

THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN KINDERGARTEN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how kindergarten teachers view the situation and inclusion of children with autism in kindergarten, how they are able to achieve this, what difficulties they encounter, and how they overcome these difficulties within the kindergarten setting. For this study, we conducted a secondary analysis of a national online questionnaire survey (N=91) conducted among kindergarten teachers in 2024, focusing on the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. After coding the responses, although the sample is not representative, it is clear that the development of an inclusive learning environment is lacking in several dimensions in these institutions.

KEYWORDS

special educational needs, kindergarten, kindergarten teacher, autism spectrum, integration, inclusion

INTRODUCTION

The growing social demand for inclusive education is one of the greatest challenges of our time, with an increasing number of children from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs entering institutions. The problems can be varied and can also accumulate, so it is possible that children come from families who do not speak Hungarian as their mother tongue and are economically disadvantaged. In this study, we use the term "children requiring special treatment" within the group of children requiring special attention, as defined by Hungarian law. This group includes children with special educational needs, children struggling with integration, learning and behavioral difficulties, and exceptionally gifted children. Hereinafter, we will only deal with children with special educational needs⁵², paying particular attention to the autism spectrum. First, we should note that due to individual differences in children's development, marked differences may only become apparent when the child enters an institution, and there are also problems, mainly in the area of cultural skills acquisition, that only come to light after the child starts school (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusion in education is not limited to schools, but already appears in kindergartens, and in fact, these institutions are the most open in the Hungarian system (Békési & Kasza, 2008). At the same time, the development of an inclusive approach and practice is the result of a long learning and development process (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, 2011, Booth, 2017). This process is dynamic, and an important key element is community-centeredness (Nagyné Schiffer, 2011), which takes into account the individual needs of children from different backgrounds and with different difficulties, seeks to involve parents and other family members,

⁵² Children and students with special educational needs: Children and students with special educational needs are those who require special treatment based on the expert opinion of a committee of experts and who have motor, sensory (visual, auditory), intellectual or speech impairment, multiple disabilities in the case of multiple disabilities, autism spectrum disorder or other psychological developmental disorders (severe learning, attention or behavioral control disorders) (Act CXC of 2011 on national public education, Hungary)

pays attention to the training and support of all employees of the institution, and in which the management of the institution can be considered a key player (Perlusz, 2020). Children with special educational needs are also part of heterogeneous communities. When we talk about the inclusion of children with special educational needs, , in addition to the continuous development of teachers' knowledge, the expertise and perspective of special education teachers are also necessary to provide support, and it is essential to establish cooperation and ways of learning from each other, which can be achieved through continuous consultation and, at times, in a very intensive form (Kállai, 2024).

The Hungarian legal environment (including the currently effective Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education and the Guidelines for the Kindergarten Education of Children with Special Educational Needs) and the regulators dealing with kindergarten education (National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education) provide the framework for integrated education. At the institutional level, the local implementation of integration is determined by the founding charter and educational program that reflect the intentions of the maintainer (Böddi & Lakatos, 2010), but it is also important to consider how this issue is addressed in other kindergarten documents. These may include the annual work plan, house rules, and unofficial documents (Vágó, 2008). In practice, this also means that implementation may vary from institution to institution. In general, domestic and international authors list objective and subjective factors for ensuring appropriate co-education. Objective factors include material and infrastructural conditions, while subjective factors include the professional preparedness and motivation of teachers and other personnel. In this regard, the opinion of kindergarten administrators reflects that the challenge stems from the lack of adequate knowledge and preparation among kindergarten teachers, as well as the fact that inclusive education places an additional burden on them (Mező & Juhász, 2024). The preparedness and motivation of kindergarten teachers, as well as the support provided to them, will also influence what is achieved within the group.

The aim of our study is to present the attitudes of kindergarten teachers towards inclusive education and children on the autism spectrum.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research results presented here are derived from a secondary analysis of a database created for a thesis. The original data was collected by Valentina Kozmáné Molnár (2025) in the spring of 2025 as a small-scale pilot study. Data collection was carried out using an online self-administered questionnaire, the link to which was shared in thematic groups on various online social networking sites (exclusively in groups for preschool teachers). The link to the questionnaire was available for two weeks. The weakness and limitation of data collection using online self-administered questionnaires is that once the link is available, it becomes virtually impossible to control who fills it out. However, we chose this solution because of the sensitivity of the topic and the need to reach the population under study. The research did not aim to be representative.

The questionnaire contained seventeen closed questions and one open question. Our secondary analysis attempts to present the responses to the open-ended question. The closed questions included questions of a demographic nature and questions related to work. We used these for this analysis in order to place the responses to the open-ended questions in the appropriate context at a descriptive statistical level.

RESULTS

Presentation of the sample

After cleaning the data, a total of 91 valid responses were received for the online questionnaire. We specified age categories for the respondents (Table 1). One third of our sample consists of kindergarten teachers aged 51 or older, but young people are also well represented (29%).

Table 1: Age of respondents

	Percentage
20-30 years	28,6
31-40 years	18,7
41-50 years	19,8
51+ years	33
Total	100

Source: Kindergarten teachers database of Kozmáné Molnár, 2025

In terms of professional experience gained in the teaching profession, we get a similar picture regardless of age. Twenty-three percent of respondents do not yet have professional experience as teachers (but have other work experience), and a quarter of the sample reported up to 5 years of professional experience. Thirteen percent have 5-10 years of experience, while just under 7% have 11-20 years of experience, and more than 30% have more than 20 years of experience.

We received information from a total of 15 counties, with the highest response rate in Budapest, which accounted for 34% of the responses. Respondents from Zala County accounted for 19% of the sample, 9% from Veszprém County, 8% from Győr-Moson-Sopron County, and 7% from Vas County. One of the responses came from outside Hungary and was included in the database.

Overall, we received responses from 37 municipalities. In addition to the responses from the capital, fifteen responses came from county seats, meaning that half of the respondents live in county seats or the capital. At the same time, an examination of the place of work shows that only 27% of respondents work in the capital or a large city, while one-third work in villages (Table 2).

Table 2: Worklocation

	Percentage
Capital city	7,7
County seat	19,8
Small town	38,5
Village	34,1
Total	100

Source: Kindergarten teachers database of Kozmáné Molnár, 2025

We examined the operators of the institutions in relation to their work (Table 3). Eighty percent are operated by local governments, more than one-tenth by churches, and 5 percent by private individuals or foundations.

Table 3: Maintener of kindergarten

	Percentage
Local government	79,1
Church	12,1
Private - foundation	5,5
Other	3,3
Total	100

Source: Kindergarten teachers database of Kozmáné Molnár, 2025

There is a significant difference in group sizes in kindergartens: more than 60 percent of respondents have more than 20 children in their groups, while one-tenth of institutions have groups with fewer than 10 children. From the perspective of our topic, it was also important to gather information on whether there were children with special educational needs in the group and, if so, what proportion they represented (Table 4). The responses show that around one tenth of respondents do not have such children in their group, while around 30-30 percent have one or two, and more than 30 percent have three or more.

Table 4: How many children with special educational needs are there in your group?

	Percentage
None	9,9
1 child	29,7
2 children	28,6
3 children	14,3
More than 3 children	17,6
Total	100

Source: Kindergarten teachers database of Kozmáné Molnár, 2025

Among children with special educational needs (Table 5), three distinct groups are represented in inclusive kindergartens: autism spectrum disorder, speech impairment, and other psychological developmental disorders. They have been assessed by a committee of educational experts, but almost three-quarters of respondents also indicated that they believe there are children in the group who have not yet been assessed by expert committees, but are either in the process of being assessed or are expected to request an assessment.

Table 5: Children with special educational needs in the groups

	Percentage
living with autism spectrum disorder	42,9
living with speech impairment	38,5
living with other psychological developmental disorders	29,7
living with sensory impairment	11

Source: Kindergarten teachers database of Kozmáné Molnár, 2025

After presenting the sample of respondents, we will present the answers to an open question in the questionnaire in more detail. The question was aimed at exploring experiences and problems related to inclusive education in connection with the reception and inclusion of children with autism. There were 65 valid responses to the question, which suggests that although there are no children with autism in the current group, the respondents do have such experiences. One-third of the responses were very brief, using simple sentences to describe the specific difficulties that had arisen, but the others explained their opinions, experiences, and impressions in greater detail. These responses are presented in the following section.

Summary of responses

The vast majority of responses (85 percent) highlighted specific difficulties associated with individual cases, even in descriptions that reported successes, as challenges were almost invariably present in these cases as well. The responses clearly show that it matters where a child is on the autism spectrum and what kind of

challenges are associated with their condition. Children with low support needs can generally be integrated more successfully into kindergarten groups if the necessary conditions are created for them with appropriate attention. These cases are not without challenges, but they can be managed with the right tools and expertise. Fifteen percent of respondents reported such successful cases. It is also clear that kindergarten teachers can find themselves in a very difficult situation, regardless of whether the support needs are low or high, especially if they do not have access to the support of a special education teacher with the appropriate qualifications and if the personnel conditions are not guaranteed.

By creating an autism-friendly, barrier-free environment in inclusive institutions, we mean a structured physical environment and the availability and routine use of visual aids. The responses show that in many cases, institutions are unable to provide sufficient support to preschool teachers in this area.

The presence of appropriately trained professionals in the institution is key to the conditions for inclusive education. A positive example illustrates the power of this: *"I had help, without which it would not have been possible. The teaching assistant paid attention to him when necessary, distracted him, and helped him."* (answer1)

In this area, the lack of special education assistants who provide daily assistance in kindergarten life is striking: one-fifth of respondents complained that at certain times of the day they are left alone with the group of children and are unable to give adequate attention to children who require special treatment: *"As a novice kindergarten teacher, I was completely alone in the group in the mornings until about 9 a.m. Without a nanny or teaching assistant, I had one autistic child and several children with integration and behavioral problems in the group. I asked the local government for help in increasing the number of assistants, but my requests were always rejected. I received no help with my daily work... Unfortunately, in the current system, everyone is only interested in getting as many children as possible into the groups, but no one cares how the nursery teachers manage to get through the day! Unfortunately!!!"* (answer2)

It is worth mentioning the training of kindergarten teachers and other kindergarten staff: half of the respondents emphasized that there is a greater need for information about symptoms and causes than about care and development opportunities: *"Nurses do not have sufficient knowledge about autism spectrum disorder, which makes it difficult for them to provide adequate support. Due to the increased number of children with special educational needs, everyday life is full of challenges. Staff are often overworked, which makes it difficult to work effectively."* (answer3)

"If the specialist service considers it feasible to integrate the child, then it is important to try and for the teacher to ask for and receive help! It would be good if there were training courses that focused on practical skills. Or I can also imagine that a special education teacher could be present in the group for a while to help establish a daily routine and provide appropriate assistance to the teacher, because in a one-on-one situation, even if it works, it may not work in a group setting." (answer4)

Several people also mentioned that large group sizes make the work more difficult; groups of 20-25 or more require greater individual support. Special education teachers with the appropriate qualifications are not available everywhere to care for the children.

Problems and difficulties can be experienced in several areas during preschool education, which requires great attention from all staff. The problems reported by respondents include outbursts of anger, aggressive behavior (half of the responses included this description), difficulty adapting to change (mentioned in one-fifth of the responses), social difficulties, communication difficulties and problems with following rules (mentioned in 15% of the responses), and sensory sensitivity (mentioned in a few responses). Some respondents (40%) emphasized that they find it difficult to deal with children's unexpected or aggressive behavior and anxiety, while others focus on creating the right conditions based on individual characteristics, for example by offering children the opportunity to withdraw or reduce stimulation during noisy outdoor or indoor activities, or by providing the assistance of an assistant: *"By providing a small space in the group for the child's habits, favorite*

activities, and tools, a calm atmosphere can be created for everyone. With the help of an accepted companion, any tensions that may arise in new situations or during various programs can be overcome." (answer5)

"He was disturbed by the noise and the many children, so he was given ear protectors, which he wore in the group to muffle the sounds. There was a soft corner where he could retreat." (answer6)

"He found it difficult to cope when there were several people around him, so it was particularly difficult when, for example, two groups spent time together in the yard. Teachers often took the autistic child into the group alone, where the two of them could play quietly, but this was difficult to do due to the large number of children and the lack of teachers." (answer7)

Cooperation and preparedness – *"A kindergarten teacher's qualification is not sufficient for the daily development of an autistic child."* (answer8)

The key to successful inclusive education is maintaining various forms of cooperation between partners. In addition to kindergarten staff, this includes parents and special education teachers who provide care for children. Several respondents reported experiencing mistrust or passivity on the part of parents. This may be because parents find it difficult to accept their children and relate to them appropriately, and they themselves need support in this: *"Parents were not honest for a long time, but once trust was established, the work became easier. We have to work a lot not only with the children, but also with the parents."* (answer9)

In this area, it can also be observed that parents' acceptance of their children can vary and go through different phases, with significant differences. Based on the reports, kindergarten teachers also experience differences in some cases, but in most opinions, parents are viewed positively: *"We are in a fortunate situation, as the parents are very cooperative."* (answer10)

The support of special education teachers and teaching assistants is of paramount importance in kindergarten, as mentioned above. Special education teachers appear only peripherally in the responses to the question, with opinions primarily reporting on their absence. At the same time, it sometimes happens that *"special education teachers expect too much from kindergarten teachers, we don't get enough information about these children at university."* (answer11). We have little information about special education provision, so we will not discuss this in this section. At the same time, difficulties have also been identified in relation to the training or further training opportunities for kindergarten teachers: *"Teachers working in kindergartens do not always have special qualifications. Practice-oriented training courses are rarely available nearby."* (answer12)

It can be observed that the knowledge acquired by career starters during their training has not yet been systematically incorporated into their practical work, for which they need encouragement and support: *"As a beginner, it is difficult to apply what I have learned in practice. With the help of experienced teachers, I feel that the situation is perhaps better, but unfortunately I am still struggling..."* (answer13)

Successful examples

Some responses also included positive examples. These show that, in addition to having a set of tools tailored to the individual needs of children, a supportive, attentive, and consistent attitude, a focus on problem solving, and cooperation among professionals contribute significantly to children's development. A child's integration into a group and development is not usually sudden or explosive, but rather takes place in very small, incremental steps, which are primarily noticed by those who regularly work with the child:

"The child's presence required a great deal of patience, attention, and organization over the course of four years. We have seen tremendous progress. For about a year, we were unable to hold organized activities in the group in his presence, but then, slowly and gradually, he began to participate in story time, poetry recitation, etc. By the end of the third year, he was already participating skillfully in our Mother's Day and end-of-year shows!" (answer14)

"It took a little over a year for the child to be fully accepted. Today, he participates in initiatives, dressed up for carnival and took part in the short show." (answer15)

The results are due to pedagogical consistency and the use of autism-specific tools by kindergarten teachers. These tools indicate the sequence and changes in various activities for the children (daily schedule, weekly schedule, time markers, etc.), help regulate behavior (behavior cards, behavior markers), and recognize their own emotions (emotion cards, etc.). The routine use of these tools makes the environment supportive: *"In another case, mood and schedule cards worked very well because X was an open child and conflicts could be easily resolved with our help, but coming in from the playground was a problem for four years (however, he made a lot of progress in this area in the last semester). There was also an example where Y needed to develop his social skills the most, because he did not show any excessive lag in other areas."* (answer16)

"Fortunately, in both cases, the child was able to integrate well into the community. Predictability, timely notification of changes, and explanation of certain phenomena helped." (answer17)

Accepting children with special educational needs means continuous learning for kindergarten teachers as well. Preparation and implementation are complex tasks in many ways and require a lot of preparation: *"From an adult perspective, we had our failures, but the small successes meant more and fueled our pedagogical optimism. I think it depends on the teacher. It cannot be done without acceptance, and voluntariness is important. It should not be forced on anyone."* (answer18)

SUMMARY

Our qualitative data analysis shows that creating an inclusive kindergarten or kindergarten group for kids with special educational needs, including autism spectrum disorder, depends on a bunch of factors. These include the range of resources to be provided by the institutions, the existence of the pedagogical culture necessary for care, and the continuous provision of these (training, further training, organizational development, creation of a barrier-free environment, provision of tools, availability of professionals with appropriate expertise, provision of continuous assistance). The lack of appropriate expertise also leads to a failure to make the environment accessible. As a result of these shortcomings, respondents often do not feel professionally competent and perceive their pedagogical effectiveness as inadequate. The responses indicate that success requires a comprehensive approach that includes support for preschool teachers and parents. Professional support may also involve the periodic, intensive involvement of a suitably qualified special education teacher, thereby reducing the burden on preschool teachers and enabling more effective support for education, especially in the early stages of inclusion. Training institutions have an important role to play in this regard in preparing preschool teachers for these challenges through practice-oriented training.

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