

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN BULGARIA: *A Current Case Study of Partnership, Development, and Implementation*

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Overview

UNESCO estimates that over 75 million children are excluded from education due to poverty, gender inequity, *disability*, child labor, speaking a minority language, being an indigenous person, or living a nomadically or rurally. Inclusive Education (IE) is a shared priority of the international community, but complicating its implementation are varied disability definitions across countries and willingness to include students with disabilities in schools.

Bulgaria is working to align its mandates and goals of Education for All (EFA). To address this global initiative, assistance from multiple aid organizations and the Bulgarian ministry support including children with disabilities in the educational mainstream. Implementation obstacles include lack of resources; inaccessible, outdated architecture; and a culture of shame that ostracizes children with special needs and their families.

One School for All is a collaborative project of the Center for Inclusive Education (CIE), Sofia, Bulgaria with the University of Washington (UW), Seattle. The project is implemented in five schools in or nearby Sofia. This article highlights features of the CIE and UW partnership.

Center for Inclusive Education & One School for All

The CIE is a non-governmental organization, whose primary purpose is to promote inclusive education through a core tenet that every child should be accepted and valued. The Centre's projects are aimed at children with dyslexia, dyspraxia, hyperactivity with attention deficits, and autism. These children are often undeservedly neglected, unrecognized and undefended, and should be afforded greater social inclusion and quality education. CIE staff work with parents, teachers, managers, professionals, government authorities, business leaders, and local/international colleagues. "We are happy when children have the opportunity to develop their skills and talents to live a happy childhood."

Iva Boneva is Executive Director and former Director of Save the Children. She is a development specialist working in the field of inclusive education, focusing on policies, practices and methodologies. She trains and manages teams to conduct research, on inclusive education and social development of children and young people.

With the cooperation with the UW, CIE is working on using the three-tiered model of educational support for Bulgarian students with special needs. This model requires a shift from current methods for children with special needs to a *system* of care. CIE is piloting the model in schools through:

- Engagement of school leadership in the culture of inclusion with coordination and support of CIE;
- Enhancing teacher knowledge and skills through workshops to define Learning Disabilities (SpLD) of children; to observe and assess a child with SpLD in a mainstream classroom; ways to talk with parents; classroom management; and work in a team;
- Develop child safety policies and child participation in school inclusion;
- Strengthen the understanding of inclusion in the whole school community.

The model is based on capacity building and mentoring of teachers by using training modules to address school context, strengths and weaknesses, such as:

- Teachers overloaded with teaching and extracurricular activities, and administrative work;
- Teachers have previous trainings on many topics and little reflection or practice time;
- A rigid curriculum, thus, teaching creativity has little added value.

University of Washington

UW colleagues include Douglas Cheney, Professor; Colin Gasamis and Jacob Hackett, Doctoral Students in Special Education. Doug has over 42 years' experience in special education and is a national leader in the area of learning/emotional disabilities. Colin and Jacob were K-12 special education instructors in large urban districts (Denver and Atlanta, respectively) and currently research teacher supports for students with special needs.

School-based Support UW members focus on supporting the CIE and Schools For All initiative based on needs. Initially, CIE staff described local needs of the five pilot schools and supports for teacher training. These needs were then discussed and ideas from the UW were tailored to needs. Assessment and teaching methods such as school-readiness inventories for Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), data tracking systems, and teaching tools have been delivered for workshops.

Web-based Support Web-based teacher practices for inclusive education have been written for blog articles. Blog topics include evidence-based practices such as: Teacher-Child interaction strategies; Active Student Engagement / Opportunities to Respond; Graphic Organizers; and Using Response Cards. The articles include an overview of the practice, and contextualized, implementation strategies for Bulgarian teachers. The blog can be accessed here: www.priobshti.se

Summary

The CIE and UW partnership is iterative and focused on capacity building. The collaboration emphasizes meeting CIE needs with use of US evidence-based strategies to improve IE outcomes through remote and onsite collaboration in Seattle and Sofia.

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