

Indicators of inclusion within pro-inclusive kindergartens in Slovakia and abroad

(overview essay)

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Abstract: A characteristic of inclusive kindergarten teachers is that they have different expectations from different children. They also work with the context – classroom and kindergarten environment so that every child can engage and participate in activities of interest without being disturbed. Teachers and other professionals in pro-inclusive kindergarten attempt to know children's microsystems and proactively co-create their mesosystem, meaning the supportive cooperative relationships between the kindergarten – family – peers – or out-of-school facilities that children regularly visit. Bronfenbrenner (1979), within the theory of ecological systems, defined the individual structures of environmental systems: micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems, in which child development takes place. Through this ecosystem framework, he drew attention to the importance of mapping important environments which children are part of, in which they develop and mature. Although this illustrative ecosystem framework has not been conceived by Bronfenbrenner in favour of an inclusive approach in the school environment, its application studies oriented on inclusion and inclusion indicators in school environment is now undisputed. In this study we describe research focused on the environment of five pro-inclusive kindergartens – the structure of children's mesosystem in specific kindergartens. The aim of the research was to explore "good inclusive practice" at pre-primary level of education, to map ways of internal functioning of visited kindergartens, their philosophy, the way of thinking about children, their needs and forms in which they cooperate with families.

Keywords: inclusive kindergarten, ecology of inclusive education, responsibilities of inclusive kindergartens, adaptability of preschool environment

1 Ecology of inclusive education

The ecosystem framework is an illustrative structure depicting a comprehensive system of specific environments in which individual children develop, which they are part of. From the immediate, closest environment that affects the child to the furthest. The author of this framework – psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner – was mainly recognised for his best-known *Theory of Ecological Systems* (1979), in which the ecosystem framework defined human development. He formulated it to explain the natural characteristics of children and their environment, and their impact on children's growth and development within a comprehensively functioning whole (Berk, 2013; Psychology notes HQ, 2013). Later, however, he revised his theory (in 1994) as he admitted that he focused too much on the context and thus did not pay enough attention to the role of the individuals in their own development (Tudge et al., 2009). His revised *Theory of Bio-Ecological Systems* is therefore used in topics based on inclusion and inclusive education. In addition to the sets of environments, Bronfenbrenner emphasized the importance of biological and genetic aspects of a person, but rather prioritized the reflection on each person's personality traits that they bring to any social situation. This revised bio-ecological theory is positivized by the inclusion practitioners because it not only addresses and understands the needs of each developing person very individually, but also treats them comprehensively as a dynamic system of multiple ecological structures that interact with each other.

We understand efforts to comprehensively grasp every child and their needs at multiple levels of their lives as an important responsibility of an inclusive school. In addition to the central *biosystem* – person/child, we are talking about: 1. *microsystem*, the closest level that forms the immediate environment in which the child develops (family, friends, school), 2. *mesosystem*, which represents the structure of mutual relationships between important environments that the child actively participates in (the relationship of the school and the child's home environment), 3. *exosystem* represents important indirect effects on the development of the child within environments in which, however, the child is not actively involved (for example the indirect influence of mother's job on the child), and finally the most distant one 4. *macrosystem* that represents the culture of the society in which the child lives, its values, beliefs, customs and legislative conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Benjamin, 2015). Bronfenbrenner, in his already modified *Bio-Ecological Theory* (1994), also added temporal 5. *chronosystem* (thus pointing out the importance of perception and tracking changes over time). In this revised theory, development has been identified as a common product of four defining features: 1. person, 2. context, 3. process, and 4. time – referred to as (PPCT) Process – Person – Context – Time model (Ettecal, Mahoney, 2017). He was convinced that the only way to understand the child and their family is through a thorough study of the contexts in which their development naturally takes place.

Bronfenbrenner always focused on monitoring the child's development and helping families. In the above-mentioned PPCT model, he highlighted the importance of *proximal processes* – which are immediate day-to-day activities and permanent forms of interaction in which an individual develops and is occupied. In order to be effective for development, the interaction must take place relatively regularly over a longer period of time. Bronfenbrenner considered *proximal processes* to be *engines of development*. They are influenced by the characteristics of the *person, context* and *time*. The form, strength, direction, and content of proximal processes influence development as a combined function of the characteristics of the developing person (Tudge et al., 2016). The authors (ibid.) state that Bronfenbrenner (1994) emphasized the proximal processes and the importance of their reflection in terms of promoting individual competence and reducing dysfunction. The aim was to point out the details of common activities and interactions that affect development and to help to work better despite the potentially difficult situation in which a person/child may be. This is where we perceive the ideological correspondence of Bronfenbrenner's theory with the philosophy of inclusion. Both thought frameworks place primary importance on the need to get to know each person in their uniqueness and complexity. Such way of thinking should be the starting point of any service of pro-inclusive schools, thus helping to properly grasp the steps of interaction and support. Although Bronfenbrenner did not offer a clear methodological guide on how to do research through his theory, in inclusion studies, this theory is considered a conceptual tool or operational theoretical framework that is nowadays diversely methodologically supported (Mahlo, 2013; Anderson et al., 2014). In their study, Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013) investigated what environmental aspects affect the inclusive education of children in schools on the Eastern Peninsula of South Africa. They describe Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem framework as a tool to better understand the inclusive educational goal. They see it as a move away from categorization and an effort to create an environment in which all pupils can fully participate, and which they understand. The subject of their research was social justice, investigating how to improve the impact of children's ecological systems in favour of learning and strengthening the relationship between them. When interpreting research results, Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem framework provided them with a structure of impacts that were identified as barriers to inclusive education at the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem levels. On the level of the micorsystem, the authors identified these barriers:

- parents do not support but rather negatively evaluate their children
- parents deny learning barriers, they perceive this as a reflection of the quality of their parenting, and therefore do not cooperate with the school
- the burden of domestic responsibility that parents place on a child negatively affects the child's performance at school
- competition, discrimination and/or rejection is present in the peer group.

On the level of the mesosystem, a phenomenon was identified that children were frequently raised by their grandparents who had low literacy and were unable to assist children in learning or to cooperate with the school. On the level of the exosystem, researchers identified a barrier in terms of inadequate teacher training regarding effective work with children with learning difficulties or strategies for working with parents, resulting in discrimination against these children. The level of the macrosystem was influenced by the attitude of medical doctors, who from their medical perspective emphasized differences. The system of “admission” of a child in school was built in such a way that teachers focused on the normative assessment of the performance of pupils who had to prove their ability to count to ten, otherwise they were expelled from school.

Hays (2009) in her research *Inclusive education: Educator’s perceptions of teaching learners with emotional, cognitive and physical barriers to learning* understands the ecosystems framework as a necessary theoretical concept that informs about the decision-making processes of educational practice. The author explains her research paradigm in that the concept of Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystem framework deviates from the medical model that influenced the educational context through special schools for special needs of children – such as a separate school for the blind, or for the deaf (Brownlee et al., 2000 as cited in Hays, 2009). The ecosystem framework is used to conceptualise inclusive education and through this conceptualisation several studies with different levels of analysis have been carried out, the results of which have been applied to the education system. This has led to a paradigm shift from disability towards barriers to learning. In her research, Hays (ibid.) investigated in the form of semi-structured interviews with educators how they perceive pupils who have difficulties in learning, which may be at emotional, cognitive and behavioural levels, how they educate these pupils in the classroom and what teaching strategies they use. During the interviews conducted with nine private school teachers in Gauteng, she verified the statement Zaretsky (2005 as cited in Hays, 2009), as she concluded that there were many differences between the policy makers on the macrosystem level in their views of inclusive education. Few educators, irrespective of the length or nature of their professional experience, therefore truly understand and can effectively link this theoretical top-down support to the benefit of their daily practice. Another research finding was that educators are afraid of pupils’ barriers – more of the emotional than the physical ones. Emotional barriers are caused, for example, by violence in the family, low socio-economic status of the family, difficult family situation due to the absence of one parent or deprivation of basic needs, which affects the child in the form of learning difficulties and the children’s inability to reach their potential. Educators who have little support from pupils’ families and their surroundings feel that they are not competent to manage and lead an inclusive classroom. In their study, Swick and Williams (2006) offer options and strategies for kindergarten

teachers which they analyse through the perspective of the ecosystems framework. As they point out, families may face various stressors (dependent parents, family violence, homelessness, ...), which can pose serious difficulties especially in the early years of children's lives.

The perspective of bioecological theory offers a practical framework for understanding and supporting these families. The bioecological framework provides an insight into the situation of the family in a wider and transparent structure and enhances the understanding of families in stress. The framework offers concepts to build a relationship with the family (for example, a grandparent can act as "an anchor" for a child as a starting point for solving a problem and linking to the family-school cooperation). The authors (ibid.) consider such professional approach by the kindergarten to be inclusive because it is helpful and supportive. It includes all systems in which families are involved and reflects the dynamic nature of true family relationships. It is also based on the idea of empowering families by understanding their strengths and needs. Each system is dependent on the contextual nature of human life and offers a range of possibilities and sources of growth. Potentially, by accessing these systems, we can have more social knowledge and a broader set of options for solving learning problems, as well as access to new dimensions of self-exploration. Microsystem is a place for the initial exploration of the world – a reference point to the world. It can provide the child with an educational culmination of care or, on the contrary, a set of ghostly memories (first encounters with violence). The most influential is the form of what children experience in relation to developing trust and reciprocity with their key persons—*attachment*, bonding, first confidence building. Horňáková (2019) also classifies a teacher to be among the key persons and writes that the educational activity of an adult is effective if the child evaluates their behaviour as reliable and supportive. Exosystem is a structure that mirrors what a child experiences in a mediated way but has a direct impact on the child. In these systems the child lives psychologically, but not physically. For example, a mother's workplace may facilitate the life of the child and family, or on the contrary it may increase family stress. As the authors (Swick, Williams, 2006) state, in many cases exosystems cause stress because we do not treat them as we should. Many children are aware of the stress from their parents' workplaces without being physically there. Creating a family friendly environment within the exosystem seems to be important. Macrosystem acts as a powerful source of energy for families. It determines when, where, what, and how our relationships can happen. Without the support of the macrosystem (faith, services), children and parents are hurt, and their situation worsens. The true power of mesosystems lies in the fact that they link two or more systems in which children and parents live. The authors (ibid.) point to the important role of "mesosystem agents", which are the persons (engaged pro-inclusive teacher, therapist who comes to school, etc.) who inevitably link important children's environments. As they state

further, without a strong cooperating mesosystem, families tend to fall into chaos. In this context, Bosáková (2019) says that the awareness of community membership can be healing in itself. Chronosystem is an important part of family assistance and support analysis, because family history can explain more about parent-child relationships than is evident from the currently existing dynamics (Frod, Lerner, 1992 as cited in Swick, Williams, 2006). Swick and Williams (2006) describe the effects of ecological systems on a child in the context of individual family stressors. In the situation of a family with an addicted parent, they say that the child stopped their ritual of attending church. She avoids contact with the community because of her mother's alcohol addiction. Such an adaptive family pattern serves to protect the family from further emotional harm but prevents the child from having the necessary communication and relationships. Chaos of the microsystem begins and extends to the meso- and exosystem of the family. If the mother is addicted to alcohol, marital problems arise, the child can be taken to the care of the grandparents, and their primary family background which the child was used to is now absent. The authors (ibid.) offer strategies for kindergartens to support such families:

- Encourage the family to have access to the necessary information and advice in dealing with addiction
- Support the family with identified resources and help them to respond effectively to the specific challenges they face
- Guide the family to a healthy lifestyle for each member

When the stressor is family violence, it should be borne in mind that what the children are experiencing living with a violent parent was what the violent parent most likely experienced as a child in the past. Kindergarten professionals' strategies aim to cut this circle of violence by offering early intervention:

- communicate the child's fear in a non-blaming way towards the parents
- establish a relationship with parents so that they can participate in a professional solution
- build on reflecting their caring and kind behaviour.

The ecosystem framework offers a structure for a comprehensive reflection of the effects on the child, which may result in a change in behaviour or inability to learn. It helps to uncover the real cause of children's problems, while also identifying the strengths of their ecological system to improve the situation for the children and their families.

2 Responsibilities of pro-inclusive kindergartens

Each kindergarten is a system that responds daily to a variety of children's needs, but also to the needs of parents or employees themselves. In pursuit of a holistic approach and the sustainability of its vision, an inclusive kindergarten needs to reflect the needs of all its participants, realizing that they are interdependent, interacting with each other. This may be the need for the child to be able to learn with which the parent is unable to accept, or, for example, the need of the parent connected to the fear from the adaptation of their child in a new environment that the child perceives and mirrors. We consider it necessary to emphasise that the pre-school period is a time when the child is still very vulnerable, sensitive, and dependent on the quality of the social interactions in which the child is involved. Kindergarten teachers are key figures, as they may reflect, for example, the socio-economic risk status of the family (an exosystem aspect) that affects the child, their behaviour or performance. When identifying and choosing solutions to meet the children's needs, it is necessary for the teacher to be able to choose the participants of the school community whom they identify as key for a particular situation. These may be parents, grandparents, guardians, peers of the child, colleagues, other necessary specialists (psychologist, speech therapists, therapeutic or special pedagogue), but in solving the situation the coach or head of the leisure club who is in regular contact with the child and their family may be supportive too. The theory of bioecological systems helps in this approach, as it illustrates to the kindergarten team the structural framework of the breadth (ecosystem framework) and depth (proximal processes – engines of development) of each person's developmental effects. However, the primary "ecosystem thinking" and "ecosystem approach" to addressing different risk situations can only be effective and sustainable if it is understood as the responsibility of all professional participants in the inclusive school community, not just the teacher. In this context, Rouse (2008, p. 7), in the study of teacher testimonies regarding the characterisation of inclusive practice, offers an illustration by a quote of one of the teachers: *"My colleagues always want me to deal with their problem pupils and I find it difficult say no because I don't want to see kids struggling. I know that the more I agree with this help, the less the others will consider it their responsibility ... I assume that this leads to some form of learned helplessness."*

3 Research study

Similarly, in our research, the category of "understanding of responsibilities" of kindergarten professionals proved to us as the main reference of whether the kindergarten is trying to be inclusive. Our research sample consisted of five kindergartens (from Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Austria), identified by

the European Agency for Special Education and Inclusion, or by universities in the country as examples “good inclusive practice” at pre-primary education level. In the conceptualization of the research, we were inspired by a study of “inclusive practices” by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). The aim of their study was to test teachers’ skills in the context of inclusive practice in terms of What? How? and Why? they do. As part of our study, the same questions were of interest – what is evidence of “good inclusive practice” in kindergartens, what, how and why teachers, but also the heads of specific pro-inclusive kindergartens do they promote inclusion in their practice. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) carried out observations in the classes of two primary schools in Scotland and subsequently supplemented them with interviews with eleven teachers of these classes. They were interested in how teachers create the meaning of the term “inclusion” in their practice. Subsequent analysis allowed them to identify practical examples of inclusive pedagogy that met the standard of extending the service of practice to all despite the fact that through setting the service some will be differentiated (Florian, Black-Hawkins, 2011).

In addition to observing the educational process in selected pro-inclusive kindergartens, we also chose a method of qualitative content analysis of pedagogical materials and a method of semi-structured interviews – always with two teachers and the head of a specific kindergarten. It was the method of interview that proved to be the most significant in our research. The questions of the interviews were directed at the thinking of teachers and principals, exploring what they see as a challenge in their work, but also why inclusive education in kindergartens seems to them to be helpful and meaningful to all participants. In addition to interviews with teachers and principals, informal interviews were also held with a psychologist or a teaching assistant, which also provided us with valuable information. The indicator confirming the inclusive direction of selected kindergartens was their similar understanding of their individual and cooperative responsibilities.

4 Individual responsibilities

Based on the interview data, we identified individual responsibilities of professionals in kindergartens as:

- *ecosystem thinking reflecting the individual needs of all people involved*

It is the thinking of individuals – teachers and principals of kindergartens, which is diverted from the defectological categorization of children. It looks at the individual needs of children through the lens of complexity, searching for the correlation of all the effects on development that are associated with the captured needs of the child, that are causing them. In addition to the needs of children, the professional also reflects the individual needs of parents and their colleagues.

“Regular teacher does a tickbox exercise and an inclusive teacher has an open mind. As if he went further.” (Teacher, Poland)

“The fact that children come from various backgrounds makes me think... but I mean in a positive way. I constantly evaluate whose need is more important, what will be the priority. Sometimes it is a child, sometimes a parent who is desperate, sometimes it is me, sometimes a colleague. For the day to be in harmony, it is important to find this hierarchy and then to help each other as a team.” (Teacher, Slovakia)

“We start the day with the children in the classroom by finding out how children are, how they slept. Each child has a notebook where parents note the child’s basic needs – how were they at home, sleep, eating, also little things. If there is something very important written there we also call the parent and ask them about it.” (Teacher, Austria)

– ***self-reflection in relation to personality characteristics and professional role***

It is the responsibility of both the teacher and the kindergarten principal to constantly reflect on their professional competences and personal characteristics in relation to the diverse situations with colleagues, children and parents.

“When I am not feeling alright and I am frustrated I cannot work well with a child.” (Teacher, Austria)

“An inclusive teacher should be a mature person, who can tell what belongs to them, what is their personality structure, and not to transfer their inner problems into the pedagogical practice. Such professionalism. And they should be open to challenges, work with them flexibly and to be supportive.” (Teacher, Slovakia)

– ***respect and creating safe supportive relationships with children and parents***

It is the responsibility of both the teacher and the principal to establish a secure relationship. It is a necessary basis of help and support, characterised by acceptance and respect – both for the adult and for the child.

“Or they tell a rule, but not to forget to come back – What did you want to say? Because children can feel that you respect them. They are personalities and the respect to children must be there, as well as to the adults.” (Teacher and principal, Czech Republic)

“For me in my group it is important the we are a mutual group, that everybody perceives each other according to their possibilities, but despite that everyone can stay as they are.” (Teacher, Austria)

– ***pro-inclusive/accepting attitude oriented on resources and everyone’s potential***

This is the attitude of a kindergarten professional which is described as openness and acceptance of each person/child, with the potential challenges that each individual may bring. This attitude is characterized by trust in each person’s/child’s resources and an effort to be supportive in finding solutions.

"I learned to be so open that the ones who came to us were accepted." (Principal, Slovakia)

"In the morning when children arrive they can do what they want. We observe them, what toys they choose for play, what they are interested in. We alternate toys and observe if the new material is attractive to them, how they react..." (Teacher, Austria)

"It is necessary to look for positive things, what works, what progressed, also when there is not working, look for small successes, for example if a child with Asperger's syndrome does not have a meltdown for two or three days, engages with the group and says sorry by himself." (Teaching assistant, Czech Republic)

5 Cooperative responsibilities

In addition to individual responsibility, another category was identified from the interviews, which we describe as cooperative responsibility in inclusive practice. Professionals in pro-inclusive kindergartens understood their cooperative responsibility as:

- ***providing service oriented on the ecosystem (children, parents, professionals)***

It is the responsibility of the whole team, which cooperatively creates a broadly oriented kindergarten service that seeks to facilitate and saturate the needs of all children, parents and kindergarten colleagues because they understand their correlation.

"If we do not work with parents we cannot help the child." (Psychologist, Austria)

"If we work with human potential of the employees, we meet as a community, we also have a crisis psychologist, who works with teachers, where they solve personal problems on teachers, but also matters from the classroom." (Psychologist, Austria)

"Parents often say how well children function here and not at home. With that they are actually telling us – will you help me? And because we are the kind of kindergarten that we are, let's say inclusive, so we try to do that. In the end, it is for the child when you help the parent." (Teacher, Slovakia)

- ***mutual professional support and vision, co-creating of equity***

The kindergarten team does not compete but rather supports each other in difficult challenges. Individuals support and supervise each other. It also creates an environment in which power is handled well. Everyone on the team, their personality characteristics or professional perspective/skills can bring a "key" to address the needs of the child/parent.

"The principal leads us towards listening to the child, so that we do not judge after five minutes, but so that we observe the child for a longer time and consider everything that the child encounters – it could be parent, the situation at home, or some

developmental difficulties that prevent them to feel good in the kindergarten and to learn something new.” (Teacher, Slovakia)

“There is a lot of supervision between our professionals ... exchange, coaching” (Principal, Austria)

“All that work with a child look in the same direction” (Teacher, Austria)

“We need to get that thinking across, from the cleaning lady to the principal” (Principal, Austria)

– ***unified and mature communication***

The responsibility of the inclusive team to communicate uniformly and maturely/diplomatically. Unified communication can be very important, for example, in situations with children with autism spectrum disorders, children in the adaptation process, but also in providing information and strategies to the parents.

“With parents, I always have to consider where the problem of the child is. Then I need to observe at which stage the parents are, mother and father, sometimes they are at a completely different stage and I need to think where the initial point is, when I can start to have a conversation. I have twins in the group, the girl is physically disabled, and the boy does not speak. They started last year, and the boy progressed a lot but the girl not so much and now I have to prepare the mother for the scissors, as they are twins, now the scissors will be opening a lot between the boy and the girl. The boy is progressing more, and the mom is not prepared for this.” (Teacher, Austria)

– ***creating accepting and open environment – kindergarten community***

A team of inclusive kindergarten experts “opens the door” for all, bringing together children, seniors, mothers, fathers, siblings, the community.

“Our services are for everyone, not only children from our facility.” (Psychologist, Austria)

“We are trying to make it close to the family environment.” (Teacher and Principal, Czech Republic)

“There is a strong collaboration and exchange between parent, therapist and the kindergarten here.” (Teacher, Austria)

– ***self-reflective understanding of inclusion as a PROCESS of “breaking barriers”***

The inclusive kindergarten team perceives its own limits. Despite the fact that our research included pro-inclusive kindergartens identified as examples of good practice, fulfilling the vision of inclusion has been presented self-critically – as an unfinished process of breaking barriers.

“Even though we are an integrative setting, but we go in the inclusive way, we fulfil a lot of the inclusive direction or approach. We minimise barriers in the fact that a certain child is limited and only in their diagnosis, that it is not only about that.” (Teacher, Poland)

"We are on a journey, but it is a long way to inclusion. We do not have a lift here; the building is old. A child in a wheelchair cannot visit children in the classroom upstairs." (Teacher, Austria)

"[inclusion] is as if a vision of our kindergarten. I understand it as a goal that is achievable, but it is not achieved yet." (Teacher, Slovakia)

6 Conclusion

Currently, every kindergarten perceives and addresses the diversity and complexity of its needs that occur daily and interact with each other. Already the school's efforts to understand their breadth, depth and interactions by including all its participants, we understand as an important pro-inclusive step. Taking responsibility and transforming the kindergarten service in favour of uniqueness and complexity should be the goal that pro-inclusive schools seek to pursue (Florian, Linklater, 2010). This requirement of transformation – the adaptability of the school as a system for the specific needs of its specific children and all its participants was aptly pointed out by the principal from an inclusive kindergarten in Austria, which we visited during our research project (Figure 1).

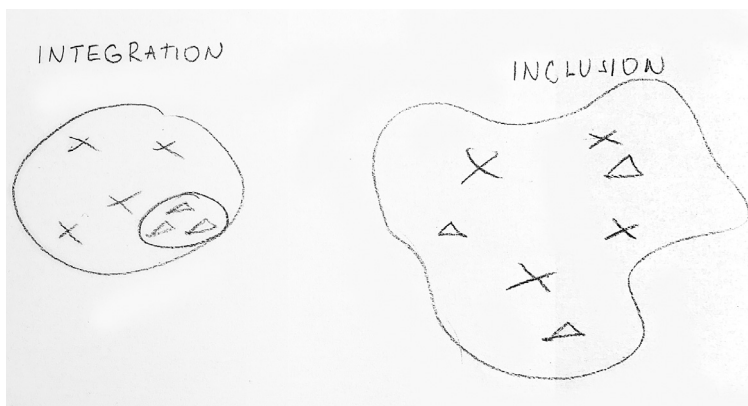


Figure 1: *The ability of transformation and adaptability of the kindergarten for the benefit of all its participants*

As she graphically suggested in the interview, the response to the diversity of needs is to be a diversely oriented flexible system capable of being transformed to the nature of its individual needs. This ability is dependent on the characteristics and reciprocity of all school participants who interact with each other and create this environment.

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