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Inclusive Education in Serbia
Fund for an Open Society Team for Inclusive Education
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In the past 5-6 years, and very intensely in the past 2-3 years, discussion is taking place among professional circles in Serbia about the concept, role and specificities of inclusive education, and this makes an integral part of overall changes and European integration processes in Serbia. Among the majority of professional public there is an awareness that market, economic and social developments demand from the system of education to adapt to contemporary trends and that these processes have to be accompanied by an efficient system of education “expected to address the needs of children and pupils with developmental difficulties, who need organized assistance of the community, educational institutions and society as a whole, in order to exercise their enshrined rights to accessible and quality education under equal conditions.”

One can say that in Serbia today there is an ongoing struggle between the medical, “defectological” approach that has so far dominated system solutions and an inclusive approach advocated by representatives of teaching professions. Even though this dialogue has resembled a struggle at first, it seems that there is a growing awareness that it is necessary to go beyond the medical model. In the light of such prevailing awareness, accompanied by an assessment of the direction which processes in Serbia will inevitably take, defectologists as special education professionals are beginning to focus themselves on finding their own proper role in those processes and on opening and transforming themselves even though by taking very small steps.

Even though these processes are at the very beginning, it seems that the prevailing concept of education is that it is a right and an instrument of social development to which everyone will contribute in accordance with their possibilities. Among the expert circles and the educational public there is also an awareness that the education system has to be just, open and flexible to enable everyone to realize their full potentials. Declaratory, there is a readiness to change certain dimensions of the current education system so as to create equal conditions for all, enable inclusion of marginalized groups and development of different forms of support to the process of learning of every child. In this sense, “the lines of development of education and upbringing of children with special needs will closely follow reform processes, which are based on international and European goals, general economic and social conditions of development of society, poverty reduction and on ensuring quality and accessible education to children, pupils

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and adults with disabilities and other difficulties due to which those persons have become a marginalized group of citizens. This more recent document, even though it is in the form of a draft, displays a noticeable change in understanding of the notion of inclusive education. Inclusion is here associated with the change of the system of education towards a more democratic model, namely change of respective dimensions of openness, fairness and flexibility of the education system. The line of development of reform of education toward opening the education system to include marginalized groups has been explicitly mentioned, along with the fact that significant curricular reforms are necessary for development of inclusive education and for inclusiveness of the education system. However, the fact that reactions to this document have been ambiguous – advocates of the social model comment that the lines of development laid out in this document are still within the framework of solutions originating from the medical model and that more attention has been paid to transformation of positions of special educators than to increasing inclusiveness of the mainstream education system; the objections of advocates of the medical approach model concern significantly changed position of special education and changed position of special educators as persons only and exclusively qualified to educate children with developmental handicaps, that is, all children now classified for education in special conditions, and potentially all children with broadly understood developmental handicaps. This fact shows that, essentially, the attitude of special education profession toward education of pupils with special needs is still out of tune with the necessity to ensure right to education under equal conditions to all children and is a source of resistance to the commitment to develop inclusive education.

Additionally, there is no unanimous opinion in Serbia about who marginalized groups of children are. Until recently, “special needs” have been understood very narrowly, as developmental handicaps that have occurred as consequence of bodily defects: handicaps in mental, sensory, verbal-linguistic and physical development and of chronic and systemic diseases. A more comprehensive understanding of the phrase “special needs” implies standstill in development occurring as a result of extremely unfavorable social, cultural and economic living conditions. This group of children and students with special needs encompasses: children with behavioral difficulties stemming from emotional and social developmental problems, children without parental care, abused children, children of refugees and internally displaced persons, children of war veterans, children from socially depriving environments (for example: due to unfavorable living conditions, Roma children often lag behind in their development and are consequently often placed in special schools under a decision of a Commission). Furthermore, special source of problems to understand the inclusive approach is a failure to understand that needs of children from marginalized groups are basically the same as needs of other children but that there is a difference in the need to provide social and educational support. Additionally, there is misunderstanding of the very concept of special needs, which are often understood as identical to the category of a handicap or a possibly existing diagnosis, thus disregarding the essential fact.

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that when special educational needs are concerned, it is important to monitor changing priorities of needs according to which support to the education process is to be provided.

Generally speaking, reasons for exclusion of children from marginalized groups in Serbia are to be sought, on the one hand, in general misunderstanding of the modern concept of education and its function in development of society and in the struggle against poverty and exclusion, and consequently, on the other, in the lack of strategy and legal framework for inclusive education, namely, inexistence of a system of support and preparedness of teaching staff, parents and children for inclusive education. Moreover, broached curricular reform has not been followed through and there is a renewed advocacy of the old style of teaching that favors reproduction of a rigid curriculum regardless of differences among children, which practically makes inclusion impossible. The status of individual curricular plans and programs and possibilities of their wider use in schools is unclear. To boot, parents are not treated as partners and cooperation with them is extremely formal. Legal obligations to include parents are not sufficiently applied in practice and instead exist only partially in a declarative and formal manner. There are no additional mechanisms of support to parents of children with special needs for inclusion in education, inclusion in life of the school and in curricular changes and there are no mechanisms ensuring their participation.

Currently, children and youth with developmental difficulties are largely outside the system of education or are placed in mainstream kindergartens and schools without the necessary support. The information shows that in relation to the total population of pupils, 7% to 10% of children and pupils with disabilities and developmental difficulties are outside the system of education.

- The official rate of enrolment to primary schools is 98.3% (2000/2002) and the dropout rate is 0.62%. The percentage of those who leave school is particularly large among pupils with disabilities and developmental difficulties, Roma, refugees and internally displaced persons. The dropout rate among girls from the most vulnerable groups is noticeably the largest, namely girls with disabilities, Roma girls, girls from the village population.

- Only 15% of pupils with disabilities and developmental difficulties attend special schools, which is only 1% in relation to the total population of children of primary school age. Only 1% of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties are covered by preschool education and rehabilitation, as compared to 27% of other children of preschool age (UNICEF, 2001).

- Approximately 80% of children and youth from the Roma ethnic group are institutionally segregated in special schools for children with lighter mental problems (UNICEF, 2001).

- Insufficient attention has been paid to education of adult persons with disabilities. The formal system of adult education does not suffice (there are 19 adult education schools in Serbia).

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and is not systemically developed, it does not have clear standards for developing multivalent educational models that would be accessible to adult persons with disabilities too.

– The sources of enormous unemployment of persons with disabilities are to be sought both in the existing structure of education and in maladjustment of secondary special schools to the current needs of the labor market.

– The education systems for children and youth with disabilities and developmental difficulties are completely separate and there is practically no possibility for a pupil enrolled to a special school to be transferred to mainstream school if he/she has progressed in development or if an error has been made in placing him/her in a special school.

- At the same time, a pupil with disabilities and developmental difficulties who fails to make the appropriate progress in a mainstream school is sent to be re-examined in order to be placed in a proper school without taking any measures of support beforehand (not even those envisaged by the law) to help him/her stay in mainstream system of education.

- A large number of pupils with disabilities and developmental difficulties for whom there are no special schools attend mainstream schools (pupils with borderline intellectual capabilities, with difficulties in reception and expression of speech, bodily disabled, chronically ill, hyperactive, hypoactive children, children with emotional difficulties, children with behavioral difficulties, children from socially undeveloped environments...). For children from this group there are no additional programs. It is not uncommon that such children are placed in special schools, especially Roma children, even though legal prerequisites for such a decision had not been fulfilled.

- Legal solutions repeat stereotyped proposals (most frequently requested is additional and corrective work), which is an anachronism, especially after passing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- A significant number of mainstream schools refuse to enroll children with disabilities and developmental difficulties just because they “have a diagnosis.”

- In neither mainstream nor special kindergartens/schools there is no appropriate method of preparing staff for work with youth with disabilities and developmental difficulties. Kindergarten and other teachers and professional associates do not acquire any additional knowledge in the course of their schooling about work with children who have developmental difficulties (exception are some teacher training colleges). The special educators who head special groups in kindergartens or work in special schools/classes are not prepared at all for educational work with preschool groups or for teaching the subject they are supposed to teach. This is the rule not only in kindergartens and primary schools, but also in secondary schools, which is a pedagogical absurdity.

- Even though there are individual positive examples, parents are true partners in neither educational nor other systems encompassing youth with disabilities and developmental difficulties. (Data taken from “Guidelines for Education and Development of Children with Disabilities and Developmental Difficulties”, Agency for Development of Education, 2007.)
In closed-type institutions there is neither clear conception of organizing educational work nor elaborated protocol for assessing needs of users of those institutions, and there is no support to address those needs.

(ii) The government of the Republic of Serbia is at least declaratory committed to further promotion of children’s rights and the right to quality and accessible education, a commitment which has been built into the new Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and ratified by the largest number of international conventions from the field of human and children’s rights. New guidelines for educational policy of children and youth with developmental difficulties and disabilities are based on the following documents: Strategy of the Ministry of Education and Sports from 2005 to 2010, National Action Plan for Children (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2004), Poverty Reduction Strategy (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2003), Analysis of State of Affairs in Education and Proposals for Reform (Ministry of Education and Sport, 2004). Moreover, the Law on the Foundations of the System of Education, Article 2, paragraph 4, emphasizes development of intellectual capacities and skills of children and pupils in accordance with their developmental needs, possibilities and interests as the priority goal of education and upbringing, which “...includes ensuring equal possibilities for education of children and pupils with developmental difficulties.” However, considering that educational institutions do not have a legal obligation to implement inclusion, this boils down in practice to good will of managers and teachers. Taking into account that there is no legal obligation, there are also no financial instruments to support those mainstream schools and preschool institutions in which children with disabilities and developmental difficulties are already placed. The schools which show interest and readiness to develop in accordance with inclusive indicators criteria and include pupils with some disabilities and developmental difficulties are supported only through projects of international organizations (Save the Children Fund, Fund for an Open Society).

The Government of the Republic of Serbia monitors indicators of poverty reduction laid out in the Poverty Reduction Strategy, but precisely according to these indicators it is visible that in the field of education, conditions have not been established that would enable producing of significant results. Consequently, education system in Serbia still displays most signs of high selectivity and exclusion from the system of education (a separate system of special schools for children with developmental handicaps, unjust placement of pupils, institutional segregation of Roma children, growing economic sector in education for those who can afford it, enrolment of children of low social economic status in bad-quality schools whose vocational orientation has no prospects, and especially enrolment of pupils with special needs to special secondary schools, the vocational orientation of which as a rule does not at all correspond to the needs of the labor market).

(iii) The reform of the system of education in Serbia, began in 2001, opened a possibility of integration of inclusive education in curriculum structure by providing possibility for schools to adjust 30% of the compulsory primary school curriculum to local needs and specific needs of their pupils as well as by becoming focused on educational outcomes, abandoning the earlier exclusive and legally binding focus on implementation of envisaged curriculum. With the halting of reform from 2004 onwards, curriculum reform was also stalled, the implementation of uniform, previously
decreed curriculum was reinstituted as a legal obligation and educational outcomes are no longer declared to be an instrument of adjusting the education process to specificities of learning of various pupils. There is still no understanding of the inclusive education as an integral part of the general education, and main-stream curriculum. Sporadic implementation of the individual developmental plans (IDP) for the special needs children is extremely rare and depends exclusively on the good will of the individual teacher, since there is no legal frame for main-streaming it. Additionally, individualized approach is mostly implemented through the developmental programs and projects of the international organizations, and mostly on the level of compulsory primary school. It is noticeable that teachers in preschool education system are much better prepared to develop and to implement IDPs and to include the children with special educational needs, but even on this level the lack of strategy and the lack of organized teachers professional development support is slowing down possible curricular changes which could be the tools for broader inclusion. As a result, among preschool teachers there is still the dominance of medical model attitudes, and only when supported through projects of international organizations, they use their capacities to create individualized curricula and to implement inclusive principles, and certainly, only when and where it exists an inclusive orientation of the whole management of individual preschool institution.

In terms of transition from compulsory primary education to secondary education, no mechanisms ensuring continuation of education of pupils from marginalized groups have been ensured. This is precisely where further dropout and reduction of number of special needs pupils occurs. Pupils who have completed special schools do not have a realistic chance to become included in secondary education so they do not continue their schooling. Some of them attend special secondary education programs in special schools, where they rarely acquire skills necessary for life or become qualified for vocations that correspond to the needs of the labor market.

As well, the concept of life-long learning that was introduced at the beginning of reform processes in Serbia, is still not elaborated, nor developed as real possibility. It has been only sporadically and only in a declarative manner mentioned in regard to various groups of students with special needs. There were some initiatives, such as one project supported in 2003 by Ministry of education and sports that was aimed at supporting life-long learning of persons with autistic spectrum difficulties. It was regarded as the model to be tested and used in respect to other groups with special needs. But with stopping of reform in 2004, the realization of the project was wrapped, the obtained results were not analyzed and practically, it had no influence on strategy development or practice.

It could be concluded that generally, inclusive education is not seriously conceived as a way of democratizing opportunities for life-long learning, and, even that the notion of inclusive education as well as the notion of life-long learning are not seen as mutually connected issues, both on a practical level important for democratization of education, as well as for poverty reduction.

(iv)

When the curriculum change is concerned, for the time being, we can only speak of making of general and declarative guidelines of legal nature, which precedes the process of changing and developing curriculum toward creation of conditions for implementing inclusive education. The curriculum change at the system level that would provide support to exercise of
right to education for all children and produce a favorable learning environment for all children has still not been broached.

The curriculum of teacher training colleges also fails to encompass as obligatory those skills and knowledge that would give future teachers reassurance and competences for including children with special needs into mainstream education system. At the Teacher Training Faculty, for instance, there is only one subject which covers this area, namely *Methods of Work with Children with Special Needs*. It is self-evident that this subject, which became compulsory only in 2006, is not enough for teachers to become capable to organize and manage process of learning at the level of the class in a manner that would include pupils of various capabilities and needs.

The curriculum of special schools has not been developed in accordance with various potentials and needs of pupils. Instead, curriculum of mainstream schools is copied, its abridged version is made and it is implemented without any adjustment or monitoring of effects it has on development and learning.

The curriculum of the Faculty of Special Education is based on medical approach to persons with handicaps and is focused on making a diagnosis, categorizing and treatment. Defectologists or special educators as they are called since 2006, do not have methodical, pedagogical and other relevant professional knowledge that would qualify them for the teaching profession.

Actually, the situation is such that practice goes ahead of system solutions and an increasing number of children with special needs are included in mainstream schools and preschool institutions. Since they have not acquired the necessary skills for working with those children in the course of their undergraduate studies, school and kindergarten teachers display a need for additional special forms of professional training to boost their competences for implementing inclusion in education.

Since 2005, professional associations of employees in education and educational institutions are the ones that initiate and organize various seminars providing support to inclusive education. With the conducting of such seminars, albeit with still insufficient system support, the initial progress toward inclusive education occurs only at the level of certain schools and preschool institutions, which, having recognized various educational needs in their environment, adjust their approach and individualize the process of learning regardless of the curriculum that does not support it.

Some other system steps are taken toward self-assessment of schools and these may provide a good foundation for adopting the inclusive concept, but for the time being, this has not produced visible results. The document on self-assessment of schools clearly states that the work in school is planned and “...organized in accordance with various capabilities and preferences of pupils, taking into account the amount of their workload, velocity and manner of work” and that “the teaching methods, forms of instruction and teaching aids are in line with teaching objectives, teaching contents and proper age and developmental characteristics of pupils”. The school is also obliged to “...elaborate and implement programs of support to the process of learning (familiarization with leaning techniques, assistance to overcome unsuccessfulness, development of motivation, organization of assistance of more successful to less successful pupils, instruction... “
how to assess one’s own progress/self-assessment...).”\(^4\) However, even in this document on self-assessment of schools, which is expected to lay down the foundations for future developments in education in Serbia, cooperation and partnership with parents remains either formal or insufficient at the level of the school as an institution or their role as associates in the education process is not envisaged at all.

As the conclusion, if the process of reform of education in Serbia gathers speed and if changes continue to be made in basic relevant dimensions of the education system as a whole, including return to the broached curricular reform and if possibilities of local developmental planning of educational institutions continue to open, so that further development of inclusive education is possible, it is certain that experiences of the non-governmental sector and international organizations will provide considerable contribution and incentive. On this provision, the developed models of inclusive education and teachers who have undergone trainings for inclusive education and for support to education process of pupils with special needs can be an important pillar in further development of inclusive practice. In those circumstances it would be important to link the already developed criteria and indicators of inclusive educational practice with criteria and indicators of self-assessment of schools and to support professional advancement of teachers for work in inclusive education (which, by the way, has been implicitly established through the rule book on obtaining a license) with system solutions and concrete plans of advancement at the local level.

\(^4\) Handbook for self-evaluation and evaluation of the work of schools, Ministry of Education and Sports, 2005