

## Early Childhood Inclusive Education: The Role and Practice of Educational Institutions

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### Abstract

*An important direction of society's development is to ensure equal access of all children to education, including children with special needs. The practice of introducing inclusive education in early childhood educational institutions is a component of the practical implementation and protection of children's rights and freedoms, regardless of any circumstances, including the state of health of the child. The purpose of the academic paper is to study the inclusive education and practice of preschool educational institutions for children with special educational needs in Ukraine and some European Union (EU) member states that joined EU in 2004-2017. The following methods have been used to study the practical aspects of inclusive education in preschool institutions in Ukraine and some EU countries, namely: analysis of the legal framework; method of comparative analysis; synthesis and analysis of quantitative indicators; questionnaires; systematization and generalization of statistical data. Results: Positive trends in the development and implementation of inclusive education in Ukraine have been identified, namely: the number of preschool educational institutions with inclusive groups has significantly increased, there has been a significant increase in the number of inclusive groups and children with special needs who study in groups with other children. The coverage of children with preschool educational institutions in Ukraine is only 58%, and children with special educational needs attend 28% of preschool educational institutions. At the same time, conditions for their training are created in only 25% of institutions, and the level of provision of teachers with special knowledge and skills of inclusive education is insufficient. A comparative analysis of the experience of the countries that joined EU in 2004-2017 suggests that membership in*

*European Union has a positive impact on both preschool education in member states and the practice of inclusive education.*

**Key-words:** Special Knowledge and Skills, Special Educational Needs, Preschool Pupils, Protection of Rights, Practical Aspects.

## **1. Introduction**

The practice of implementing inclusive education in preschool education is quite common in EU countries, forasmuch as one of the directions of the democratic society's development is to ensure the right of children to education, including children with special educational needs. UNESCO [1] considers inclusive education to be a comprehensive and extremely important basis for promoting democracy, human rights, strengthening the world community, tolerance of citizens, social cohesion and justice, and sustainable development. Sucuoğlu B. et al. [2] emphasize that children with special needs receive a significant boost in development from inclusive conditions in early childhood education, and belonging, participation, and social relationships are meaningful and realistic outcomes of inclusion. It is through an inclusive education system that children are protected from segregation and negative attitudes from others. At the same time, inclusive education cannot achieve the expected effect if it remains at the level of theoretical research, regulations, standards, recommendations. In this context, preschool educational institutions play a special role, which create the proper environment, and teachers who understand the benefits of inclusive education, have knowledge and skills about the educational abilities and needs of children with special educational needs, and have received appropriate training and experience in working with all pupils [3-5]. Prospects for Ukraine's membership in EU include systemic reforms in many areas, including preschool and inclusive education. The aim of the academic paper is to study the inclusive education and practice of preschool educational institutions for children with special educational needs in Ukraine and some EU member states that joined European Union in 2004-2017. Inclusive education as a concept should be considered from two positions: a scientific approach that interprets the essence of the concept, and a legislative approach that ensures the practical implementation of such education at the international and national levels [6].

The Convention on the Rights of the Child [7] and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [8] establish a sound legal framework for the rights of children with special needs, including access to care, education, health care, entertainment or any other another aspect of their lives. According to the UN Human Rights Council Resolution [9], inclusion in education is a system of empowerment of the individual through: participation in education; ensuring equal access of

children with disabilities to education; individual curricula; providing reasonable accommodation; availability of educational environments and materials; providing adapted training materials, assistive devices, information and communication technologies and support. Muscat Agreement [10] stipulates that the inclusive learning strategy is the creation and improvement of educational institutions that take into account the interests of children with special educational needs and provide a safe, free from violence and social barriers and effective learning space for everybody. UNESCO [1] considers inclusive education as a process of ensuring quality lifelong learning. In connection with the gradual enlargement of EU, the number of requests to resolve the issue of the quality of preschool education from the candidate states for accession to EU is constantly growing [11]. In 2018, European Commission published “Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems”, which is based on the quality of preschool education and childcare not only for all EU Member States, but also for candidate countries.

## **2. Literature Review**

J. Ledford et al. [12] emphasize that it is in early childhood that children grow and develop incredibly and amazingly; consequently, this phenomenon is often studied by scientists and taken into account when developing teaching methods in early childhood educational institutions. Early childhood inclusion combines values, policies and practices that support the right of every young child and his or her family, regardless of their ability, to participate in a wide range of activities as a full member of the society. The expected outcomes of inclusive education for children with special needs provide a sense of community belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and personal learning and development. Access, participation and support are key determinants of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality programs and services for tender-age infants [13]. L. Florian [14] notes that the concepts of “special” and “inclusive” education are extremely important to the policy and practice of many countries around the world. Although the conceptualization of these concepts has changed, they are not interchangeable, but only complement each other. Optimizing the learning potential and development of various abilities from early childhood is a combination of efforts and expectations of parents, teachers, educational institutions and the government [15].

N. Olefir [16], in the context of studying the features of inclusive education of children in preschool educational institutions, puts forward a number of requirements for educators of such institutions. The teacher should be tolerant towards children with special educational needs; he should

form their sense of usefulness, provide them with individual support, help create a favorable positive climate in the children's team, adapt educational tasks to the needs of such children and actively cooperate with a multidisciplinary commission accompanying such children. By the way, Zh. Matjukh [17] proves the feasibility of introducing multimedia technologies in inclusive preschool education in order to improve the education of children with special needs. The advantages of this technology are as follows: polysensory perception of the material, the development of key mental processes (thinking, imagination, memory, speech), the ability to visualize the information, emotional and visual representation of the material, demonstration of objects, processes and phenomena not available in everyday life. Multimedia presentations, educational and game programs and multimedia films are examples of multimedia technologies in the process of inclusive education of children with special educational needs, to which the researcher pays special attention. A positive experience is the use of a model of multimedia technologies by an educator of a preschool educational institution in educational work with an inclusive group. Such model consists of target, content, technological and diagnostic blocks, and the result of its implementation centers around improving the quality of educational work with an inclusive group [18].

L. Chernichenko [19] among the most diverse innovative technologies used by speech therapists in preschool educational institutions during inclusive education, pays special attention to art-therapeutic innovative technologies and cryotherapy. Art-therapeutic innovative technologies include: art therapy that combines isotherapy (using art materials), fairy tale therapy, game therapy, music therapy, phototherapy, sand therapy, chromotherapy. Cryotherapy is a method of collection pedagogy aimed at using games with ice. S. Akalin et al. [20] in their study prove that teachers of preschool educational institutions are the most important components of inclusion. Therefore, teachers should be more prepared for activities in heterogeneous classes, in which there are children with special educational needs in order to increase the success of inclusive education. At the same time, the results of the research conducted by scientists, make it possible to establish that modern teachers require knowledge, skills, support and experience in order to identify changes in children with special educational needs. Also, teachers are encouraged to use various functional programs to prepare for the implementation of inclusive education.

The study of inclusive education in preschool educational institutions, according to the viewpoint of S. Sasipin, M. Arthur-Kelly, I. Dempsey [21], can be conducted by assessing the current situation, analysis of existing knowledge and experience of preschool teachers, determining the level of perception of inclusive education by teachers and their attitudes towards children with special educational needs, analysis of interdisciplinary cooperation and prospects for inclusive education in

the institution. In addition, E. Soukakou [22] recommends assessing the level of quality of inclusive education in preschool educational institutions, based on the results of which an inclusive audience profile should be developed. The study of the features of educational processes for preschool children makes it possible to find out that the issue of inclusive education has been studied by numerous scientists and scholars. However, the development of the theory and practice of inclusive education in EU has led to the emergence of different approaches, especially regarding the role of preschools in inclusive education.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

The study of practical aspects of inclusive education in preschool educational institutions is based on the use of the following research methods, namely: analysis of the legal framework for inclusive education for preschool children; studying the practical experience of Ukraine, individual EU member states and developed countries that have made significant progress in inclusive education; method of comparative analysis in relation to the performance of preschool educational institutions and inclusion; synthesis and analysis of quantitative indicators that characterize the education of children with special needs in preschool educational institutions; systematization and generalization of statistical data and progressive experience on inclusive education. The analysis of the legal framework for inclusive education includes normative documents that provide the basis for the practical implementation of the right of children with special needs to study in preschool educational institutions, namely: Law of Ukraine [23] “On Education”, Law of Ukraine [24] “On Preschool Education”, Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine [25] “On Approval of the Concept of Inclusive Learning Development”, Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine [26] “About the Statement of the Order of the Organization of Activity of Inclusive Groups in Establishments of Preschool Education”, Letter of the Ministry of Health [27] “Regarding the Organization of Activities of Inclusive Groups in Preschool Education Institutions”.

Assessment of the quality of preschool education and inclusion as a component of the educational environment was carried out through the study of the results of questionnaires of principals (directors), teachers and parents of preschool institutions of Ukraine on the basis of Analytical report of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine “Research of quality of preschool education: components of the educational environment” [28]. Practical aspects and activities of preschool education institutions in Ukraine and EU member states have been studied through separate indicators, which are included in 5 groups of components of quality assessment of

the preschool education system, adopted by European Commission, namely: Access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) for all children; Workforce quality; Quality curriculum/content; Evaluation and monitoring; Governance and funding. In order to determine the prospects for the introduction of inclusive education and development of preschool educational institutions in Ukraine, the experience of individual member states from the last stages of EU enlargement (Poland, Slovakia – 2004 accession, Bulgaria, Romania – 2007, Croatia – 2013) has been studied. The information base for studying European experience and the experience of individual countries includes: Eurostat data; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education; Official Website of the European Union, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The study of key features of inclusive education in preschool educational institutions is related to the regulations that form the basis for the activities of preschool education, taking into account the rights and features of children with special needs. The system of preschool education in Ukraine is unified and indirectly subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MES); it is part of the state education system. Children with special educational needs can receive education in preschool educational institutions, in the family (by family / home form of education), with the help of persons with the appropriate education or qualifications of a teacher, as well as in specialized childcare institutions, for example, nurseries of compensating type. Law of Ukraine [23] “On Education” defines inclusive education as a system of state-guaranteed educational services based on the principles of non-discrimination, taking into account human diversity, effective involvement and inclusion of all its participants in the educational process. A child with special educational needs needs additional permanent or temporary support in the educational process in order to ensure his / her right to education. Such support is provided by an inclusive educational environment – a set of conditions, ways and means for joint learning, education and development of pupils, taking into account their needs and capabilities.

In Ukraine, children with special educational problems, who are identified due to intellectual disabilities and/or physical and sensory impairments, have priority enrollment in preschool educational institutions. It should also be noted that inclusive groups are formed on the basis of age, that is, groups of the same age or different ages can be formed in an educational institution, but when forming a group, the peculiarities of the educational needs of children are taken into account. It is recommended to enroll in inclusive groups no more than 3 children with special educational needs in

order to achieve a positive effect from inclusive education. In practice, the educational process in inclusive groups for children with special educational needs is carried out on the basis of the Basic component of preschool education according to special separate programs (curricula) approved by the MES in the prescribed manner and in accordance with the methods, taking into account the individual characteristics of children in relation to educational and cognitive activities. By the way, a team of specialists in psychological and pedagogical support of children with special educational needs is specially created for them in preschool institutions in order for such children to feel comfortable in inclusive groups. The results of the analysis of statistical data on the features of inclusive education in preschool educational institutions in Ukraine indicate positive trends in the development and implementation of inclusive education in Ukraine. Also, the number of preschool educational institutions with inclusive groups has increased, while there is a significant increase in the number of inclusive groups (Table 1)

Table 1 - Key Indicators of Preschool Education in Ukraine

No.	Indicator	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1	Number of preschool educational institutions	15002	14813	14949	14907	14898
2	Number of children in preschool educational institutions	1294891	1291207	1300129	1303787	1278237
3	Coverage of children by preschool educational institutions,%	55	55	57	61	58
4	Number of preschool educational institutions with inclusive groups	79	210	425	929	1721
	of them for children aged 3 years and older	78	208	419	916	1694
5	Number of inclusive groups	116	275	578	1284	2617
	of them for children aged 3 years and older	111	267	564	1246	2525
6	Number of places in inclusive groups	1641	4487	9730	23475	48987
	of them for children aged 3 years and older	1546	4236	9446	22875	47272
7	Number of children in inclusive groups	1774	4731	10437	27465	57313
	of them for children aged 3 years and older	1658	4504	10180	26636	55263

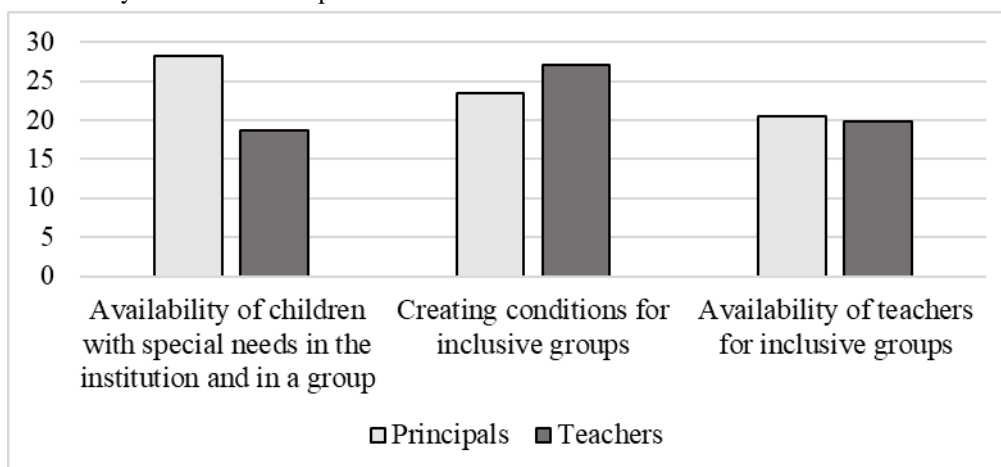
Source: Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukraïny [29].

In general, in Ukraine the number of preschool institutions, the number of children attending them, during the study period remains virtually unchanged. However, the qualitative indicator characterizing the coverage of children with preschool education is only 58% and does not tend to grow. There are on average 9 children per teacher. According to estimates of UNICEF Ukraine [27], all children have the right to be enrolled and attend preschool institutions on free of charge basis, however, many children, especially in rural areas, do not attend kindergartens. One of the reasons is the lack of a comprehensive approach to the integration of children with special needs. Along with

this, during the study period in Ukraine, the number of preschool educational institutions with inclusive groups has increased significantly, as well as the number of inclusive groups and children with special needs who attend preschool institutions has also increased.

The study was conducted based on an online questionnaire in order to assess the quality of preschool education in general and the effectiveness of inclusive education in Ukraine, in particular. The formation and distribution of the online questionnaire was carried out using the Google Forms service, which provides information about the survey, visualization of the obtained data in real time mode. Respondents in the study were principals (directors), teachers and parents of pupils of preschool educational institutions of Ukraine, with a separate questionnaire used for each category of respondents. Data processing and analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Statistics). The survey covered 702 preschool institutions; 1239 teachers, 677 principals of preschool educational institutions and 5725 parents of children, attending such institutions, took part in the survey. 98,4% of principals and teachers, who participated in the study, work in municipal and public preschool educational institutions, 1.6% – in private and municipal institutions (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Survey Results of Principals and Teachers of Preschool Educational Institutions in Ukraine (%)



Source: Compiled by authors on the Research on the Quality of Preschool Education: Components of the Educational Environment [28].

The conducted survey shows that preschool educational institutions in Ukraine are attended by children with special educational needs, which is confirmed in their questionnaires by 28.2% of principals and 18.7% of teachers. Preschool institutions with special and inclusive groups and classes create conditions for the education of children with special educational needs. For this purpose



individual curricula are developed and the needs and possibilities of each child are taken into account. This is precisely why children with physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments are provided with teaching aids in educational institutions. The answers of the respondents show that the conditions for inclusive education in preschool institutions are partially provided, forasmuch as only 23.5% of principals and 27.1% of teachers state that the necessary conditions for children with special educational needs have been created in groups. It should also be noted that the need for additional permanent or temporary support for children with certain developmental disabilities is due to ensuring their rights to quality preschool education. Preschoolers, whose social, physical or psychological characteristics need special support, should be provided with appropriate conditions, additional attention and care; consequently, they are provided with psychological, pedagogical and correctional and developmental services, which are provided by employees of the relevant specialty. The obtained data indicate that the level of provision of teachers who provide inclusive education in preschool education is insufficient. After all, only 20% of directors claim that the institution has employees who are able to provide inclusive education, while there are even fewer educators who are ready to work with such children – only 19.8%.

The need for qualified personnel and specialized assistance is partially solved by inclusive resource centers (IRCs) – institutions created to implement the right of children with special educational needs aged 2 to 18 years to receive preschool and general secondary education. Such centers conduct a comprehensive psychological and pedagogical assessment of a child's development; they ensure psychological and pedagogical and correctional and developmental services; they provide systematic and qualified support for a child with special educational needs. According to the data of the Ministry of Education and Science [30], as of May 2020, in Ukraine, 627 inclusive resource centers have been established and are operating in all regions of Ukraine. In the context of rapprochement with EU, Ukraine continues to implement an ambitious program of reforms related to various economic, political, social spheres, stimulating economic growth and improving the living standards of citizens. That is why in order to outline the prospects for the development of inclusive education in Ukraine, it is necessary to consider the indicators and practice of preschool educational institutions in European Union.

Preschool education in the EU is defined as the initial stage of organized learning, designed primarily to acquaint young children with the school environment, that is, to provide a bridge between home and a school-based atmosphere. Early childhood educational (ECE) programs should be centred or school-based, be designed to meet the educational and developmental needs of children at least three years of age, and have staff that are adequately trained (qualified) to provide an

educational program for the children [31]. Inclusive education in accordance with EU law is an ongoing process aimed at providing quality education for all, respecting diversity and different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations, eliminating all forms of discrimination. Children with special educational needs in EU countries can study through inclusive education, in separate special groups/classes, in separate special preschool institutions, and through non-formal education (Table 2).

Table 2 - Key Indicators of Preschool and Inclusive Education in EU

	EU	Poland	Slovakia	Bulgaria	Romania	Croatia
Number of early childhood and pre-primary education pupils. (thousands)	13657.4	1361.2	166.3	220.9	521.2	114.5
Participation rate	94.8	93	82.2	82.4	86.3	81
Number of teachers in early childhood and pre-primary education (thousands)	1204.9	102.5	14.1	18.0	34.7	9.4
Pupil-teacher ratios in early childhood and pre-primary education	12.7	14.9	11.8	12.3	15.1	11.1
Enrolment rate in inclusive education. based on the enrolled pre-primary population (%)	98.6	99.43	98.62	99.27	n/a	n/a
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in inclusive education. based on the pre-primary population of children with an official decision of SEN (%)	70.64	79.68	64.85	85.6	n/a	n/a
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in special groups. based on the pre-primary population of children with an official decision of SEN (%)	12.58	3.43	4.93	11.97	n/a	n/a
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in special pre-schools. based on the pre-primary population of children with an official decision of SEN (%)	23.14	16.88	28.32	2.43	n/a	n/a
Percentage of children with an official decision of SEN in fully separate educational settings. based on the pre-school population of children with an official decision of SEN (%)	36.73	20.32	33.25	14.40	n/a	n/a

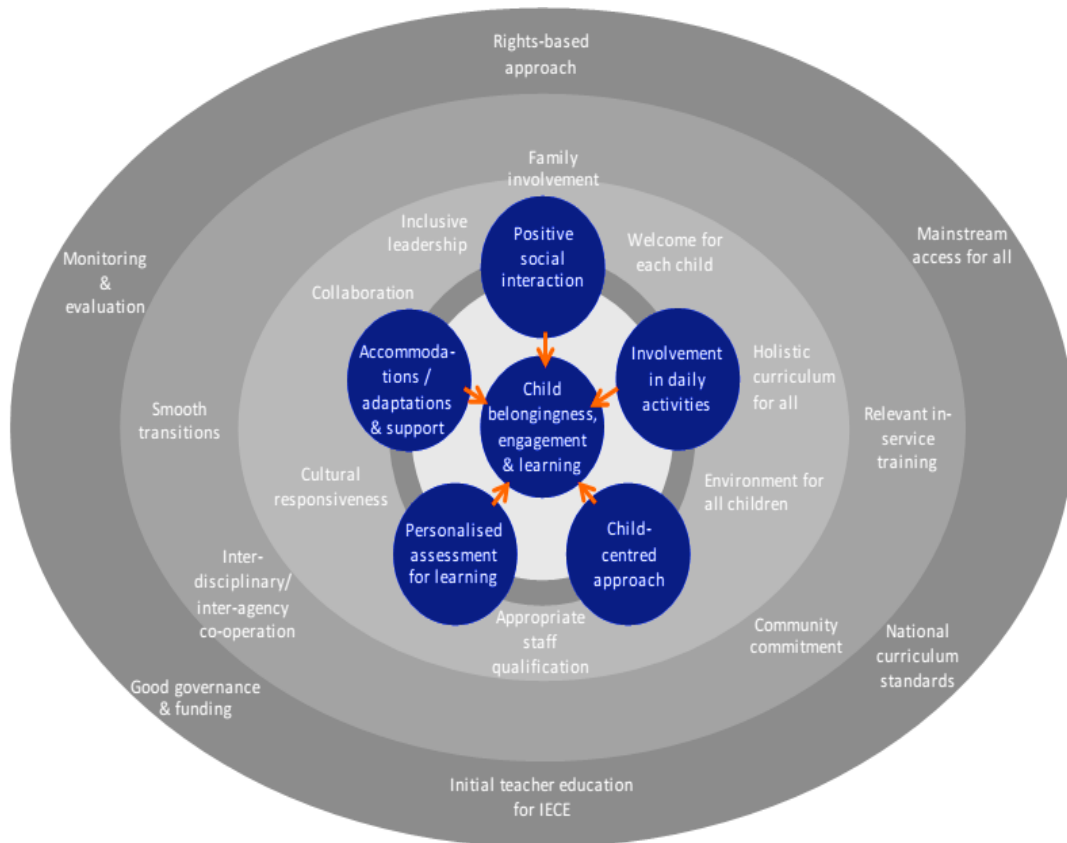
Source: Compiled by authors on the Early childhood and primary education statistics [31].

The number of children attending preschool educational institutions differs in different EU Member States. To some extent, this reflects the demographic structure of the population, as well as the policies of individual countries regarding the involvement of children in early childhood and

preschool education. Strategic framework – Education and Training 2020 [13] has set a benchmark according to which at least 95% of children of preschool age should be involved in preschool education. In fact, this goal has been achieved, forasmuch as the share of children attending preschool in EU is 94.9%. At the same time, some countries have lower rates, in particular, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia involves about 80% of children in preschool education, while Poland – 93%. In 2018, there were 1.2 million preschool teachers in EU, and the workload per teacher was on average 12.7 children. Among the studied countries, the highest value is observed in Romania and Poland (15.1 and 14.9, respectively), and the lowest – in Croatia – 11.1. In most EU countries, the rate of involvement of preschool children in inclusive education is 98.6%, and its value in some countries ranges from 80% to 100%. In the group of analyzed countries, the highest value is observed in Poland (99.43%), the lowest – in Slovakia (98.62%). Those children, who are not involved in education and upbringing in general institutions, attend special schools or receive non-formal education under the supervision of official health authorities or social services.

The percentage of children with special educational needs, who study at least 80% of the time in preschool institutions, ranges from 19% to 100%, and the overall average for EU countries is 70.64%. At the same time, some children with special educational needs in the studied countries are brought up and educated in certain special groups (the highest rate in Bulgaria – 11.97%), in some preschools (the highest rate in Slovakia – 28.32%), and through non-formal education. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, taking into account the experience and issues outlined, developed and implemented a project called “Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE)”, which lasted from 2015 to 2017. The basic goal of the project was to identify, analyze and promote the identified key characteristics of the quality of inclusive preschool education for all children of EU member states. The result of the project is revealed in meeting the educational needs and, at the same time, the social education of all children from the age of 3 to primary education. The participants and the target group of the project were the Member States of European Union and Switzerland. The results of the project reflect the general situation in Europe, which shows that most EU countries have created the relevant conditions for the successful development of inclusive preschool education for all children, including children with special educational needs. The results of the project based on a qualitative thematic analysis of 32 examples of IECE descriptions across Europe were presented in a new model: Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education



The new model is the result of a combination of two main views on quality inclusive education for preschool children, namely the Outcome-Process-Structure model and the Ecological Systems model. The ecosystem model, based on examples of descriptions of IECE practitioners, researchers and advisors, aims to promote a deeper and broader understanding of IECE-related issues. It is expected that this will improve IECE research, policy and practice in Europe and on international level. Countries that acquired EU memberships have also gradually reformed their pre-primary and inclusive education systems, starting with the accession negotiation phase. In order to approve an application for membership, a country should meet certain criteria, including respect for the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, the stability of institutions guaranteeing adherence to these principles, and the ability to commit to membership, including commitment to the political, economic and monetary objectives of the Union, etc. The surveyed countries (Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Croatia) have taken significant steps since the accession to EU in order to improve inclusive preschool education and generally meet all EU requirements regarding preschools for children with special educational needs. Along with this, in some countries during the project implementation specific features have been

identified, which are an example of positive experience or, conversely, need to be regulated to ensure compliance with EU requirements.

The study of 5 key components of a high-quality system of preschool inclusive education has made it possible to determine the basis of the prospects and directions for Ukraine, which are important in the context of state integration into the European Community, namely: Access to quality ECE for all children. In Ukraine, it is necessary to increase the number of children attending preschool educational institutions. Currently, the coverage of children by preschool educational institutions in Ukraine is 58%, while in EU – 95%. It is necessary to carry out explanatory work among parents with children of preschool age about the importance of preschool education in general and for children with special educational needs in particular. In addition, in Ukraine, due attention is not paid to children from families with difficult life circumstances, families from national minorities. Insufficient attention is paid to diversity related to religion, ethnicity, and language. In this context, the experience of Slovakia is interesting, where children with various difficulties attend kindergarten and need individual adjustments to the program, as well as children of immigrants, socially unprotected children and children from foster families and orphanages, which also need inclusive education. Workforce quality. Professional training of teachers of preschool educational institutions in Ukraine on the basis of the recently developed profile of educational competencies creates numerous opportunities for children with special needs. However, it is necessary to continue towards striving to combine theory with practice, to emphasize child-centered learning, as well as inclusiveness. In Ukraine, it is necessary to improve the system of continuous professional development for educators, special teachers, methodologists and principals. Compared to EU countries, there are significant differences in working conditions, wages, and the incentive system. A promising direction for Ukraine is also the development of cooperation between preschools and universities, which train specialists, conduct investigations, provide assistance in monitoring and evaluating the quality of services.

Quality curriculum/content. The state standard of preschool education in Ukraine is an essential step towards creating a quality preschool education system that meets EU requirements. The standard describes the competencies that children should have after graduation from the institution. In Ukraine, the list of training programs (curricula), manuals, and methodological materials approved by the Ministry of Education and Science is updated annually. At the same time, EU experience in this area suggests that it is necessary to make the curriculum meaningful for every child, to apply a child-centered approach and “individualization” of learning. The goal of a quality program not doing “the same for everyone” but instead of making “each to his own” is the goal of educational work in EU.

The study shows that appropriate conditions are not sufficiently created for children with special educational needs in Ukraine. The problem is partly solved through inclusive resource centers; however, a slightly different approach is needed, which is practiced in EU countries. For instance, in Poland, there is a requirement for children with special needs that “the therapist goes to the child” and not “the child goes to the therapist”. This means that professionals prefer to work with children in their natural environment, especially when working to improve independence and develop social skills. In most EU countries, parents are actively involved in the process of inclusive education; they participate in curriculum development. Their opinion and wishes must be taken into account by educators of preschool institutions, and parents are not left alone with the problems of raising children with special needs; they receive comprehensive assistance.

Evaluation and monitoring. Assessing the quality of preschool services of preschool educational institutions in Ukraine is underdeveloped, and applied indicators do not comply with EU requirements; consequently, it is sometimes difficult to compare them in order to determine the best practice or prospects. There are practically no tools and documents for assessment and monitoring in Ukraine, in contrast to the system used in EU. External monitoring and evaluation of the quality system of preschool education should be carried out on the basis of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R); it will be an important step for Ukraine in the process of integration into the European Community. The same indicators should be used for self-assessment of preschool educational institutions, as well as for assessing the effectiveness of inclusive education and training children with special needs.

Governance and funding. State kindergartens in Ukraine are free of charge, but some services remain paid. The state does not control the cost of education in private kindergartens. Along with this, the process of decentralization in Ukraine creates a number of problems for preschool education, forasmuch as there is a lack of staff and adequate funding for preschool educational institutions at the level of rural communities. Consequently, the government should support communities with low levels of social-economic development, as it is the practice in EU. In some countries, funds are created to finance preschool education, and local authorities provide financial and social support for children and their families (Latvia). In Norway, municipal kindergartens (47%) are free of charge, and private ones (53%) receive financial grants from the government, which cover most of the costs; therefore, the fee for such institutions is minimal. In Switzerland, preschool institutions are fully funded by the state or municipal authorities; they are free of charge for all children. A significant source of funding for preschool institutions and inclusive education for member states is participation in EU projects; in particular, such projects are implemented in Slovakia, Croatia and other countries.

Inclusion, which is being promoted at the international level by both legislative initiatives and societal values, is a practice in which educators of pre-school institutions are invited to apply new methods adapted to children with special needs in standard curricula. E.B. Frankel, S. Gold, A. Ajodhia-Andrews et al. [32] state that children with special needs should develop with their peers without any restrictions, and that this confidence is a common value for numerous programs for early development and education around the world. It is worth noting that inclusive education for preschool children has been developing unevenly in EU member states, especially in relation to the countries that have recently become members. The context of approaches to inclusive education varies from country to country, however, the basic principles and challenges of implementing inclusive practices are similar. D. Mitchell, D. Sutherland [33] identify the following main obstacles to the introduction of inclusive education, namely: large classes; negative attitude towards disability; focus on exams of the education system; lack of support services; rigid training methods; dominance of the medical model; lack of parental involvement; lack of a clear national policy in some countries.

At the same time, some countries, while trying to promote inclusive education at the level of legislation and government policy, in practice are not sufficiently prepared to teach children with special needs [33]. As for Ukraine, an appropriate regulatory and legal framework has been formed there; it enshrines state guarantees for the provision of educational services to children with special needs. The main international documents have been ratified to ensure the rights of children in accordance with world standards of education, social protection and healthcare. According to the results of the analysis of preschool educational institutions' practical activities, positive changes in the development of inclusive education have been revealed. Every year in Ukraine the number of preschool educational institutions with inclusive groups increases, the number of inclusive groups increases, as well as the number of places in such groups and the number of children attending them. Children with special educational needs study on free of charge basis; they have the primary right to be enrolled in preschool institutions; adapted curricula are developed for them, and groups are formed taking into account the peculiarities of children's educational needs. At the same time, most of the quality indicators, characterizing inclusive education, are significantly lower than in EU countries surveyed.

S. You, E. Kim, K. Shin et al. [34] and B. Sucuoğlu et al. [2] emphasize the extraordinary role of teachers whose responsibilities have changed taking into account the inclusive practice of preschool institutions. These are teachers who are expected to understand the needs and features of children with disabilities and adapt curricula according to their level of development and organize interaction in the classroom with all children. The results of the research make it possible to state that

children with special needs attend more than 25% of preschool educational institutions under study in Ukraine; however, conditions for the full development of such children are not created in all institutions, and only some of them are provided with teaching staff with the appropriate skills and qualifications. The practice of inclusive education in most European countries also demonstrates the positive practice of introducing inclusive education in the educational process, as evidenced by information sources analyzed and the research conducted. However, despite the significant impetus for the introduction of inclusive education in EU, its practical implementation still remains limited in some countries. There are significant differences in the ways in which countries seek to achieve inclusion, as well as the unique challenges that each country faces with. Moreover, the resources available for inclusive education vary considerably across Europe [35]. The ultimate goal of forming an inclusive education system in EU is to provide all children with full-fledged, high-quality educational opportunities in their country. It is important that at EU level inclusive education is considered as a systemic problem and a necessary component of high-quality education with respect for the principles of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law, stability of institutions that guarantee compliance with these principles.

## **5. Conclusions**

Economic, cultural, social development, traditions, hierarchy of the society and other external factors indirectly determine the concept of inclusive education, which has a common goal; however, it acquires different features in individual countries. The creation of an inclusive educational environment in preschool institutions ensures the implementation of the rights of children with special needs for education, physical, psychological and social adaptation, comfortable conditions for learning and development. Implementation of European best practices in preschool educational institutions will make it possible: to improve the level of perception of children with special educational needs of educational material, which will be reflected in the demonstration of educational achievements; to ensure the positive development of mental processes in children with special educational needs through the improvement of memory, thinking, concentration, attentiveness; to involve children with special educational needs in the educational process.

The procedures that ensure an effective inclusive environment of preschool educational institutions in Ukraine should be as follows: equal access for all children to quality preschool education; accessible and flexible curriculum, friendly educational environment and individual development programs for children with special educational needs; quality psychological and



pedagogical support; monitoring the needs of participants in the educational process, analysis and evaluation of the activities of preschool educational institutions; partnership and close cooperation with parents; responsible management of the institution in order to facilitate cooperation and distribution of responsibilities among all interested parties. The conducted research on the quality of inclusive preschool education in Ukraine and some EU countries has revealed positive changes in the educational process, which makes it possible to assess the educational space as of high quality and comfortable for children. However, not all institutions can provide conditions for the development of children with special educational needs. Consequently, the reasons for the inconsistency of public policy, expectations and practical results in inclusive education are quite diverse and require further research.

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