



# REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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**Current developments in inclusive education in Republic of Moldova**  
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The problem of children with disabilities has been hidden in Moldova for many years during the Soviet Union. The educational system is inherited from Soviet Union, a system with exclusion elements. The causes of exclusion are various, the most obvious ones are inadequate perception of children with disabilities by the society, lack of tolerance for differences; encouragement of exclusion phenomenon by Orthodox church; actual structure of educational system and methods of funding, which is not stimulating the inclusive education; lack of policy implementation mechanisms; lack of educational and social services for children with disabilities and their families during their all lives; lack of preparation of mainstream schools for accepting and supporting the children with special educational needs. In that period the state found a “solution to that problem” – the institutionalization. Parents that had children with physical or mental disabilities were encouraged to send them to the institutions. Few were keeping them at home.

Nowadays the general situation is almost the same. Because of economical situation, lack of information about the ways to help the children, the parents send them in the institutions: some of them for the school year and some of them forever. According to the annual report about “Children’s situation in Moldova for 2004” there are about 13,225 children with special needs. 4,900 of them are placed in 38 special institutions for children with physical and mental problems. From the whole number of institutionalized children only 10% are orphans. The other 90% have one or both parents. More than 50 Non profit organizations created during the last 5 years meant to provide services to children with disabilities and their families. Still most of them do very little because of the lack of funds and managerial abilities. As a result a great number of children with special needs don’t receive the necessary medical, physical, educational or psychological assistance. In this respect it is necessary to enlarge the services by creating a network of services well structured that will allow offering qualitative services to children with disabilities and their families all over Moldova.

The issue of equal access to quality education by all people without exception rests upon the principle of equity and the right of choice – part of the process aiming for a democratic society that is currently ongoing in Moldova. From the theoretical point of view the main field of promoting the inclusive education nowadays refers to perceiving and using adequate terminologies. From the practical point of view it refers to policies and strategies developed by the government in this area and their implementation; on the other hand it refers to actions undertaken by the parents of children with special needs, by different state educational institutions (on one’s account), by ONGs and to a great extent by the citizen’s attitude towards the process. Today we can state that inclusive education in Moldova is one of the tendencies of development of educational system which evolve in double sense “top down” and “down top”.

## **1. Concept of Inclusive Education**

During last five years in Republic of Moldova many issues were published, mainly with financial support from ONG by carrying out different projects. Analyzing more than twenty books of the sorts we find that more than 80% authors are trying to define the key-terms. This fact indicates the degree of novelty of the subject “inclusive education” and

respectively the absence of unique terminology in this area. Key-terms such as „children with special educational needs”; „disabled children”; „integration” and „inclusive education” have been brought into discussion. However, Moldova today does not have yet a single commonly shared and understood terminology in this area. A real attempt to unify terminology in this field is the Concept Project „Inclusion of children with special educational needs in pre-university institutions in Republic of Moldova”. A project developed by Educational Sciences Institute along with practitioners and representatives of several NGOs. In Project Concept Inclusive Education “Inclusion-assumes extending the school purpose, its transformation in order to respond to the children with special educational needs. The aim of inclusion is taking full account of the individual needs of every child and ensuring the successful schooling for all children. Inclusive Education suppose an ongoing permanent process of improving of school institution in order to use efficiently the existing resources, especially humane ones for sustaining participation to the learning process of all community students. The concept of Inclusive Education imposes the recognition of the need to reform the school to be ready to form and offer educational assistance to all children, including children with deficiency, super endowed, all children with special gifts in common school environment. Thus, allowing the handicapped child to stay home with parents, insuring in this way the premises of the social-professional integration in their community. And at the same time do not exclude the special organizational alternatives if cases can not be solved within Integrated Education. The concept of Inclusive Education stipulates many efficient modalities of approaching child within the framework of *school for all*.

This concept has become a general strategy of teaching children with disabilities which gives to every child equal value according to his particularities of learning and developing. Inclusive Education is going to meet the educational needs of children through individualization of education and by insuring access to education for all children in accordance with the rights of children. It is the largest explanation of the term. Compared with UNESCO definition from 2004, we seem to lack an important connotation - “increasing participation of children with special needs in learning, cultures and communities”. This lack, in my opinion, may be perceived as one-sided distortion of inclusive process and consequently can create a “consumer” attitude from the part of children with disabilities and their parents.

In the literature of the field, during last 2-3 years, it can be noticed a separation between inclusion and integration processes, terms that used to be given same meaning. Integration – is a teaching way in usual schools and classes, it’s a way of adaptation of the child to the school requirements she/he is attending; a process of establishing affective positive reports with school group members and eventually attaining the school functions (getting the child to reach his or her *pupil* status as a result of internal changes of the personality with direct consequences on his or her actions).

The analysis of periodical press, as well as other publications that address the topic of inclusive education shows that terms such as “children with disabilities/handicap” (which have a negative connotation) have been replaced gradually during last 5 years with terms such as “children with special educational needs” or “children with special educational demands”. Terms are used as absolute synonyms but also have a relative meaning. The later that is referring to children who have dysfunctions or deficiencies of intellectual, sensorial, or locomotive nature who need a more or less customized educational intervention also includes the category of children from detrimental social environments and families, delinquent children or sometimes children coming from some ethnic social groups. The term "children with special educational demands" is implemented at the school and classroom levels for only two years in Moldova by NGO programs. These programs are aiming at the children whose parents left to work overseas and who let their kids with

someone or even on their own. One such program is being undertaken by Education Centre Pro-Didactica.

We can also ascertain the tendency in avoiding the traditional separation of children into several handicap categories. Instead, classification of the difficulties children are facing is used: *cognition and learning; communication and interaction; sensorial and physical; emotional and behavioral.*

As the conclusion we can point out that in Republic of Moldova the terminology regarding Inclusive Education is still confusing, semantically speaking the range of used terms are going to have the same meaning as those in UNESCO documents.

## **2. Inclusive Policies and Strategies**

The conceptual frame for inclusion of children with special educational needs is based on adoption of the documents at the international and national levels. The approval of the international norms, as well as the adoption of national norms and decision making process with reference to the children with special educational needs problem is made in 5 distinct phases: (i) from the aggressiveness to awareness of necessity to protection of the persons with special needs; (ii) from the awareness of the presence of persons with special needs to recognition of possibility to teach them; (iii) recognition of the necessity to teach deaf persons, blind persons, persons with mental deficiencies; and organizing of such teaching; (iv) understanding the necessity to teach all kind of children with special needs.

The fifth phase (v) is the transition from isolation to the integration into the society of the persons with special needs, having at its basis the National Strategy – Education for All document and the National Plan of Actions – Education for All for the 2004 – 2015 period. The key purpose of National Strategy Education for all is to assure the access to quality education for all children, especially for children in extremely difficult situations: orphans, children deprived of parents care, children with disabilities, shelter less children, children from socially vulnerable families, refugee children, law-breaking children, disregarded or abused children etc. Strategy Education for All, Republic of Moldova identifies three primordial directions: early education, access to quality education, especially for children in extremely difficult conditions and non-formal education. The main objectives of National Strategy are: guaranteeing an access for all children to quality education by the end of 2007; guaranteeing by the end of 2015 education for all, especially for those being in extremely difficult conditions to complete, free, compulsory and quality education; promotion of integration policies for children with special needs within National general education, developing of an adequate methodological support especially for teaching children under very difficult conditions. The associate objective comprises possible integration of children with special needs in general educational system. General approach when developing policies in this area is focused on special groups.

The implementation process of governmental policies in this field nowadays is centered on searching of the reorganizing solutions of a residential institution system and special educational institution in order to guarantee a quality education for children from these institutions. At the same time a special attention is given to early education declared also as a priority direction. The Republic of Moldova received a grant of USD 4.4 million from the Education for All/Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI) Catalytic Fund to support implementation of the Consolidated Action Plan on Education (2006-2008). The Grant will finance several activities of the Plan under the Early Childhood Education Component. The Grant will be implemented by the Ministry of Education and Youth (MEY) and supported by the EFA/FTI Working/Technical Group and Project Management Team. The objectives of the project are:

(a) to increase the rate of enrollment of children in preschool programs, in urban and rural areas and among vulnerable social groups; (b) to extend access to quality preschool education for children at risk; (c) to increase the quality and efficiency of childcare health and education facilities and programs; (d) to provide training on early childhood development for teaching, medical and technical administrative staff in educational institutions; and (e) to consolidate social partnerships and local community involvement in early childhood development programs.

The project implementation will offer educational alternatives for children under school age and will create the necessary conditions for pre-school education of the children with special education needs in one of the 33 kinder gardens, as well as the architectural accommodation for the children with special educational needs in all 33 pre-school institutions.

One of the considerable impediments when implementing policies of inclusive education field is caused by the nonfunctional mechanism of implementation. From the perspective of managerial sciences we have to develop the local strategy taking into account educational policies and national strategies developed by the Govern.

The analysis of the Development Program of the Educational System in Chisinau, “Modernization of the Education for 2006-2011” is pointing out a number of normative and legislative acts not taking into account the National Strategy Education for All.

As a conclusion we can mention that Policies and Strategies in Inclusive Education nowadays in Republic of Moldova don’t have developed mechanisms for focusing the efforts on the implementation, application of the policies end strategies in entire educational system. We need the mechanisms that will contribute to the right functioning of the laws. Above this a lot of other problems exist, from the multitude of the problems existing in this field we pointed as the most important to be:

- The lack of a special department as part of the Ministry of Education in Moldova that would deal with inclusive education related activities. At the moment the organization of the Ministry includes a section “Special education and children rights protection” that has control over institutions for special education and residential institutions.
- The lack of an alternative model of inclusive education guidelines to the segregation of the children with special education needs. In this context there is a danger that the deinstitutionalization, that is being considered a positive movement in the educational field of Moldova, can acquire a negative tint through the isolation of the children with special needs at home.
- The lack of professional competences among teachers from the mainstream schools necessary to be able to provide qualitative educational services for all the categories of children, including those with special needs. This fact keeps down the implementation of the main objectives of the Education for All and Strategy of Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction (creation of conditions for access to qualitative education for all the categories of children).
- The lack of collaboration between the state and the non governmental organizations in solving the social and educational problems disperse the efforts. The partnership would add value and will foster the use of existing experience. This collaboration aims at increasing the value of the activities of many NGOs, multifunctional-rehabilitation centers, and day care centers that prepare children with special education needs for school integration.
- The lack of possibility to redirect the governmental funds necessary to sustain the education of the children with special education needs for the inclusive mainstream schools.

### 3. Experiments and inclusive practices

The undergraduate educational system in Moldova includes educational mainstream institutions where, according to the law, can study all the children, and residential institutions where can study different categories of children with special educative needs. The residential institutions have basic conditions and special education programs for children from vulnerable families and children with different disabilities. Because of the poverty and the high level of family instability the children are exposed to different risks. A big number of children are deprived of the family environment, because the institutionalization is the main way of protection of children from poor families, abandoned and disabled children. The number of institutionalized children continues to be very high; many children are abandoned by the parents that cannot offer them an adequate care. Because of the insufficient resources and lack of support from the part of the community, the disadvantaged children are exposed the most to institutionalization. The institutionalization compromises the survival, the development and social integration of the children. They can become victims of different diseases and of development problems as well as having problems with social inclusion because of the years spent in isolation in the institutions.

There are many families that would like to avoid the institutionalization of their children but don't have any alternative. Despite the fact that the Education Law allows every child to attend the mainstream school, the schools are not prepared architecturally; teachers don't have the necessary skills to provide teaching/services to children with special needs.

In many residential institutions there are restricted study programs that do not allow the child to graduate the school. The child has no possibility to put good use to his potential.

During the last few decades in Moldova were made certain attempts in inclusive education. One of the form of direct integration in structure of common school of some children with slight mental deficiencies and with temporary delay in growth, largely spread in our country in 1980-1990, is *differentiated classes*. The differentiated classes for children with learning difficulties have been left for local representatives to deal with. They did not give satisfactory outcomes due to some conceptual and organizational errors.

Another attempt of satisfying certain special educational needs in a genuine and successful way have been the *interschool logopedic centers*. Acquiring a vast experience, these interschool centers have an important role in preventing and fighting with the schooling failure of numerous students with special educational needs. Particularly due to positive gained experience we consider that the objectives and obligations of those logopedic centers should be developed. They could easily be transformed into centers dealing not only with language therapy area but also with some dysfunctions of intellectual, sensorial, affective, instrumental and learning nature.

The political changes occurred in Moldova beginning with 1990 created the necessary conditions for identifying and recognizing under a favorable light the problem of children with special educational needs. Thus, the event started a real movement of *deinstitutionalization* children from residential institutions and special boarding schools. On one hand, the deinstitutionalization process was initiated by educational institutions that has not managed to cope with deep economical crisis through which our country was passing. On the other hand, this process was initiated by parents of children with special educational needs who consider it possible to offer them the necessary care and education in the family, and also by parents who saw SEN children as a survival source because of receiving invalidity pensions or compensations etc. Most of these actions appeared as a reaction and temporary solution to economical crisis, poverty and inflation increase. This process led to an increased number of children educated at home and of children with special educational needs who attended general schools. But, at the same time, it increased the number of

children who were eliminated from the educational process, the number of school abandons, the number of children with special educational needs who attended a general school but did not benefit from full educational services, just being put to school: the children were written in register of class with pencil, were promoted from class to class and finely gained a school certificate confirming the simple fact of school attending. The above mentioned school certificate did not give them right to continue studies in vocational school either. The mainstream school was not yet ready to respond or cope with such a challenge. The deinstitutionalization concept is accepted theoretically but it is not sustained at practical level. There are no viable deinstitutionalization mechanisms, alternative educational models, nor is there access to qualitative education for persons with special education needs.

In the 2000-2007 period several NGOs have implemented programs and projects that addressed the UN Convention regarding children rights:

- There have been created community inclusion centers;
- There have been opened Day Care Centers for multifunctional therapy for children with special educational needs, and for vocational education;
- Support programs for the families with children with special educational needs, etc.

Such actions have been taken in response to the problems created by the process of deinstitutionalization of children with special educational needs.

The goal of opening ***community inclusion centers*** and Day Care Centers is to support and stimulate the community resources in order to establish some community services depending on specific needs.

Schools, kinder gardens or hospitals are provided with especially equipped rooms for complex and integrated occupational therapy for children with SEN. So, having methodical support of Step by Step program, the financial support of Social Investment Fund for Moldova and that of the community, some centers have been created in village Pîrlița, Ungheni district, village Copceac , r. Ștefan-vodă, village Ștefănești, r. Florești, village Tîrnova, r. Dondușeni, etc.

As part of implementation of other projects territorial centers were built. As positive experience examples in this area can serve Calarasi and Criuleni centers. Children with special education needs from many villages were transported each morning to the district center for different activities of learning and rehabilitation. Exams were taken by children in local schools. So, the children stayed with there parents, with neighbors and friends and enjoyed/ benefited from qualitative educational services.

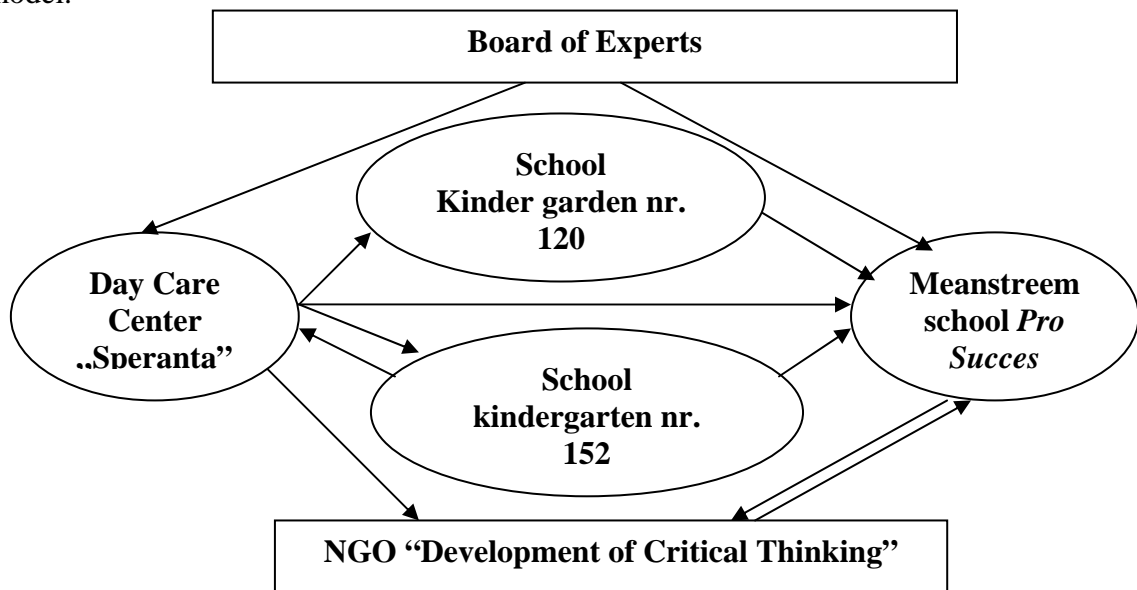
We can identify 2 models of inclusive practice witch are promoted experimentally by general schools. According to the first model, the children with special educational needs are integrated in usual classes, in educational activities true to general curriculum. In addition, they benefit from extracurricular and therapeutic activities facilitated by teachers.

The activities take place due to Resource Centers created and equipped with the financial support from grants and funds. Here, they are offered a large variety of services which correspond to rehabilitation, special needs and vocational education. The contents are proper to the child's interest, potential and special needs. However, in such schools can go only children who do not require a modified and tailored curriculum.

Another model developed in Chisinau is more specific, characterized by the cooperation between general educational institutions and other state educational institutions and in partnership with ONGs. The project That is ongoing in Gymnasium Pro Succes serves as an example in this field. It acquired the necessary experience and has created relationships with many officials from central and local administration and with many specialists in education and rehabilitation research field. In the implementation of this model there are involved many persons with great experience in research and evaluation. This allows us to consider that we have all the necessary capacities in order to help solving the problems we have mentioned.

### About partnership

The graphical representation shows the connection between the institutions involved in this model.



**The Board of Experts** is formed from responsible persons from Municipal Educational Department, Ministry of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences, universities from Moldova in order to ensure a real support in developing and implementation of pedagogic and social inclusive practices. The Board of Experts is meeting once in a month. At each meeting Gymnasium Pro Success offers a summary update of what has been done and experts from the Board asses the activities, present there points of views regarding the proposed improvement objectives and activities, the board gives specialized advices during the implementation, evaluates the work done within the project, and encourages and participates in the broad dissemination of the project results information.

**NGO “Development of Critical Thinking”** - contributes to the study and research activities and elaboration of the materials for publishing. During the 2005-2006 school year, Development of Critical Thinking has conducted a study titled “Inclusive Education – Reality and Perspectives”, which was financed by the GTZ – the German Office for Technical Cooperation.

**Day Care Center „Speranta“** - has six years of experience in working toward including children with disabilities in primary and middle school and facilitating their stay there. During six years Day Care Center “Speranta” helped the school inclusion of about 40 children (in most of these cases Speranta Center was paying for the personal assistance for the children that needed it).

The primary schools in collaboration with Day Care Center “Speranta” integrate the children with special educational needs into common classes. After 4 years they continued to study in Gimnazium Pro Succes. The mainstream school “Pro Succes” (For Success) is the first middle school from Moldova that accepted children with special education needs into classes. “Pro Success” has been collaborating with primary schools, Educational Science Institute and Day Care Center “Speranta” for four years already. The partnership is to be based on collaborative conventions signed among the organizations and institutions involved in the implementation of this model of inclusive education. Our activity is to contribute to solve the social and educational problems through the unification of the efforts of Non

Governmental organizations and those Official (in our case – preschool educational institutions, primary and middle schools) and of the Civil Society. This is a basic aspect of the Activity Plan elaborated by the Government of the Republic of Moldova for the implementation of the Education for All and Strategy of Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction.

The partnership between state institutions, NGOs and community is to evolve on the concept of Inclusive Education from down to top – from NGOs toward state officials. This collaboration can be fostered initially in the context of various projects in which NGOs invite the officials for collaboration. After that, maybe the govern will understand the importance and role of such a collaboration.

#### About model

This model will rely on the international experience adapted to the national reality. Also, this model comes to take value from the best practices of the activities of many NGOs, multifunctional-rehabilitation centers, day care centers that prepare the children with special education needs for school integration. Up to now this inclusion was unofficial. The children with special education needs who attended our school officially have home schooling education. That is to mean that 9 hours a week teachers come at home and work individually with children. But the parents want to offer for their children higher quality education and prefer their children to attend school if possible. The principal of school, teachers, other children in most cases accepted the children with special educational needs.

Now in our school are learning 9 children with special education needs in 5-8 classes that will have the possibility to grow up in the family and have access to quality education. Their disabilities varies in severity from mild to moderate to severe, and generally fall into the following broad categories:

- **Mental Retardation:** A condition in which the individual has below-average intellectual functioning abilities, both in terms of IQ and adaptive skills.
- **Learning Disabilities:** A heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are presumed to be related to central nervous system dysfunction, and are not a direct result of other handicapping conditions.
- **Behavioral Disorders:** Extreme, chronic behavior that is unacceptable because of social or cultural expectations which interferes with the child's ability to learn, maintain interpersonal relationships or function.
- **Speech and Language Disorders:** Problems using speech and language for purposes of sending and receiving messages at an age appropriate level.
- **Sensory (Hearing and Visual) Impairments:** This area includes individuals who are hard of hearing, deaf, visually impaired or blind.
- **Physical Disabilities:** This area includes individuals with crippling conditions (both orthopedic and neurological) and chronic health problems.

In each class there are being integrated 2-3 children with SEN. They are participating to the lessons and to different extracurricular activities together with other children. In order to avoid schooling failure these children benefit from individual lessons. Recovering activities and therapies are also held within Day Care Centre Speranta and are being provided by its personnel. This model allows for the best use of experience and resources from all involved institutions.

### About necessary conditions

In Gimnazium Pro Succes with the support of Day Care Center Speranta were created the necessary conditions for the education of children with special education needs in the mainstream schools:

- Architectural adaptations: ramps were built; bathrooms and lavatories were adapted for children with wheelchairs; wall bars were installed; the recreational rooms (these rooms have the elementary equipment and materials for relaxation, education and other extracurricular activities).
- Transportation: with a support of President of Republic of Moldova we have organized the transportation of the children with SEN to and from Gymnasium with a special bus.
- Tolerance: through special activities we prepare and sustain the parents of the children with special education needs in order to help children integrate in the pupil groups; this also includes preparing the parents and children (without special needs) from the mainstream school to accept and help the children with special education needs to integrate among pupil groups. Many parents are reluctant to send their children to general schools being afraid of discrimination. Our experience proved the opposite: the children feel very good at school, they make new friends etc. There are being held meetings with parents whose children already attend general school.
- Assistants: The children can benefit from personal assistance if required.

### About learning and teaching proces

The teaching-learning process is guided by the support group which is formed by the management of educational institute, teachers, school physiologist and the parents of the child. For each child a support group elaborates an individual educational plan which decides what subject matter have to be excluded (physical education, fine arts, technological education etc.) permits partial attendance of child of some subject matters (musical education, Romanian language etc) decides individual teaching of some subject matters (mathematics, chemistry etc). At the professional council the forms of organization of educational process relevant for each case were discussed. Taking into account that Ministry of Education did not have any special notification on this and school principal is not trained properly, so the process is going on intuitively or is copied from the experience of other countries, which is not always appropriate.

The support group is making decisions on at what extent is it necessary to modify or adapt curriculum for each subject matter. Now, at this stage, teachers are trying to select and reduce the contents in order not to overburden the child; in a similar way the teacher adapt the tests of assessment. It is a difficult process because of lacking of proper teachers training for such activity.

The philosophical foundation of base curriculum is the child centered education. But, the actual base curriculum structure does not suppose regulatory documents with reference direct to inclusive education. The National Curriculum practically don't support inclusive approaches in the classroom: for instance, special instructions for things that should happen in inclusive classes, special materials. Teachers from general schools have proved to be less prepared psychologically and pedagogically to teach in inclusive classes. In the last 2 years some Universities (graduate education) have benefited from some methodological references for inclusive education for teachers created with support from NGOs.

The majority of resources are referring to the inclusion of the children with special educational needs in the general schools at the primary level. Inclusive education as part of the gymnasium cycle becomes a problem at a theoretical and practical level.

Nevertheless, we obtained a few positive meaningful results in inclusive education. The school is making a relevant alternative for inclusive model for educational system in the Republic of Moldova. Students with disabilities can benefit from well-planned and organized integration experiences. In integrated school environments, regular class students are provided unique opportunities to learn first-hand about human differences and similarities and how to approach and interact with members of society who have severe disabilities. Researchers have found that generally speaking, non-disabled students who have had opportunities to interact with students with severe disabilities hold more positive and accepting attitudes toward them than students who have not had such learning opportunities. Such interactions can also reduce non-disabled students' fear of students with severe disabilities and promote understanding and tolerance. When students with disabilities are placed in regular public schools and classrooms, teachers generally find an abundance of opportunities for positive interactions. Opportunities exist from the beginning of the day, when students are entering the halls, interacting with each other, throughout the day, in regular education classes, during breaks, lunch, at library, during special activities; through to the end of the day, when awaiting for buses or participating in extracurricular activities. Teachers who have been involved in integrating students with severe disabilities have found that careful planning is required to take full advantage of the available interaction opportunities. Eventually, positive interactions between students with severe disabilities and others in our school increased an internal climate where students got to know each other better and feel comfortable with one another.

#### About future

Starting with January, 2008 there will be created in Gymnasium Pro Succes a Recourse Center for researches, trainers, teachers, and personal assistants. The resource center will have all the necessary materials and tools for facilitating the spreading of the acquired experience: publication of materials, training for trainers, implementing open demonstrative activities (classes, individual activities, group activities etc.), organizing trainings and seminars for different persons, visits to different schools from Moldova for experience exchange programs.

This year we will undertake researches with Educational Science Institute for the model to be produced and that will be validated by and through the involvement of the Ministry of Education propagating it throughout other schools. The experimental validation of the model together with the research and training activities of people involved will lead to the elaboration and publishing of the support materials for the replication of the model in other schools from Moldova

The implementation of the model is expected to have a direct impact on the social, political and educational context in Moldova. The inclusion of children with disabilities will change the social perception of this category of children; will contribute to the elimination of the stereotype that says that the place of the children with disabilities is in special institutions with their similar peers. Also it will reassure every child's right to qualitative education. The creation of the partnership among governmental and non governmental structures will create a strong base for further collaboration; will increase the confidence of the authorities toward the NGOs.