

“Regional Support for Inclusive Education”

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An inclusive school is a school where:

every child is welcome,

every parent is involved,

every teacher is valued.

2nd Annual Conference in South East Europe

“INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRACTICE”

Patterns, tools and actions

28-29 October 2014

Hotel International, Zagreb, Croatia

Conference Report



The Second Regional Conference “Inclusive Education in practice in South East Europe” was held in Zagreb, Croatia on 28-29 October 2014. Organised by the joint European Union and Council of Europe project ‘Regional Support for Inclusive Education’ and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports of Croatia, it was attended by around 180 participants from the 7 Beneficiaries of the region. The project is the largest regional cooperation effort in the field of education in South East Europe.

The participants included representatives of the relevant ministries and academic institutions, policymakers, educational professionals, school practitioners, representatives of parents’ councils and local communities. Also present were representatives of European Commission, European Training Foundation and partner organisations – London School of Economics, Network of Education Policy Centres and Save the Children.

The aim of the conference was to identify and prioritise the areas for policy interventions so that the policy and practice of inclusive education could be merged together in a harmonious and consistent way. This included evaluating various stakeholders’ contributions towards inclusive education, strengthening the understanding of the evolving regional context of inclusion and identifying the required instruments for a systemic change.

The conference discussions and meetings helped make the existing inclusive practices visible to policymakers, highlighted the challenges and constraints faced by schools and identified ways of overcoming them and bridging the gap between policies and practices of inclusive education.

It has become clear that the principle of inclusiveness demands not simply an adjustment of the education system, but its thorough overhaul and a comprehensive reform of the school itself. Inclusive schools are the foundation of inclusive and socially just societies.

Side by side with the conference was a novel open event organised with the support of the Ministries responsible for inclusive education from each beneficiary. The “Expo for Inclusive Education” was an opportunity for the region to celebrate what has been achieved and the progress made so far in making children feel welcome at school.

Each country had stands at which they demonstrated the practical steps that each had taken to encourage inclusive education in the region. These achievements were shown in a creative and attractive manner using photographs, montages and samples of the teaching aids used. The Expo, which was also open to outside visitors throughout the conference attracted keen interest in these practical measures. There was the added advantage that the different countries could study each others' stands and pick up practical tips and ideas from them.

SESSION I “Progress overview of the Joint EU/CoE Project “Regional Support for Inclusive Education” focused on the project achievements over the past year, as well as challenges and constraints facing inclusive education practitioners.

An overview of implemented project activities highlighted the following achievements:

- 3 Regional Inclusive Networks were created – SchoolNet, TeacherNet and PolicyNet. They launched an active debate on inclusive education issues, encouraging all stakeholders to have their say and share their ideas. Such a participatory approach inspired confidence and optimism. No ready solutions were offered, they were arrived at through dialogue, consultation and exchange of opinions.
- A Baseline Study on the perception of inclusive education was conducted and an index for inclusion was developed. The Study involved all 49 pilot schools in the 7 beneficiary countries, including primary schools, gymnasias and vocational schools. Against this survey all policy interventions over the following 12 months would be measured and evaluated.
- Teachers' needs assessment was conducted involving 140 representatives of the 3 Regional Networks and a Mapping Study was prepared.
- Draft policy recommendations for inclusive education in primary, secondary and vocational education were developed through consultations.
- Peer learning in the form of study tours, e.g. to Grand Region schools, enabled learning and adoption of some of the best inclusion practices that exist in the region.
- The Steering Board, the project driving force, lived up to its role of fostering, directing, supporting, encouraging, steering and validating results.

The results of the Baseline Study on the perception of inclusiveness were presented by **William Bartlett, the European Institute, London School of Economics (LSE).**

The aim of the Baseline Study conducted in 49 schools (7 in each beneficiary: 3 primary, 2 gymnasias, and 2 VET) was to develop an index of inclusion as a measure of achievement of the project's objectives. Around 10,000 students participated in the survey; other groups included teachers, school principals, parents and local government representatives.

Nine separate questionnaires per country were developed asking a common set of questions along 4 dimensions – (a) inclusive practices for entry into a school; (b) inclusion within the school; (c) inclusive teaching practices, (d) community engagement.

The results showed that, on the scale from 1 to 5, the average index of inclusion for all the three types of school was 3.76. The survey revealed certain discrepancies in the perception of the level of inclusiveness between various groups. Teachers and school principals thought that their schools were more inclusive than did students and parents. On the whole, primary schools appeared more inclusive than secondary schools.

Statistical analysis revealed two essential components of school inclusiveness:

- (1) inclusive teaching practices, including school entry and community engagement, and
- (2) inclusive atmosphere within the school.

Further research was carried out into what constrains the implementation of inclusive principles and practices in schools, with the objective of providing targeted support to schools via small-scale projects.

The results were presented by **Lana Jurko of the Network of Education Policy Centres** who reported that 196 focus groups were conducted, involving 1,751 representatives of school staff, students, parents and local communities.

The overall perception of the majority of stakeholders is that the school culture is either *predominantly* open and welcoming or *on the whole* inclusive with some issues, e.g. gender stereotypes, bullying of students with special needs and violence, resistance of parents to having students with learning difficulties in common schools. Such non-inclusive practices were reported in a large proportion of schools.

Many schools have reported targeted inclusive education measures, e.g. individual learning plans, remedial classes and additional tutorials for students with learning difficulties or at risk of dropping out, organisation of inclusive extra-curricular activities, etc.

Nevertheless, the survey revealed a lack of a holistic, consistent and articulate strategy for inclusion based on awareness and understanding by all groups – teachers, administrators, students, parents and the broader community. Even when the existence of a policy was reported in focus groups, it didn't imply that a generally agreed written policy existed in schools. The presence of policies has only been reported where special project activities had taken place.

The survey emphasised once more the key role of teachers as agents of change at the grassroots level and the leading role of schools in creating an inclusive society. Better understanding of inclusiveness, teachers' capacity building and improved quality of education remain outstanding issues.

All small-scale projects were designed based on the results the focus groups.

Judith Hollenweger, Zurich University of Teacher Education, presented a summary of the mapping activities in the area of teacher education. Teachers are viewed as key agents of change in building inclusive schools. They have to be reflective practitioners who seek collaboration with others to develop their practice. They should understand themselves as learners, not only as teachers and regard learning as knowledge *creation* rather than knowledge *reproduction*.

The study provides basic information on existing modules and programmes for teacher training relevant to inclusive education across the region. These include activities related to initial teacher education, continued professional development of practicing teachers and mentorship training. The programmes ranged from two-day workshops to entire university training courses; some focused on individual teachers, others on school communities or relevant partners. A common framework to make the diverse modules and programmes comparable was developed.

The survey findings served as a starting discussion point for the TeacherNet workshops held in Skopje (June 24-25) and Tirana (July 2-3) that were used to validate the mapping results. They became a platform for discussions on ways to improve current practices in teacher education and tools for teachers' capacity building. In lively debates a vision of what makes a good inclusive teacher emerged.

Some of the workshops' conclusions are:

- Universities and ministries in the region are not yet able to fully meet the training needs of teachers working in inclusive education. The gap between theory, policy and practice is one of the major barriers to inclusive education;
- There is a need for a closer cooperation between universities, schools and policymakers for the development of good practices at all stages of teacher education
- Teachers must be supported with teaching materials, study tours, videoconferences, round tables, online seminars and workshops.
- The awareness and understanding of inclusive principles and values by subject teachers, especially in VET establishments, remain a problem
- Interactive approaches and methods are most important in achieving inclusive education
- Implementation of inclusive education requires changes at individual, interpersonal and systemic levels.
- Teacher education should be part of a broader school development process where all activities contribute to the creation of inclusive environment.

There is consensus that current efforts to develop a framework of teacher competences for inclusive education may be one of the tools to identify training requirements.

In the panel discussion "Practicing inclusion in schools" a broad picture of inclusive education practices across the South East European region emerged, based on research conducted and reports from pilot schools. Its main characteristic features as presented by **Maria Golubeva, Education Policy Expert**, are:

- Most pilot schools do not have a comprehensive and consistent strategy/ policy for inclusion based on common and full understanding of inclusive principles and values by all parties involved.
- Of the 3 types of schools, primary schools are more inclusive than VET schools and gymnasiums. VET schools exist with a sense of marginality because vocational training is perceived by society as a 'lower stand of educational achievement'. There are discrepancies between teachers' and students' perception of the achieved level of inclusiveness in schools.

- In multiethnic schools, with large numbers of migrant students, prevention of violence and creation of a friendly inclusive environment are priority tasks. The larger problem here is society's attitude to diversities in culture, language and gender roles. Drop-out rates are connected to violence and abuse, or neglect of children in the family.
- Local communities are not sufficiently involved in helping schools achieve inclusiveness in their practices. There is also a bigger role for local governments (e.g. providing easy access to schools for students in wheelchairs) and the private sector (e.g. support to gifted students).
- Pedagogical assistants and psychologists are needed in schools to guide and assist students with learning difficulties, but school budgets do not allow/ provide for them.

In the heated discussion that followed, a set of measures was suggested to overcome the drawbacks listed above.

They include:

- Develop school policies that recognise inclusive education as a goal, process and result. Increase awareness and improve understanding of inclusive principles and values by all stakeholder groups.
- Build and strengthen partnerships with parents: educate them, provide information but also learn from them. Workshops for parents where they are encouraged to share ideas and experiences could be useful as well as parents' involvement in all school activities.
- Work persistently to overcome prejudices, especially those of parents who have children with disabilities. These children can learn if they are helped and supported. Parents should involve them in various activities as early as possible. Enrolling such students in regular schools is extremely useful for their development. They should participate in all school activities, including sport competitions, drama and rhetoric groups, school ceremonies and traditions.
- In multi-ethnic schools, classes should be composed of children from different cultures to help integration. Joint visits to various religious establishments, learning about each other's cultures and customs through organising exhibitions and events could also prove useful.

DAY 2 of the conference opened with a panel discussion of Regional PolicyNet recommendations in line with the beneficiaries' commitment to EU accession. In the panellists' presentations an overview of the activities of the 3 PolicyNet groups – primary education, gymnasia and VET - was given and a summary of the positive experience of implementing inclusive policies at schools was presented.

The presentations were followed by a lively discussion and a number of steps were recommended to accelerate and improve the policymaking process:

- There is an urgent need for consistent inclusive strategies and policies to be implemented in schools. Inclusive education can no longer rely only on enthusiastic individuals and proactive schools. Inclusion should not be solely the responsibility of the education system, but of all related sectors – healthcare, social welfare, etc.
- A system of assessment of the effectiveness of policy interventions should be developed, as well as ways to adjust them if necessary. Theory does not automatically become practice with the adoption of laws and regulations. The process involves many factors and a complex series of steps. Tight deadlines and too much emphasis on form rather than context are often the main constraints.
- Policy-makers should be held accountable for the implementation of their policies and not pass on the responsibility to schools alone.
- A comprehensive and clear definition of 'inclusive education' is needed as it is often narrowed down to including children with disabilities into regular schools. It should cover all children at risk and focus on creating an enabling and friendly environment for everyone.
- Broader awareness campaigns should be carried out involving media, e-learning, school networks and communities.
- Policy starts with teachers' motivation, and measures should be developed to increase it. Teachers should be encouraged to get involved in the management of their schools, a system of reward points could be introduced. Good ideas and innovative approaches from schools should be given support and included into policies.

The afternoon session was devoted to the future of inclusive education in the region. In the introductory part of the session, short progress reports were presented by representatives of the seven countries involved in the project. Though the levels of achievement vary slightly from country to country, they face similar problems and challenges.

One of the common constraints is inadequate budget allocations for education (*e.g. in Albania public spending on education averages only 3% of GDP*). Where donor funding is present, progress is more noticeable.

The region has made some progress in providing better access to education for disadvantaged children. In “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” curricula on Roma language and culture for primary education were developed and textbooks printed. Bosnia and Herzegovina addressed the housing needs of Roma and adopted the guidelines on improving the situation of Roma children and social inclusion. In Serbia the legal framework for protection of minorities is broadly in place, but its implementation in the area of education is slow. In Montenegro a strategy and an action plan for integrating disadvantaged children for 2014-2015 were adopted.

As a result, the number of Roma children attending primary schools increased markedly; the number of early school leavers dropped considerably and pre-school enrolment increased. But discrimination against Roma and other minorities remains widespread and stereotyping, stigma and segregation still exist across the region.

Another major concern in the region is vocational education and training. Existing VET systems do not meet labour markets’ needs. Market relevance of qualifications provided by VET is questionable and skills mismatches are widespread. Youth unemployment across the region is alarmingly high, reaching 30% mark. There is an urgent need to adjust and improve vocational education in the region to overcome labour market imbalances. The role of VET in establishing functioning labour markets and ensuring workforce mobility can hardly be overestimated.

The panel discussion that followed focused on the benefits of regional approach in inclusive education and ways of supporting regional efforts by relevant ministries in individual countries. The participants were very appreciative of the regional dimension of the project and listed its benefits as follows:

- The project brought together all relevant stakeholder groups and created mutual obligation and commitment. It boosted broader regional cooperation between different sectors – education, health, social policy, labour and employment, etc. Participation in such important initiatives increased responsibility for the results.
- The institutional capacity of relevant ministries and educational establishments is being strengthened. The project helps formulate policies, find legal solutions to existing problems and create human resources capacity to implement inclusive principles. (*e.g. acquired competencies for writing project proposals to receive funding*).
- The project increased transparency of educational systems and allowed comparability of different systems of education. It has become clear that the introduction of inclusive principles and practices calls for a comprehensive reform of the school system in many countries.
- The regional approach created a platform for sharing ideas, practices and plans for inclusive education on a much larger scale, helping understanding of the broader concept of an inclusive society. Experiences of other countries provide a pool from which individual countries can draw solutions best suited for their needs. It helps to mitigate and overcome the challenges of the inclusion process which are similar across the region.
- Via the three networks – SchoolNet, TeacherNet and PolicyNet - direct links were established between educationalists and policymakers, facilitating dialogue, stimulating debate and feeding creativity.
- By attending to teachers' needs, the project established a base for continuous professional improvement of teachers, provided them with inspiration, broadened their horizons and increased their motivation. Joint efforts are put into developing a list of competences needed to work in inclusive education. Indicators and standards of good teaching practices are also being developed.
- The project facilitated joint research having given the opportunity to make comparisons between participating countries and against EU standards. The index of inclusiveness was developed and instruments for monitoring and assessing school performance are being created.
- The regional approach led to greater mobility of educational experts and practitioners, laying the foundation for future mobility of students, teachers and workers.

The participants suggested a number of ways for their respective ministries of education to contribute to regional efforts. They include:

- implement all tools and documents developed by the project;
- make use of all resources available in the Beneficiaries;
- incorporate the project achievements and good practices into the development of relevant guidelines and regulations;
- exchange information and ideas, share lessons learnt and problems overcome; be open for visits of colleagues from other Beneficiaries;
- participate in awareness raising campaigns across the region, supply success stories of implementing inclusiveness to the media, inform general public about the project's objectives and activities;
- support continuous teacher education, share developed training modules, manuals and guidelines;
- contribute to the development of monitoring and evaluation framework for schools;
- improve schools' infrastructure, contribute to the creation of enabling environment for all students;
- support schools in their cooperation with local governments;
- facilitate regional networking of students by organising regional sports competitions, summer camps for students and teachers, etc.

Serbia is ready to share their laws on inclusive education that have been assessed as very inclusive. It has attended to the language policy and can offer models of bilingual schools. Kosovo^{*} has developed a new school curriculum that incorporates the principle of inclusion and is open for cooperation.

A 2-day mutually-enriching discussion ended on a very positive note, with participants inspired and equipped to take further steps in introducing inclusive education in schools.

CONCLUSIONS

Inclusion is a strategic issue and will remain topical in the foreseeable future. There is political will in Europe and commitment to creating an inclusive society and culture. It is now time to transform it into concrete measures in the sphere of education.

^{*} This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

The joint European Union and Council of Europe project 'Regional Support for Inclusive Education' that helps to bridge socio-demographic differences by introducing inclusive principles in education, is a powerful tool for the future integration of the 6 beneficiary countries into the EU. The benefits of regional approach are highly appreciated by the beneficiary countries

Inclusive education is the first step towards social inclusion. That is why schools have become the key agents and the main resource for the positive changes in the society. A welcome 'side effect' of the project is improved quality of education generally across the region.

But no single country can achieve success on its own. Further joint efforts by all stakeholders are needed to move further progress this.