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Inclusive Practice in R. Macedonia at the Beginning of Efforts

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Abstract

Inclusive education is priority in many educational systems. It seems that educational process could not be effective and successful if it is not inclusive one. Educational policy demands creating inclusive practice which means that every one would find his place and could be treated according to different needs that pupils have. It is not easy to develop educational philosophy and to implement it. On that way there are any obstacles, challenges, but the way is the only one. Those decades are dedicated to efforts to make educational process and system inclusive one. Every country has his story. We share our story so that we can collect suggestions and offer experience for all who must follow this way.

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1. Introduction

Every country has his history in Inclusive education and different experience. Many countries try to develop Inclusive systems in mutual cooperation. Inclusive practice became part of Educational policy at the international level. The main idea is to offer supporting educational process for all citizens. A long period of time educational systems were closed for many of pupils. Or many of pupils didn't get what they really need inside the system. The main reason is difference and understanding of difference. All of us are different in many ways, it is challenge, advantage, not obstacle. We share our story and hope for suggestion for guiding process further more, and in the same time we offer our experience for everybody else who yet have to walk our way.

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2. The definition of Inclusive education

We can define Inclusive education in a different ways: some of them are narrow, some of them are wider. The definition of Inclusive education has his history according to level of awareness of society about importance of Inclusive education and level of development of Inclusive practice. Establishing International Documents and Agreements about Inclusive education make many things clearer and many initiatives to become true. *Inclusive education can, therefore, be understood as the presence (access to education and school attendance), participation (quality of the learning experience from the students' perspective) and achievement (learning processes and outcomes across the curriculum) of all learners. Inclusive education is a pairing of philosophy and pedagogical practices that allow each student to feel respected, confident and safe so he or she can learn and develop to his or her full potential. Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school... A succinct definition of inclusive education is provided by Lipsky & Gartner (1996, 1999), who described it as students with disabilities having full membership in age-appropriate classes in their neighbourhood schools, with appropriate supplementary aids and support services. To Antia et al. (2002), inclusion denotes a student with a disability unconditionally belonging to and having full membership of a regular classroom in a regular school and its community. They contrasted this with 'integration', or 'mainstreaming', both of which imply that the student with a disability has the status of a visitor, with only conditional access to a regular classroom, but primary membership of a special class or resource room.* The main problem all over the world at the beginning of Inclusive education was integration. It was considered that if pupils are somehow in the educational system, even in that parallel one our responsibility is finished. Many countries opened special institution where pupils with some kind of special needs get special treatment. This was a medical approach, not social one. You as a pupil with special educational need are there, but only with pupils with similar needs. Many of pupils are stigmatized, isolated, not understand in proper way, and many of them simply because of this reason are not in schools at all. Our educational system a long period of time looks like this and functioned like this. From the outside point of view everything was all right. But not for the parents and their children with special educational needs. At the same time there were no serious efforts to understand the reality: who are children with special educational needs, who are children with disabilities and what kind of educational treatment they really need.

Meanwhile many of International documents were established :

UNESCO (Jomtien)

UNESCO (1994) Final Report: World conference on special needs education: Access and quality. Paris: UNESCO. (Salamanca)

UNESCO (2000) Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments. Notes on the Dakar Framework for Action. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2001) The Open File on Inclusive Education. Paris: UNESCO

UNESCO (2005) Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All, Paris:UNESCO

UNESCO (2007&8) EFA Global Monitoring Report: EFA. Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education. Paris: UNESCO.

OECD (2008). Policy brief: Ten steps to equity in education.

www.oecd.org/publications/Policybriefs

This means that actors in educational policy were dedicated seriously to this question. So we have the definition of inclusive education that explains all aspects of inclusion: *Real inclusion is about changing awareness and organization of school systems and environments, focusing on diversity of learning needs and capabilities. "Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children."* (Guidelines for Inclusion, UNESCO, p. 14, 2005) http://inclusion-europe.org/images/stories/documents/policies/Education_BestPractice.pdf

3. What have we done?

Our first initiatives about Inclusive education did not get proper attention in our educational system. This means that we were not prepared for serious steps. Only very narrow circle of teachers have heard about inclusive policy. There were research activities among parents to collect their opinions about inclusion. Their attitudes were negative: they do not want the real inclusion in schools. The explanations they give were about their concern about their children. They consider that children with disabilities or special educational needs will disrupt the process of education. From one point of view they were right: no one in our educational system was not ready to implement this process in a qualitative way. The concept of inclusion was not elaborated between parents, teachers, pupils, attitudes were negative, prejudices and stereotypes were present, it was no clear how the implementation will be organized and many more questions were without answers. The fear of inclusion was among all stakeholders and it was reasonable because the real framework of inclusion was not prepared. It was not clear enough who, when and for what will be in charged, how they will collaborate between them. The network of supporting institutions was not established, and the main obstacles was yet to be overcome. Teachers in primary and secondary school were not prepared to understand and implement an idea of inclusive education. The first real steps were taken by UNICEF organization in Macedonia by providing high quality training sessions about inclusive education. The sessions were leading by experts from various countries which expertise is in area of inclusion in education. Training was very well prepared by incorporation of different aspects of inclusion. Participants have to be promoters of inclusive education concept and trainers for teachers and other stakeholders. But we still have some doubts: are we ready enough to implement this serious practice? We think that there is lack of wider social initiative of promoting importance of this philosophy. Staying in tight circle of actors a long period of time is not good. Inclusive practice is hard work for everyone who must participate in it. So many actions must be taken simultaneously if we want qualitative and effective practice.

4. What has to be done?

Our recommendations if we want to succeed in our efforts for inclusive education practice are:

- Developing National Framework for Inclusive Education;
- Preparation of society, and
- Preparation of schools.

First of all we need one document which will be leader in all actions that should be taken. That document will be represent of our dedication to make our society inclusive one. There must be introduced all actions and steps that should be taken. This means that our society is really dedicated to inclusion and Social model of inclusion, not to medical one. This document will offer answer to questions such as: where we want to go and how to get there? It has to have definition of our priorities and key principles of inclusive practice. This kind of Document strictly defines which social factor is responsible for what kind of actions and how different social factors will compliment each other. The next thing that we need is preparation of whole society. We need wide social initiative about promoting philosophy of Inclusion. This is very important because we need national consensus about this initiative. Promotion must be taken among various social groups: representatives from institutions, parents, teachers, medical workers, pupils. Those actions will help us to overcome stereotypes, prejudices, and will give a sense of commitment to all things we have to do, as well as sharing responsibilities. Leaders of promotion must be Government representatives in area of Education and Social work, as well as NGO participators. This kind of approach will offer message of having good Action plan about our intention. The main stress must be put on the elaboration of benefits from Inclusive Education at the social and individual level. Many good and successful practices from countries must be presented, of course getting on mind our circumstances and cultural background. Preparation of schools will provide promotion of collaborative approach to the implementation of inclusion, operationalization of actions, evaluation policy of inclusion. School inclusion must be carefully prepared because the most valued outputs must come from school practice. The main preparation must be dedicated to: Leadership and Management; Whole-School Development Planning; Whole-School Environment; Communication; Pupil and Staff Well-being a) Fulfilling Pupil Potential, b) Fulfilling Staff Potential; Curriculum Planning for Inclusion; Individualized Education Planning; Teaching and Learning Strategies: a) The Learning Experience, b) The Teaching Experience; Classroom Management: a) Classroom Protocols and Rules, b) Curriculum Implementation; Support for and Recognition of Learning. All of those steps must be carefully planed and implemented. As far as we

know situation in the moment is not very well. It seems like we consider teachers as the only one which will implement inclusion. The question is: how and are at all our teachers prepared to practice inclusion? *"All teachers -- those just preparing to teach and those who have been teaching for decades -- need to develop the capacity to better address all kinds of student diversity Only with direct teacher preparation, and only with teacher training activities we can not expect good effects."* Teacher preparation is only one brick in the wall. Curriculum adaptation, communication between all factors in school, managing the school, cooperation with parents of children with SEN and other parents are only few actions which has to be taken simultaneously. Also there are lots of additional equipment of learning materials according to support different educational needs of pupils and physical adaptations to be provided. The school itself need support from outside. That is the reason why we need institutions of professional character which will support school efforts. There are some kind of institutions which are present right now, but we need much more. But before all of this we will have to take one serious action: make a research which will give a real picture about situation now about main obstacles, expectations, different experiences, level of knowledge and practice.

5. Conclusion

The process of Inclusive education is very complex one. If we want to have a success in its implementation we must collect different experiences. Still there are a lot of pro et contra arguments about this concept. But we made a decision: our educational school and process must be inclusive one. Many of good practices should be accepted and implemented according to our circumstances. But principles and mechanisms of inclusion must be same as everywhere. On that long trip we need a lot of international support, and commitment of many factors which will lead this process. We have to know where we are now if we want to go somewhere else, level higher. Also we must be aware that Inclusive education is a long process, hard one which needs a lot of energy and motivation.

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