play.

**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 have become one
of the main goals for upcoming years. In 2013 and 2015, the researchers from the Social Education Department prepared research reports “Complex support for people with disabilities”, “Lithuanian deaf: the ability to live together. (Deaf integration of social and managerial aspects)” (Kvieskienė, Čiužas, Vaicekauskienė, Šalaševičiūtė, 2015; Kvieskienė, Briedis, Čiužas, Šalaševičiūtė, 2013). Using situation analysis and analysing case studies and good practice models in Lithuania the NGO and education institutions prepared recommendations for the schools and NGO. We send 256 questionnaires for Select Representatives from people with disabilities groups. In the same way, we acknowledged 230 questionnaires for experts from 46 municipalities, 69 experts from Civic Society. Additionally, in a focus group we had a discussion with 21 national and international experts. In the focus group, we asked the question: which indicators in project managing are the most important for Sustainable Education? The experts chose the following main Indicators for Sustainable Education (Table):

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<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Supporting Statements</th>
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<td>1) <strong>Systematic approach</strong>: Team working, (PPP + Schools, NGO, Universities; Social Services, Business, etc.): Networking, Clustering; Database, case study, second chance, alternative programs;</td>
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<td>2) <strong>Emotional intelligence</strong>: System, crisis intervention, consulting, guidance, social mediation, mentoring. Sustainability, environment, climate, creativity, emotional, natural setting = IQ (better teachers, quality of school, green school, social partnership);</td>
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<td>3) <strong>Inclusive aspect</strong>: Skilled and innovative based social researches, Social pedagogues, Youth coaches, One contact system, Crisis intervention, consulting, guidance, social mediation, mentoring.</td>
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The goal of this research paper is to describe the kind of educational assistance provided for children with SEN in Lithuania, Denmark, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom, and the kind of experience provided for these children by the 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 four case studies of Lithuanian children, who were educated both in state primary and secondary schools and in schools for children with special needs. The paper maintains that main difference between the two types of educational institutions is the individual support for the children. In parents’ and the teachers’ opinion, children’s behaviour underwent positive change when they started attending a special needs school. According to respondents, children had more positive experience and a reduced possibility of being bullied or left behind academically. They also stated that home schooling provides results that are even more positive. Every local authority and institutions across Lithuania manage to create their own portfolio
of community playgrounds, yet there is no structure ensuring a proportion of the ones that are truly inclusive. In a bid to change this, Inclusive Play has been working tirelessly with a number of great organisations and individuals to create PiPA (Plan Inclusive Play Areas)\(^3\) to make the process of designing inclusive play areas much easier. Our experts mention, that it is important to include questions to children like:

- **What games do you like to play?** (Using the talking mat will help, particularly if the child has problems communicating. ‘Making things’ on the enclosed CD.)
- **What part of a game do you prefer to play?** (For example, the child may prefer to be the one who blows the whistle to start and stop children running around, rather than actually running around him self or her self.)
- **What support or help does the child need to take part in activities?** (For example, the child may need help to understand the rules of the game, or to actually take part in a game, but after a couple of attempts, they will know what to do. Alternatively, the child may need help with gluing at the art table, but can colour in pictures themselves.)

It is important to let all children make their own decisions. If the child has trouble communicating, using the PECS system will help. This will allow you to give the child a range of choices, but the child will make their own decisions. When you are planning games, think about different ways of communicating. For example, some children respond better to words, some to gestures, some to pictures or symbols, and others to sign language. It is important that you store games appropriately and that you keep the play area tidy and without any clutter. You should store games:

- low enough so that a child in a wheelchair can reach them;
- with labels or symbols on the front to help someone with a learning disability find the game they are looking for; and
- in an easy-to-open box so that a child who has trouble with movement can easily open it or pull it out.

‘Sensory Experiences’

Play for children with disability may be a topic for various professions: preschool teachers, social pedagogues, special needs educators, and leisure time educators, teachers in physical education, occupational therapists, psychologists, and youth workers. It should be considered in the study of early interventions, language and speech therapy, special educational needs, inclusive education, developmental psychology, psychomotor development, neonatology, disability studies, assistive technologies, etc. (Westling et al., 2016).

The role of play in the research is rudimentary; it is viewed as additional leisure activity, with little to no focus on it in children’s schedule. The case study in this paper offers a viewpoint on special needs education in Lithuania, which so far emphasizes a certain level of marginalization (sending children into special care home instead on working

individually with them in local communities) instead of inclusion. To solve this, a methodological tool “Individualizing educational programmes for students with SEN” was created. It is a set of recommendations for social pedagogues and teachers, who work with children with different needs and abilities. Sensory experiences are very important for all children. The five senses give us opportunities to experience different sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures. Many children with additional Support Needs do not have the opportunity to explore each of these senses for various reasons.

As experts point out, children may need our support to provide them with sensory stimulation and your support to help them explore their senses.

There are many sensory activities you can provide children with, i.e. activities that would benefit all children. There are many specialist resources that can be purchased from specialist catalogues (see section on Resources Guide).

However, you can make many funs and exciting sensory items; some items can be used as a way to help with communication and others can be used simply as a game or an activity. See the Making Things section, which describes various ideas for items that can be made at a low cost to you.

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 but 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 and 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 and 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.

Socialization and daily activities of children with disability 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. The needs reported by the users are many. The children say that all the children have the right to play and to have leisure time. Physical adaptation of the playgrounds is necessary for making them accessible
to children with disabilities. The playground should be adapted bearing in mind that children with disability may need support from adults in order to participate in certain activities. It should be possible for parents with disabilities and elderly grandparents to support young children in their play. It was determined that only 8% of the outdoor playgrounds were adapted so that children in wheelchair could participate. There is a need of a long-term planning of changes, of the development of guidelines, and of the use of the expertise from professionals in making the adaptations. There is a need of more knowledge about the importance of play and of accessible places for children to play in. There is a need to take into consideration the child’s perspective when making decisions. Children want to come to playgrounds every season, i.e. year-round.

Methods used in the research were as follows: structured interview with SEN children, SEN children parents, questionnaire with teachers. The data were 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 are not participating in after-school programmes, spend their time passively, usually – watching TV. The data gathered by the research are contradictory – teachers are insisting that families that have children with SEN are taken care of and have individual help, whereas parents argue on the contrary.

Parents spend very little quality time with children (either watch TV together or do chores) and make little effort in helping children with their homework. Children with SEN and their parents say that they receive no or not enough care from special pedagogues, social educators, and speech therapists. Teachers reckon 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 believe that there are 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 qualification, 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 and positive socialization. Analysis of previous research/content, statistical data analysis, and empirical observation methods were used during the time of the research. The article proposes that the general public attitude is the main threat for positive socialization of children with SEN, but current tendencies of creating inclusive socialization models
provide opportunities for children and young people with SEN to have experience that is more positive socializing. The research states that skills related to play offer improvement in social behaviour, and that creating an environment where play is encouraged is important in order to empower children for positive socialization. Social drama, creativity and free games are also important as a formative force for positive behaviour.

The research showed 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 and free games” presents a pedagogical experiment, which was carried out from October 2012 to March 2016 in NGO “Viltis” with visitors of the NGO federation of children, Lithuania. It describes children’s needs for appreciation, free and creativity games, support from an adult and being a leader. The researchers analysed 10 concrete inclusive festivals for special needs children. They pointed out that there are the best way for included such goals as, for instance, “to develop empathy”. All participants were concentrating on simpler tasks (to prepare letter about wishes, develop picture for friend; to learn dance together in big group, etc). Thus pointing out that those educators who are described in the research paper focus on specific tasks, not on a holistic strategy.

During the interviews, all NGO members described creativity festivals as most effective method for developing empathy or other positive emotions. The festivals were perceived as limited in time, having long breaks, but energizing and effective.

The other facilities and lessons from festival cases through creativity and free play:
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.

The results of the experimental research convince us that creativity and free play games influence not only the emotional development of children but also the development of the person as a whole. Thus, under the influence of a purposeful management in didactic games children with mental disabilities have an opportunity of more intensive emotional progress. The overall topic is developing emotional intellect in children with average cognitive development disorders through social drama, interactive games and free play. The research 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 four children was analysed during the research, provided that children are more responsive, calm and trust themselves better if theatrical games introduced in their daily routines. Conditions for positive socialization are 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 points out that the theatrical games and free games are used as a tool for inclusion less than other art and social games forms (music, dance, visual arts). Theatrical, social games, free play, and the natural activity of children offer a wide array of possibilities for education and positive socialization. The research reveals that deaf and blind children communicate through body language and through acoustic methods – gestures, mimics, touching. The research concludes that during the game time, the children who are deaf and blind communicate only directly with their teacher. They need to have a constant structure and repetition – routine helps them to communicate better. Children do not communicate among themselves (only with their teacher), without using verbal cues. “Inclusive education using play and art therapy in pre-school” discusses children’s need to express themselves and own feelings and to have a safe environment where they can explore their surrounding and understand themselves better. In general, the paper discusses the importance of play for development of a pre-school age child. Barriers for children to have 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 are used:

- 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:

1) Being a part of a community,
2) Having social relationships and forming friendships,
3) Partnership between family, specialists and community,
4) Implementing human rights.

This article defines a good practice model of using play as a tool for inclusion of children with disability. There is evidence that even children with severe and multiple disabilities can effective engage in all creativity and free play forms during early childhood. We do not have clear findings about the level of play development achieved by children with different disabilities in this research.
Conclusions

- The implementation of the idea of inclusive game strongly depends on the ability to grasp and deconstruct the power relation. It is impossible to evade the power relation. The achievement has been largely attributed to the significant proportion of welfare and NGO professional’s, who consult a specialist contact person or welfare commission at their schools on a regular basis. These frequent interactions were in turn facilitated by the high time resources of NGO professionals and welfare specialist, who typically worked for a single school (NGO) where they spent a mean of 10 hours per week.

- It is necessary to improve the education programmes and include tasks that are more complex for educators and to introduce creativity ant free play gradually and in small groups.

- Also it is important to integrate more theatrical, social games, free play, and the natural activity for children with disability and to offer possibilities for adequate education and positive socialization.

- In most cases, the basic need of children with SEN to play is not met in Lithuania. Play is not viewed 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 qualification, 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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Socioedukacinės inovacijos

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Vaikų, turinčių negalią, žaidimų poreikiai: Lietuvos atvejis

Eglė Celiešienė¹, Giedrė Kvieskienė²

¹ Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas, Lietuvos demokratiškumo ugdymo kolegija, Studentų g. 39, Vilnius, egle.celesiene@gmail.com
² Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Socialinio ugdymo katedra, Studentų g. 39, Vilnius, giedre.kvieskiene@leu.lt

Santrauka

Apie tvariosios edukacijos ir švietimo kokybę analizuojančius indeksus yra plačiai diskutuojama ir jie prieštarai suvokiami tiek praktiniame, tiek teoriniame diskurse. Darnusis švietimas turėtų atliepti vaikų, turinčių negalią, poreikius ir padėti jiems integruotis į visuomenę ir taip prisidėti siekiant socialinės pažangos bei ekonomikos augimo. Švietimas yra centrinė ašis, skatinanti skirti daugiau dėmesio interaktyviai edukacijai, įtraukiajam žaidimui ir daut-giafunkcijam dizainui.

Esiminiai žodžiai: tvarioji edukacija, įtraukusis žaidimas, vaikų poreikiai, socialinė ekonomika ir gerovė.

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