



Baltic  
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### ***CASE-STUDY: PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL***

**Baltic Institute of Social Sciences**

***Project 2: European effective educational practices: How is education contributing to overcome or reproduce social exclusion? /WP8***

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This preliminary report was written within the framework of Project 2: *European effective educational practices: How is education contributing to overcome or reproduce social exclusion?* Project 2 aims to analyse components from educational practices that are decreasing the rates of school failure and those practices that are increasing them (Annex 1, p. 5). In order to study educational practices altogether 20 case studies were carried out in Latvia, Spain, Finland, UK, Cyprus, and Hungary. For each case study one educational institution from pre-primary, primary, secondary, vocational or special education field was chosen. This report is one of the four preliminary reports focused on pre-primary education.

In order to explore effective educational practices that are decreasing the rates of school failure and those practices that are increasing them at pre-primary level, kindergarten "Pasaciņa" was chosen for the case study. The kindergarten is located at the outskirts of Jelgava (66 thousand inhabitants, the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest city in Latvia). "Pasaciņa" is a kindergarten operating mainly in Latvian<sup>1</sup>, which works additionally with Roma and Russian children (mostly from mixed Latvian-Russian families). The kindergarten has participated in several projects aiming at inclusion of Roma children in institutions of comprehensive education and hence promotion of general inclusion of Roma in community and promotion of inclusive education.

As the result of project "Qualitative Education for Roma Children" (organized by Centre for Education Initiatives, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia in 2003 – 2004), a position for additional staff – Roma teacher assistant was established. The assistant's main task was to help Roma children to adapt and integrate in the kindergarten, and to facilitate dialogue between Roma children, teachers and parents. The first Roma teacher assistant has been promoted as a teacher and therefore gives an example of successful results of this practice.

The successful work of the Roma teacher assistant, good academic results of students and their successful integration further at schools make this

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<sup>1</sup> In Latvia there are kindergarten groups working either in Latvian or in Russian. Usually parents choose the kindergarten group according to the language spoken in family. In the last years Russian families often prefer Latvian kindergarten groups to ensure better acquisition of Latvian language.

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kindergarten a good example that has been valued in other projects as well. Parents note that the kindergarten has a very good reputation and former students living in other areas take their children to this kindergarten. However there are no available external evaluations of the pre-primary level schools and kindergartens do not have data on their students' further success in schools.

The kindergarten takes care of 276 students including 12 Roma children and 20 students from mixed Latvian-Russian families. However the numbers vary especially regarding Roma students as their parents travel a lot and therefore children have to leave the kindergarten.

Similarly to other European countries Roma people in Latvia are socially and economically disadvantaged. One of the identified reasons is lack of education. Many Roma children leave school already at primary level and many are sent to correction classes often without justified reasons. Therefore inclusion of Roma children in comprehensive schools starting from pre-primary level and providing inclusive additional support prevents early tracking, contributes to the motivation to learn and to achieve good academic results. The socio-economic conditions of children with other ethnic backgrounds vary however there is no correlation between low SES and Latvian or Russian origin.

In the kindergarten there are 12 groups which are homogeneous in terms of age. The youngest group includes children up to two years old and the oldest – pre-school aged children (6-7 years). There are mostly two teachers per one group and one group assistant. There are additional teachers for singing classes and other specialists like speech therapist and psychologist, who work individually with children in need of specialized help.

During the case study one group that corresponds best to the selection criteria was chosen for detailed exploration. In this group there are about 20 children (the number varies as there are children, who are ill for a long time or leave kindergarten for other reasons) including 4 Roma and 5 Russian students. All are 6 -7 years old. This group offers the possibility for parents to leave their children in the kindergarten also during nights.

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The group includes children of different ethnic origin and various native languages (Latvian, Russian, Roma), children from families of different socio-economic status and children with different ability level – different level of knowledge and skills based mostly on their previous experience – what parents have taught them and at what age they have started kindergarten. There are also children with health problems or minor disabilities, for example problems with speech and also behaviour problems. Hence the main disadvantaged groups are: Roma students (language, cultural reasons, low SES), Russian students (language reasons), children with disabilities and children with lower ability level (including students of all nationalities).

## **2. SUMMARY**

This report provides results of the case study of one pre-primary education institution in Latvia – the kindergarten “Pasaciņa” in Jelgava. The aim of the case study was to evaluate practices that are decreasing the rates of school failure and those practices that are increasing them at pre-primary level according to the objectives of the Project 2. The kindergarten fulfils the selection criteria as it provides education for students with different ethnic origin and native languages, students with disabilities, different ability level and diverse SES. The educational practices of the kindergarten contribute to good academic achievements of students and further their successful integration in schools.

The methodology used for data collection in the kindergarten included 11 open-ended interviews with teachers, relatives and students, one communicative focus group with nine members of the kindergarten staff and five communicative observations in the classroom, playground and meetings. The data were analyzed according to two research hypothesis on inclusive educational practices and community participation and along exclusionary and transformative dimensions.

The results of the case study show that there are several practices that contribute to fostering social cohesion and improving learning process and student results. These are heterogeneous grouping, successful use of human resources, inclusive

individual assistance, provision of multicultural environment and parental involvement. However some of them are in need of improvement, e.g., low parent participation and partial participation in consultative activities and decision making process and inclusion of multiculturalism in planning of instrumental subjects.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the case study corresponds to the methodological framework of INCLUD-ED established in Annex 1. The methods of data collection in the case study of the kindergarten "Pasaciņa" included open-ended interviews, communicative focus group and communicative observations.

During the case study following data collection activities were carried out:

- a) three open-ended interviews with two teachers and one teacher assistant;
- b) three open-ended interviews with four family members of students;
- c) five open-ended interviews with five students of the kindergarten;
- d) the communicative focus group (involved a group of seven teachers, one group assistant and one methodologist);
- e) the communicative observations (in classrooms during two different learning activities, in two different parent meetings and one during the play time of students).

For more information on respondents see the table on the next page.

As mentioned in the introduction, the main fieldwork was carried out in one group of students including interviews with teachers and teacher assistant, interviews with students, an interview with one family member and all observations except for one observation of parent meeting, which was carried out in the parent board meeting and included parents from all groups of the kindergarten. Hence three interviewed family members were from other groups and the communicative focus group also involved participants from other groups of the kindergarten.

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Code	Description
TIFP1	Roma teacher assistant for 5-7 years old students. She has worked in the kindergarten for 1,5 years.
TIFP2	Teacher for 5-7 years old students. She has worked in the kindergarten for 7,5 years.
TIFP3	Teacher for 5-7 years old students. She has worked in the kindergarten for 16 years.
RIMP1	Latvian father, who is a president of parent board
RIFP2	Two Russian mothers of children 2-3 years old
RIFP3	Russian aunt of a 6 year old boy with disabilities
CIMP1	6 year old Latvian boy
CIMP2	6 year old Roma boy
CIFP3	6 year old Russian girl
CIFP4	6 year old Roma girl
CIMP5	7 year old Latvian boy
TGP1	Focus group with 9 kindergarten staff members: 1) teacher of 6-7 year old students, who has worked in kindergarten for 10 years; 2) teacher of 5-6 year old students, who has worked in kindergarten for 15 years; 3) teacher of 5-6 year old students, who has worked in kindergarten for 7 years; 4) teacher (Roma by nationality) of 3-4 year old students, who has worked in kindergarten for 4 years; 5) teacher of 3-4 year old students, who has worked in kindergarten for 3 years; 6) singing teacher of all age students, who has worked in kindergarten for 2 years; 7) music teacher of all age students, who has worked in kindergarten for 25 years; 8) group assistant for 3-4 year old students, who has worked in the kindergarten for 10 years; 9) methodologist, who has worked in the kindergarten for 16 years.
OcP1	Observation in classroom of morning learning activity
OcP2	Observation in classroom of singing class
OpP1	Observation in playground
OmP1	Observation of parent board meeting
OmP2	Observation of group parent meeting

The analysis of data was accomplished according to the hypothesis on inclusive educational practices and community involvement and along the exclusionary and transformative dimensions. Some chapters include analysis both in exclusionary dimension and transformative dimension, but for others the dimensions are not clearly separated as the information relates more to just one dimension.

## **4. INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**

### **4.1. Grouping the students and use of human resources**

#### **Transformative**

In the kindergarten children are divided in homogeneous groups according to their age. Hence the groups include children of different ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, children with different ability level, and children with low SES. However the forms of classroom organization facilitate learning achievement for all students and are tended to overcome streaming as described in *Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems*.

Learning activities within the kindergarten group are organized either for all children together or in smaller groups. There are various ways how children are divided in groups but they do not include division according to ability levels, ethnic origin or other factors. Usually children draw lots or they choose the groups themselves. There are usually five groups or centres, as teachers call them, according to different subjects. For example in one group children learn letters, in another – numbers. There are also centres where children can play. Although teachers sometimes let children choose a centre, they also record the children activities so that they do not repeat and make children change the centres, if they want to work in one centre several days in a row.

It might seem at first like a practice promoting streaming within classroom by content, it is not. Different groups study different material and topics with different difficulty levels but the groups are heterogeneous and change daily so that everyone has an equal chance to be in all groups the same amount of time. The working in smaller groups and opportunity for kids to choose promotes their motivation to learn, good coexistence and relationships based on trust and cooperation between students and teachers.



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Teachers also carefully watch children's participation in joint activities. They try to organize activities in a way that everyone can participate and they pay special attention to children that are shy and quiet. Otherwise only the smarter, louder or more active children would do all the tasks preventing others from using their knowledge and skills. If the student has difficulties or does not know the right answer, teachers help her/him and sometimes involve other kids, too. These practices show the inclusion of all children in the same activities regardless of their ability level or other factors. The activities are organized to avoid segregation and hence promote cooperative learning.

The use of human resources facilitates inclusionary practices, which encourage learning achievements for all students. In the observed group there are two teachers, a Roma teacher assistant and a group assistant. Teachers share the main responsibility for the learning process of students, but they also involve the group assistant in different learning activities (mostly in subject centres). The Roma teacher assistant also takes part in the learning process and has other responsibilities that were described in the introduction and will be discussed more in Chapter 4.3. Group assistant for the most part is responsible for preparing meals, cleaning and assisting teachers in other practical tasks.

One of the teachers noted that different ability levels, diverse ethnic origins and native languages of children require individual approach and attention, therefore it is necessary to use all of the available human resources. She said that in all groups there are two teachers, but they work in shifts and that means that there is only a small period of time when both of them are with the group at the same time. She thinks that it is very hard for one teacher to ensure good learning achievements for all the students. (TIFP2)

The use of all available human resources ensures that, when children work in subject centres, there is almost one adult for each group, who can help them to learn and explain what is unclear. Effective use of human resources also gives opportunity to work individually with children who need extra help. Individual assistance is closely linked to the classroom curriculum and is either provided during regular activities or the learning time is extended before or after regular activities. Individual help, especially for Roma children, is one of the main responsibilities of the Roma teacher assistant.

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If there are several students that need the same assistance, teachers unite them in small groups (2-4 students) and instead of individual help they work with all of them together. In order to help children, who have learning difficulties, and at the same time to promote cooperation and good coexistence, teachers sometimes put together in pairs or in small groups high-ability students with low-ability students. In that way the “spillover effect” is ensured. Students with different ability levels can learn from each other and understand each other better.

However there are no precise data to evaluate which practice – uniting students, who need the same assistance, in small groups or mixed groups of high-ability and low-ability students - provides better results. The choice of the one or other practice depends more on situation, difficulty level of the task and on the ability level and prior knowledge of the child. If it is very hard for a student to understand what others are learning, then teacher assistance is necessary, but, if there are only minor things he or she needs assistance with, then other students can help as well.

As noted in the Report 2, “cooperative learning increases students’ self-esteem and contributes to the creation of positive peer relationships between students”<sup>2</sup>. That was also observed in the kindergarten and confirmed by teachers and parents. Children are friendly and willing to help each other regardless of their ability level, national origin or other factors.

Since there are students with different learning experience and ability levels, teachers adapt the curriculum to the ability level of each student. Although this practice has a risk to correspond to streaming and hence reducing the learning opportunities, teachers try to do it in an inclusive way. This will be discussed in more detail in next chapter and Chapter 4.4.

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<sup>2</sup> Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems, p.32.

## 4.2. Impact on disadvantaged groups

### Transformative

The inclusionary practices aimed at disadvantaged students include heterogeneous groups, as already discussed in the previous section, and integrated individual support. In the case of the kindergarten "Pasaciņa" the disadvantaged groups are ethnic minority students, students with disabilities and students with lower ability level depending of their prior knowledge and skills.

Heterogeneous groups allow the inclusion of all children including disadvantaged students in the same activities and hence they all learn the same material. That gives disadvantaged students opportunity to try and to achieve better results and learn from each other. Hence that promotes better learning achievements and better relationships among students. These are necessary in order to establish a good social climate in class that also corresponds to children learning achievements. If disadvantaged students are separated from other students and given different material to learn, they are denied the opportunity to reach higher results.

However it is necessary to mix heterogeneous groups with integrated individual support in order to help disadvantaged students achieve the results of higher ability students because many disadvantaged students lack prior learning experience or have difficulties understanding Latvian language. If they have any learning difficulties, teachers work with them individually and adapt the curriculum to their abilities. Teachers say that it is important for them to learn the same material and do the same tasks as the rest of the children but according to their ability level and pace. They are sure that by doing nothing children will not be able to learn anything. Even though they cannot achieve the standards of the curriculum, it is important that they try to do it.

Although the practice to teach similar material, but with different level of difficulty and to modify objectives or activities in the curriculum for a particular student corresponds to streaming practices, as much as they can teachers provide integrated support. Exclusionary support is only provided in cases, when the

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ability level is considerably lower than that of other kids due to lack of any prior learning or in cases of students having a disability, which prevents them from achieving standards of the curriculum. Despite this there is a good example of a student with movement disability participating in dancing classes.

In order to promote learning achievements for children from disadvantaged groups (will be discussed more in Chapter 4.4.) teachers try to involve parents in the learning process of their children more than for other kids as it is necessary to work with them after classes and stimulate their motivation to learn. Parent participation in student's learning processes and their contribution to successful results will be discussed more in Chapter 5.

The aunt of the previously mentioned student with movement disability, who has also delayed mental development, notes that the teacher attitude towards disabled and disadvantaged children is very important for them to achieve good learning results. She is very pleased with teachers in this kindergarten and says that they are patient and always willing to work with children individually. She also highly values teacher contribution to create positive social climate in the group that helps children become more tolerant and friendly. (RIFP3)

Her and her nephew's experience is a good example how learning the same material at slower pace or lower ability level together with integrated individual support lead to good learning results. Although the boy will never be able to achieve the same academic results as other children, working in heterogeneous groups with other children and individual assistance of teacher, who repeats him the task as many times as is necessary for him to understand, leads to good learning achievements. His aunt confirmed that it is possible to see great progress in different areas of curriculum that would not be possible, if he was segregated from other children and given only very simple tasks.

*I will tell you honestly, because our [nephew], he soon will be six, but it seems like he is five. But I can say, I see, that they teach him more and more and I can see that he becomes smarter. Because for other children it*

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*is enough if you say one time, but for our boy you need to repeat two, three, four times. (RIFP3)<sup>3</sup>*

Learning in heterogeneous groups and individual assistance contribute not only to his learning results but also to benefits of inclusive education for disabled students listed in Report 2 – development of better social skills, relationships and independence. As said in the Report 2, it also prevents negative attitudes and promotes peaceful coexistence and hence avoids potential inequalities later in life.<sup>4</sup> Although there are special kindergartens for children with disabilities, aunt of this boy thinks that he can achieve better results in a regular kindergarten than in a special kindergarten. Of course this might not be true about all disabled children, because the success depends also on the type of disability a child has.

During the classroom activities the researchers observed that teachers did not allow children to laugh at others, if they did not know something or could not do the task as well as others. Similarly the teachers gave their positive approval of the well done task. This also corresponds to the benefits of cooperative learning and heterogeneous groups. As already said teachers and parents noted that children are friendly and help each other regardless of their ethnic background, ability level or socio-economic status.

### 4.3. Impact on overcoming cultural segregation

#### Transformative

The case-study shows that heterogeneous grouping of students in the kindergarten leads to creation of multicultural groups and avoiding segregation. The multicultural environment promotes good coexistence and understanding between students with different ethnic origin. It also leads to integration of ethnic minority students, sense of belonging to the community and good educational

<sup>3</sup> *Un es pateikšu godīgi, jo mums [krustdēls], viņam drīz būs seši, bet viņam tā kā uz piecgadīgo bērniņu. Bet es pateikšu tā, es neredzu, viņam vēl vairāk kaut ko māca un pamāca un es redzu, ka viņš paliek gudrāks. Jo citiem bērniem vajag vienreiz pateikt, mūsējam – 2, 3, 4 reizes. (RIFP3)*

<sup>4</sup> Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems, p.32.

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success. There are several practices in the kindergarten that help to overcome cultural segregation.

One of the practices to support children from different ethnic minorities in integrating in the group and achieve good learning results is helping them to overcome the language barrier that prevents them from equal opportunity to acquire knowledge. As noted in Report 2: "in order to reduce the differences between the results of native students and of foreign students, learning the official language is revealed as being a necessary factor in order to promote their integration"<sup>5</sup>.

Since the kindergarten does not offer any separate classes for minority students to learn the language of instruction, linguistic support measures are provided during classroom activities which do not involve segregation. If students do not understand teachers, when they speak Latvian, they give explanation also in the student's native language. Both teachers speak Latvian and Russian and one of them also understands Romany. A good practice to help children to learn other languages is teachers' initiative to put signs on furniture that show how the particular thing is called in Latvian, Russian and Romany. In the classroom there are also books in Romany language that children can read.

*And also this language problem. Anyone, both that Russian child and Roma child still has it, if he doesn't know any words in Latvian. All his thinking, he thinks in his language. Therefore we try. You already saw that we do all that so that he would not feel rejected. (TIFP2)<sup>6</sup>*

The Roma teacher assistant speaks all three languages and is a great support to Roma students. Her responsibilities are to help Roma children adapt in the unknown cultural and learning environment, to help teachers to involve Roma students in learning activities and to cooperate with parents of Roma students (on parental involvement see more in Chapter 5.1.). The Roma teacher assistant works with children individually both in kindergarten and also visits them at home. She helps them to learn the Latvian language and to achieve better learning results. Teachers mentioned that usually Roma children know Latvian,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.62.

<sup>6</sup> *Nu un arī tā valodas problēma. Jebkuram gan tam krievu bērnam, gan čigānam bērnam, nu, tomēr ir, ja viņš nevienu vārdu nesaprot latviski. Nu viņam jau visa domāšana. Viņš jau domā savā valodā. Nu tā kā mēs jau cenšamies. Jūs jau redzējāt, kā mēs to visu darām, lai viņš nejostos nu tā kā atstumts. (TIFP2)*

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but there have been children who understand only Romany. In those cases it would be very hard to teach children without the help of the Roma teacher assistant.

All these practices lead to overcoming Roma students' disadvantaged academic situation, inclusion in the educational environment and achievement of good learning results. At the same time they ensure connection with other Roma people and their culture and language. They also show a good example to other Roma people and lead to their understanding of the necessity of education.

Roma teacher assistant ensures that other children in the kindergarten hear Romany language and learn about their culture and hence develop respect and understanding of other cultures. Teachers organize different activities that include traditions of other cultures, for example, making traditional Roma food. In the music classes or for celebrations children learn songs and poems in all three languages (Latvian, Russian, Roma). There have been thematic afternoons, when children write fairy tales together with their parents. Teachers asked Roma parents to translate them and Roma teacher assistant read them to all children. However these practices are in need of improvement. The inclusion of other cultures in the learning activities is not systematic (will be discussed also in Chapter 5.4).

Teachers say that children enjoy the company of Roma teacher assistant and activities in different languages. They have observed that during their play time children sing Roma songs, which they have learned during classes. That proves that multicultural environment promotes good coexistence and positive relationships across ethnic groups by preventing prejudice, stereotypes and xenophobic feelings.

Teachers also confirm this and note that stereotypes and prejudice is more common among adults, although they emphasize that parents have positive attitude towards the multicultural environment in the group. They remember only one incident when parents did not want their child to learn together with Roma students. Interviews with parents also show that parents appreciate the multicultural environment and opportunity for their children to learn other languages and traditions. One Russian relative notes that Roma women are very

good with children. She says that love for children is characteristic to their mentality and therefore they get along very well (RIFP3).

Regarding educational success of children from ethnic minorities teachers think that they do not depend on cultural background, this will be discussed more in next chapter.

#### 4.4. High expectations

##### Exclusionary

The high expectations of students' opportunities to succeed at school are related to student ability level. Teachers admit that it is not possible to expect equally good academic results from all children. As noted earlier there are children with different ability levels which is influenced by several factors – age when they have started kindergarten, how and what parents have taught them at home and in this context also their native language, how well they know Latvian, and any physical disability. Teachers say that very often these factors are characteristic to Roma students – they start kindergarten at an early age, parents have not taught them anything and they are not fluent in Latvian. As a result regarding some students teachers evaluate more their hard work and motivation and not so much academic results.

*The main thing is that they try and do something and that is their own work, but equal results we can't ask. They will never be equal. Most important thing is that they do, even though he can draw only three lines, but he has drawn them himself or cut out a letter – he has cut it himself. It doesn't matter that sometimes you can't even tell what it is, but the child has done it himself. (TIFP2)<sup>7</sup>*

Regarding students' opportunities to succeed further at school, Roma teacher assistant said that it is easier for Latvian children to continue studies at school, to adapt and to achieve better academic results. Especially hard it is for Roma

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<sup>7</sup> Galvenais, lai viņi censtos un darītu, lai tas būtu viņu darbs, bet nu vienādu tur noteikti nevar prasīt. Viņi arī nekad nebūs vienādi. Galvenais, lai viņi dara. Kaut vai viņš var tur uzvilkt tās trīs strīpiņas, bet viņš tās pats ir uzvilcis, vai tur izgriezt tur to burtiņu, bet viņš pats ir griezis, lai viņš ir tur šāds, tāds vai vispār reizēm pat nevar pateikt, kas tas ir domāts, bet bērns to pats ir darījis. (TIFP2)



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students because other students reject them and do not want to be friends with them. She also added that usually the hardest part is the beginning and gradually they manage to make friends and integrate in the school (TIFP1).

This shows the beliefs of lower ability and lower expectations of academic future after leaving kindergarten regarding students from disadvantaged groups – ethnic minority students, students with disabilities and students with low ability level. Therefore there is a risk that some streaming practices exist in the kindergarten and the inclusive practices do not completely ensure good academic results of students from disadvantaged groups. However there are also other factors that have to be taken into account and good examples of the academic progress teachers and parents have noticed in children.

The teachers note that sometimes the beginning of school is hard and students do not show good academic results. They say that not only Roma children make this experience, but any student can face difficulties adapting to new environment and requirements, even those, who have had good academic results in kindergarten. They think that it depends more on child's character and not so much on nationality or other factors.

*Well, it depends also on child's character, because here during four years he has opened up and he then maybe in the first year of school might not open. He simply goes into himself and in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade he will be excellent student again. We must take into account that it is different environment, bigger classes. Here teacher is like Mom, but is it different at school. (TGFP1)<sup>8</sup>*

## **Transformative**

Despite the factors influencing children's ability level identified in the previous section in general teachers think that academic achievements in kindergarten and further in school do not depend on ethnic origin, cultural background, economic or social conditions per se. They say that sometimes Roma or Russian students have better academic results than Latvian students. That means that nationality

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<sup>8</sup> *Nu tas ir atkarīgs arī no bērna rakstura īpašībām, jo šeit viņš ir četru gadu laikā atvēries un viņš tad varbūt tajā lielajā skolā pirmajā gadā neatvērsies. Viņš vienkārši atkal nedaudz aizvērās un 4. klāsē viņš būs atkal varbūt teicamnieks, ja? Jārēķinās, ka tā ir cita vide, tās ir daudz lielākas klases. Šeit audzinātāja ir kā mamma, bet skolā ir daudz savādāk. (TGFP1)*

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or SES often go together with lower academic success, but there are also good examples, where they do not have any influence.

*No, I can't say that only Roma students are... We have had so wonderful kids and they go to school as excellent students. It has happened. I can't say that only because he is Roma, he won't be able to learn anything, no! The same is with Russian children, exactly the same. (TIFP2)<sup>9</sup>*

Both teachers and parents (see more in Chapter 5.1.) say that it is possible to observe a great improvement of children's knowledge and skills. Although it might not reach up to academic standards, as noted in the previous section, the most important thing is the hard work and motivation of children. If parents and teachers notice improvement, children have motivation to do better. For example parents of Russian students have noticed great improvement of their children fluency in Latvian language. And as mentioned before, an aunt of a student with disabilities notes that her nephew will never be as other students, but she is very happy to see any progress he makes.

These examples show that teacher and parent trust in the abilities and motivation of students. The connection between trust and high expectations of teachers and parents and good academic results will be discussed more in the next chapters.

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<sup>9</sup> Nē, nu es nevaru teikt, ka tikai čigānu nu viņš ir... Mums ir nākuši nu tik apbrīnojami bērni un skolā viņi aiziet pilnīgi teicamnieki. Ir tā bijis. Es nevaru teikt, ka tikai tātēc, ka viņš čigāns, nu tagad viņš neko nevarēs iemācīties, nē! Tāpatās ar krievu tautības bērniem. Tieši tas pats. (TIFP2)

## 5. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

### 5.1. Community participation in decision making processes and in student's learning processes

#### Exclusionary

According to Report 2, "involvement of the whole community in schools provides a significant opportunity to overcome social inequalities"<sup>10</sup>. The results of the case study of the kindergarten "Pasaciņa" confirm this, although the involvement of community members is in need of improvement. Firstly the community participation applies only to parents and close relatives of students and secondly not all types of community participation are ensured. From those identified in the Report 2<sup>11</sup>, four are ensured in the kindergarten. These are informative participation, partly consultative participation, partly participation in decision making processes and participation in students' learning activities. Some of them are ensured only partly, meaning that they refer to narrow issues.

The informative participation includes attendance to meetings and individual consultations. The kindergarten facilitates this participation very well and the good practices will be discussed more in next section. The problems arise from rather low parent participation that is common for all types of participation and will be discussed later in this section.

The consultative and decision making processes are ensured only partly, because the suggestions and decisions that parents can make are more related to technical improvements and provision of safe and clean environment in the kindergarten than improvements in learning activities. The learning activities are regulated by government acts and inspected by government institutions. That is also one of the reasons why other community members apart from parents or close relatives of children are not expected and do not participate in the activities related to student's learning activities or decision making processes.

<sup>10</sup> Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems, p.47.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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The participation in students' learning activities include participation in classes, but mostly as observers; participation in thematic afternoons, when parents do different activities together with their children, and participation in cultural and social events at kindergarten including cleaning and repair works around the kindergarten.

Regarding the level of parent participation in all these activities, teachers note that there are some parents, who participate in the activities of the kindergarten very actively, but there are also parents, who do not take any part in the learning process of their children or any other activity.

*As I said that those parents are in about three groups. One includes those, who comes every time, asks something and does something. Then others are on one hand yes, on the other no. And then the third group is those, who on the whole think that they have brought their child here and deal with him as you like. Do as you like. (TIFP2)<sup>12</sup>*

Since the kindergarten offers the possibility to stay overnight on working days, there have been cases, when children actually grow up in the kindergarten and parents see them only on weekends. The teachers try to give them the necessary knowledge and skills but they cannot substitute parents and hence confirms the necessity to involve parents in order to ensure higher quality education. More on connection between the participation of parents in the kindergarten and its effects on students' achievement see in the next chapter.

Teachers also say that there are parents, who do not attend parent meetings and other activities planned for involvement of parents in the learning activities. But only a small part of those, who attend them, participate actively, others only sit and listen or even talk to each other during the meeting.

The observations in two parent meetings showed that parent participation is low despite the democratic atmosphere that ensured that all of the participants were able to express their opinion – they all sat in a circle, teachers invited parents to express their thoughts, give comments or share their experience, they all more or less knew each other, none of the expressed opinion was rejected as wrong, but

<sup>12</sup> *Nu es jau teicu, ka tie vecāki ir, jā, apmēram, trijās tādās grupās. Vieni ir tie, kuri nāks katru reizi, paprasīs, katru reizi izdarīs. Nu tad vieni ir tādi tā kā jā, tā kā nē. Un tad ir vēl trešā daļa, kuri nu principā viņi uzskata, ka tas bērns šeit ir atvests un tieciet galā, kā Jūs gribiet. Dariet, kā Jūs gribiet. (TIFP2)*

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discussed in a democratic way. In one meeting teachers gave the opportunity for parents to express their thoughts anonymously in writing, but even that did not raise the participation level.

Regarding parents of ethnic minorities, teachers try to involve them in the meetings and other activities of the kindergarten as it promotes good relations between parents and provides positive role models. However interpretation is not provided in the meetings, but, if somebody does not understand something, teachers explain it in the respective language and parents can express their opinion in their native language as well.

There can be several reasons for the low participation that need to be taken into account and prevented in order to ensure higher quality education in the kindergarten. Regarding participation in the meetings one of the reasons of low participation could be the unwillingness of parents to share their thoughts publicly since they also have the opportunity to talk to teachers individually before or after classes. In the meetings teachers not only give a positive evaluation of children's work, but also share difficulties and problems that they face, therefore it can be concluded that parents might feel guilty or even ashamed for their children and that can affect their participation level.

Teachers also list several other reasons that might prevent parents from more active participation both in meetings and other activities – too much work and other responsibilities, irresponsibility and disinterest as well as common opinion among some parents that kindergarten is responsible for its activities and the learning process of children. Some parents live far from the kindergarten or only a single parent raises the child and therefore has many other duties. The kindergarten should also reconsider the organizational issues of meetings as they usually start at a time, when most parents are still working or have just finished their work.

Regarding the educational level of parents, their ethnic origin or economic situation, teachers think that higher education of parents promotes greater interest in learning activities of their children as they value more the benefits of good education. On the contrary nationality or economic situation does not have such influence.

Two parents pointed out in interviews that parental involvement for the most part depends on the activity and initiatives of teacher (RIFP2). Regarding this teachers point out to one more problem hindering more active parent participation. That is lack of human resources. They think that it would be good to have one person, whose main responsibilities would be to organize good cooperation between the kindergarten staff and parents and promote their participation in different activities. (TGIF1) Despite the problems mentioned teachers are interested and willing to facilitate the involvement of family members as it is a very important resource to educational success.

### **Transformative**

Despite the general problems of parent participation, the case study of this kindergarten and one group in particular shows also good examples of teacher activity, parental involvement and cooperation between parents and teachers. Teachers regularly organize activities (thematic afternoons, meetings) for parents and provide information about activity schedule well in advance. In order to increase parent responsiveness, teachers prepare individual invitations to certain activities. This individual approach shows teachers' willingness to involve parents in the learning activities and to establish a good cooperation that further can lead to better learning results of children.

In parent meetings teachers inform about children's academic results, learning activities, children's behaviour and different activities going on in kindergarten. There are meetings not only for parents of each group but also meetings at the level of whole kindergarten. Parents of each group delegate three to four Moms or Dads to participate in the parent board and attend these large meetings. Afterwards they have to inform the rest of the parents on what was discussed in those meetings. Parent board makes decisions on different technical issues for example children safety. The kindergarten staff usually invites different specialists to these meetings like doctors, psychologists, representatives from police and others.

Parents can also get individual consultations with teachers on the learning process of their children. Teachers are open to different suggestions and ideas

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from parents to improve the activities and work organization of the particular group, if they are not in opposition to general rules of the kindergarten. In this way the participation of parents enriches educational ideas related to learning opportunities and hence leads to better education that suits the interests of children.

The interviewed parents are very satisfied with the administration of the kindergarten and teachers regarding their responsiveness to different parent requests. They say that any problem will be solved.

*And here is very... director. There can be any question, I can make a phone call. For example I don't like something. I call and ask, why is it like that? All the questions have been solved, it isn't that I walk around with something in my heart that my child doesn't like something. No, it's not like that. (RIFP3)<sup>13</sup>*

Thematic afternoons give parents the opportunity to spend good quality time together with their child, see how teachers work with them, learn together different things and get to know other children, their parents and the teachers. In these afternoons parents together with children write stories, draw pictures or prepare decorations for celebrations (e.g., Easter, Christmas). Teachers also let parents watch regular learning activities in order to help them understand what and how children are learning and hence help them to work with their children at home and contribute to better learning results. Parents are also invited to celebrations in the kindergarten, for example, Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day. Children usually prepare performances to show their parents what they have learned. All this leads to a good cooperation between teachers, parents and students, provision of good coexistence and understanding and hence better education and learning results for children.

Teachers collect and file all assignments children have done and show them to parents, explain in which subjects they are doing better, in which not so well. The new works are put on the walls for parents to see, when they bring children in the morning and come back in the evening. That gives parents the opportunity to see what their children have done that day, see if they are making any progress and

<sup>13</sup> *Un te ir Joti... vadītāja. Kāds jautājums nebūtu, es varu droši piezvanīt, atzvanīt. Nu, piemēram, kaut kas man nepatīk. Es pazvanu un prasu, nu kāpēc tā. Visi jautājumi ir atrisināti, nav tā, ka es staigāju un turu kaut ko pie sirds, ka man tam bērnam nepatīk vai kaut kas. Nē, tāda nav. (RIFP3)*

what they could teach them at home. That also contributes to parent-child relationships as children want their parents to be proud of them and show them what they have done.

The kindergarten „Pasaciņa” is also a good example of facilitating Roma parent involvement in their children learning process and other activities in the kindergarten. Roma parents often need extra motivation not only to participate in kindergarten activities but in general to make decisions on education of their children. That motivation is supported by the Roma teacher assistant and the Roma teacher in the kindergarten. They understand better their fellow Roma people and therefore with their own example can show the importance of education for their children. They can also provide examples of other Roma children and their successful inclusion among other kids despite the common prejudices against Roma people in the society that cause concerns by Roma parents that their children will be excluded.

*We talk to them [parents] and make them believe, and they feel somehow more confident when here is the Roma assistant, who can talk to those children, when they don't understand Latvian and so. (..) In general now they are striving... Our fellow people strive for education, so that it would be easier to live. Because they see now that no one takes to work without education. And they want that at least their children learn. (TIFP1)<sup>14</sup>*

## 5.2. Repercussions on successful results and good coexistence

### Transformative

In accordance with the Report 2, the results of case study show that teachers of the kindergarten agree that children's academic achievements are to a great extent influenced by parental involvement in the learning process. Parents' participation promotes not only good learning achievements, but also improves the motivation and good coexistence among children.

<sup>14</sup> *Mēs ar viņiem [vecākiem] aprunājamies un iestāstām, un viņi kaut kā jūtās tādi, nu tādi drošāki, ka te ir čigānu palīgs, ka ar tiem bērniņiem var parunāt. Nu, ka viņi tur nesaprot to latviski un tā. (..) Tagad vispār tiecās. Tiecās mūsu tautieši pēc izglītības, nu lai būtu vieglāk dzīvot. Jo tagad, nu redz, ka aiziet uz darbu un taču neviens nekur neņem, ka nav izglītības. Un grib vismaz, lai viņu bērni mācās. (TIFP1)*



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Teachers point out two very important ways of parent participation that contribute to children success. Firstly it is interest in what children have learned that leads to higher motivation to achieve better results and secondly actually working with children at home especially at an early age. By participating in students' learning activities parents can observe what their children are learning and what are the areas, where their children need improvement. That gives them information in which subject areas and how they should work with their children at home. As already mentioned teachers say that it is very important for parents to work with their children at home as it is not possible to learn everything in classes. Parents also know their children better and therefore can assist them in a way that suits them better.

Parent participation in learning activities shows their interest in their children's achievements and helps them notice improvements their children are making. Hence children have higher motivation to do better and achieve better results. Parent interest and participation also promotes better parent-child relationships and helps children understand the importance of education. By participation parents can also observe the whole organization of learning process and social life in the kindergarten and make any suggestions to improve them in order to better correspond to higher learning results of children.

As already mentioned there are parents, who participate actively and always ask teachers what their children have learned in classes and what should they teach at home, and there are parents, who say that they do not have time and patience and all the teaching should be done during the classes.

*If that parent regularly talks to him and works with him at home, and that child sees that his parent is interested. He comes to take him home: What did you do today? What is that you have made? Oh, how beautiful you made it! Well he has such a motivation. But if that child comes and says: Mom, look what I did today. Come look! Leave me alone! I don't have time... There are cases like that. And that's it. (TIFP2)<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Ja tas vecāks ar viņu regulāri mājās tur runā un darbojas un tas bērns redz, ka tas vecāks jau ir ieinteresēts. Viņš atnāk pakaļ: Ko tu šodien darīji? Kas tev tur tanī darbiņā? Ā, vai cik tev skaiti izdevās! Nu viņam jau pilnīgi tāds stimul. Bet, ja tas bērns nāk un saka: mamma tu paskaties, ko es šodien izdarīju. Tu paskaties! Liec tač tu mani mierā! Man tak laika... Ir tādi. Nu tad viss. (TIFP2)

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Parents themselves also recognize how important it is to be interested in their child's progress, because parents share the responsibility for the education of their child.

*We ourselves for example want to know whether there are any problems and what should we do, therefore we don't have problems. Of course not all the parents take interest, children have different parents. (RIFP2)<sup>16</sup>*

The results of the case study confirm the importance of the role family has in education of vulnerable groups identified in Report 2.<sup>17</sup> Teachers agree that parental involvement in learning process is especially important for ethnic minority students to achieve good academic results. They need both the encouragement from their parents to feel confident among other students and a real support especially to improve their Latvian language skills. Therefore, if parents know Latvian, teachers ask them to speak with them in Latvian at least occasionally, so that kindergarten would not be the only place, where they hear it.

The connection between the parental involvement in their children's learning activities and its effects on students' achievements can be well observed by Roma children. As already mentioned, very often parents have not worked with them at home and consequently it is harder for them to achieve good academic results. The Report 2 also suggests the benefits of inclusion of people with different origins in the classroom activities both for students who identify themselves with these people and for the rest of the students as it helps to overcome stereotypes and prejudice.<sup>18</sup> The participation of Roma parents contribute to these benefits as they promote good coexistence between students with different ethnic origin and the parents as well. They bring their culture and traditions to the group and hence broaden the knowledge of other children. They also are good role models to other Roma children.

Regarding good coexistence teachers and parents note that it is very important how parents treat their children and what relationship models have they seen at home. For example, if a child is used to relationships, when someone constantly

<sup>16</sup> *Mēs pašas, piemēram, interesējamies, vai ir kaut kādas problēmas un kas jādara, tāpēc mums arī problēmu nav. Loģiski ne visi interesējas vecāki, ir arī dažādi bērniem vecāki. (RIFP2)*

<sup>17</sup> *Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems, p.46.*

<sup>18</sup> *Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems, p.61.*

yells at him, he will not listen to teacher peacefully explaining him what to do and what not to do. Experience at home can affect not only relations with teachers but also with other students.

### **5.3. Community education**

#### **Exclusionary**

Despite the positive effect community education programmes might have on students' learning achievements and their motivation, this kindergarten does not provide any educational programmes for the community or families of children. It must be noted that literacy programmes or classes on child development, education on being a parent, education of how to take care of a child with disabilities or sex education as identified in Report 2<sup>19</sup>, are not usually provided by educational institutions in Latvia.

However teachers try to provide educational information on many subjects affecting children development in parent meetings. As already mentioned they invite doctors, psychologists, speech therapists, and representatives from local police or other institutions to these meetings in order to inform them about different issues concerning education, health, safety and development in general. Teachers have also gathered different educational information in classrooms that parents are welcome to consult.

### **5.4. Inclusion of multiculturalism into planning instrumental subjects**

#### **Exclusionary**

Although the importance of a culturally sensitive curriculum is noted in the Report 2<sup>20</sup>, the existence of references to minority cultures in instrumental subject classes and the inclusion of their voices in planning them is an area in need of

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>20</sup> *Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems*, p.59.

improvement in the kindergarten. References to minority culture in classes are not included systematically, but only occasionally depending on topic and the situation. They are also more common in extracurricular activities than in regular learning activities. For example, the holidays are celebrated according to Latvian traditions but teachers and students also prepare songs in other languages – Roma and Russian. Teachers say that minority children share with others how they celebrate holidays and hence other children hear about different traditions and good coexistence is promoted. That also shows that teachers promote multicultural dialogue and let children share their experience.

As mentioned in Chapter 4.3., teachers also involve parents in different multicultural activities – by preparing traditional Roma food, translating fairy tales to other languages and others. But these are activities organized in thematic afternoons and in the planning process for instrumental areas parents are not involved. It was also observed in parent meetings that multicultural environment and its impact on learning process is not discussed or assessed.

## **5.5. Overcoming gender stereotypes**

### **Exclusionary**

The results of the case study do not show the connection between gender stereotypes and the educational performance of women as was noted in the Report 2.<sup>21</sup> It rather leads to conclusions on the lack of male role models. However despite the lack of the inclusion of diverse role models of different genders, different expectations depending on the students' gender were not observed in the kindergarten.

There are only women working in the kindergarten and hence the lack of male participation in the learning process and other activities. However teachers do not consider it as a problem although they mentioned that it would be good to have at least one male teacher, who would teach boys to do some handicrafts, e.g. woodworks. However from their experience they say that it is harder for men to

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<sup>21</sup> Report 2: Theories, reforms and outcomes in European educational systems, p.52.

deal with children. The reason could be the widespread situation in Latvia that mostly women work in the educational field and therefore the children are not used to male teachers and do not see them as an authority. That leads to reproducing already existing role models. There is no information on how the curriculum corresponds to existing values and models, but the environment of the kindergarten promotes good relationships between boys and girls.

The observations at parent meetings showed that mostly mothers attend them, although there were few men and one of them is a president of the parent board. Teachers try to involve fathers in different activities in the kindergarten to create an environment with the presence of both genders and hence to overcome existing stereotypes and models. They think that fathers' participation in the activities of the kindergarten are closely related to distribution of responsibilities in the families (TGFP1) and therefore reflect the broadly accepted task of women to raise children.

Regarding different minorities a good example are Roma women, who work in the kindergarten, and also mothers, who attend parent meetings and participate in different activities in kindergarten. They are good role models to children and with their example show that Roma women can achieve good results and be respected members of the society.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The kindergarten "Pasaciņa" was chosen for the case study to explore effective educational practices that are decreasing the rates of school failure and those practices that are increasing them at pre-primary level according to the methodology established in Annex 1. The results of the case study give examples of practices that contribute to school success (transformative) and those, which are in need of improvement (exclusionary).

The kindergarten works with children from several disadvantaged groups – Roma and Russian students, students with disabilities and students with low ability level that can include children of all nationalities. In general teachers note that the

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academic results of students do not depend on their belonging to a disadvantaged group, nevertheless their expectations of academic achievements of some students are lower than for others. The lower expectations are related to students with lower ability level that is a result of their prior knowledge, age they have started kindergarten and parent participation in their learning process. Ability level can be related to the ethnic origin and especially the native language. One particularly vulnerable group is Roma children because of the general status of Roma in the society that prevents them from involvement in the education system.

However despite the disadvantaged situation of some students teachers have seen great progress and academic success of students. The practices that lead to success are the following: heterogeneous grouping, successful use of human resources, inclusive individual assistance, provision of multicultural environment, and participation of parents. The results of the case study show that these practices promote cooperative learning, good coexistence between students and relationships based on trust and cooperation between teachers and students. All children are involved in the same activities and individual assistance helps children from disadvantaged groups to overcome those factors that prevent them from equal opportunities in the educational system.

Provision of a multicultural environment helps to establish good relationships between children of different ethnic origin, contributes to their understanding and knowledge of different cultures and prevents stereotypes and xenophobic feelings. It also helps Roma and Russian children to integrate better in the group and overcome their language barriers. Friendly atmosphere and role models they can relate to increase their motivation to learn and hence lead to better academic achievements.

Regarding Roma children a very good practice is the establishment of staff unit of the Roma teacher assistant. She contributes not only to the multicultural environment but helps Roma children to integrate in the kindergarten, to establish good relationships with teachers and other students and to achieve good academic results. She is also a good role model for parents and other Roma people.

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The case study also shows the importance of parental involvement in their children learning process and activities of the kindergarten. Parent participation in their children learning processes increases their motivation and leads to better results. Especially important it is for disadvantaged children to integrate better in the kindergarten and acquire new knowledge and skills. In order to establish good cooperation between the kindergarten and parents and hence provide better education to children it is important for parents to participate actively in different activities in the kindergarten and especially decision making process.

However parent participation and involvement is a practice, which is in need of improvement as the participation in general is rather low and parents are not fully involved in any types of community participation. In order to develop good practices other community members need to be involved as well. Other field in need of improvement is inclusion of multiculturalism into planning instrumental subjects. The current practice shows that elements of different cultures are not included in learning activities systematically but rather depending on the subject and the situation and therefore an improvement in this respect could contribute the educational achievements in the kindergarten "Pasaciņa".