



Current developments with Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Hungarian Educational Research Journal
2015, Vol. 5(2) 1–17
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<http://herj.lib.unideb.hu>
Debrecen University Press



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DOI: 10.14413/herj.2015.02.01.

Abstract

This article builds on a previous publication in the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* (Tsokova & Becirevic (2009) and examines further developments of inclusive education in Bulgaria (BG) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The paper seeks to provide local and cross-national insight into the current state of and influences on developments with inclusive education. The underlying research considers relevant local and international literature and education policies, and explores the perspectives of a small sample of key policy makers' from both countries. The findings suggest that inclusive education reforms as they relate to children with special educational needs and disabilities in both countries face some unique and other similar challenges associated with external and internal pressures embedded in historical, political, economic and educational circumstances. The authors argue that democratisation of the inclusive education policy making process and bottom-up grass root developments are essential for a sustainable reform that could go beyond integration and policy rhetoric.

Keywords: inclusive education, integration, special educational needs, disability, defectology, Roma

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Recommended citation format: Tsokova, D. & Halilović, M. (2015). Current developments with Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 5(2), 1-17, DOI :10.14413/herj.2015.02.01.

Introduction

Inclusive education developments special in Bulgaria (BG) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are rarely documented and reflected in academic literature, although UNESCO, OECD and UNICEF have been active in collecting and publishing data from this region. This article aims to build on our earlier publication (Tsokova & Becirevic, 2009) by continuing to follow developments with inclusive education policy and practice in BG and BIH since 2009 through exploration of policy makers' perspectives.

As defined in international publications (OECD 2007) BG and BiH belong to the South Eastern European Region. Both countries have undergone major political changes and upheavals in the past 20 years. BG experienced collapsed of Soviet dominated communist political system and years of transition marked by poverty and uncertainty. In January 2007, BG became a member of the European Union (EU). Currently, Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU. Unprecedentedly, the reforms in Bulgaria continue to be monitored by the European Commission. The Commission has continuous concerns about 'deficiencies in the rule of law, judicial reform and the fight against corruption'. (The Economist, 2014).

The accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the European Union continue to be a key strategic interest for BiH. The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) dating from July 2008 has been ratified by all EU member states but not yet enforced due to certain unfulfilled preconditions on the part of BiH, including the necessity of change to the country's constitution to prevent discrimination, and to agree on the internal EU coordination mechanism. These preconditions for SAA enforcement and EU Candidate Status are still not adopted (UNDP, 2013).

For both countries membership of the EU is seen as a promising economic, social and political development as EU structural and Cohesion funds can play a critical role in member countries' development. In relation to Bulgaria, already a member, issues with the absorption of these funds have been identified in the period 2007-13 and therefore are a current priority (The World Bank, 2014).

The political situation in Bulgaria since its accession to the EU has even markedly unstable. Governments have changed several times between 2009 and 2013 only: the Government of Boyko Borisov (CEDB party - 'Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria') has fallen in 2013 as a result of public protests against poverty; it was replaced by an interim cabinet and after urged elections by a largely unpopular Socialist-led coalition lead by Plamen Oresharski, 'embroiled in a series of political controversies that led to daily anti-government protests.' (The Economist, 2014). Demonstrations continued into the summer of 2014 calling for an end to corruption, transparent politics and the government's immediate resignation. In the time of writing this government has recently fallen due to a collapse of the ruling coalition. An interim transition cabinet has been formed and snap polls carried out on 5th October 2014. The outcomes of these are currently unfolding but there is no sign of promise for political stability.

In 2010 after the General elections in BiH it took 18 months for the Government to form, which impacted negatively on social policy implementation and distribution of funds. New general elections were held in October 2014 and overall same major parties have won as in previous years. For that reason there is little hope that education or social policies will be significantly improved in the future. However in BiH local level politics can also impact on special or inclusive education, and more disabled people's organizations' and parent's organizations are turning to local level advocacy or working with individual schools (Becirevic & Dowling, 2012).

*In relation to BG interviewees in this research refer to CEBD government as 'the previous government', and the Socialist party led coalition as 'the current government'.

Concepts

The key terms that will be used throughout this paper are inclusion, special educational needs and disability, along with integration and defectology. The former three terms are complex and highly contested in different contexts, particularly in countries of the West.

For example, in a UNESCO publication, Aincow and Miles's (2008) review of literature on inclusive practices identifies diverse ways of thinking about it, 'inclusion concerned with disability and "special education needs"; inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions; inclusion focusing on all groups vulnerable to exclusion; inclusion as the promotion of a school for all; inclusion as EFA (Education for all);' Acedo (2008 :7) refers to views representing ' *"new thinking" on inclusion that should link inclusion/exclusion in education more broadly to inclusionary and exclusionary pressures within society*'. For Aincow and Miles, this perspective would require 'challenging deep seated assumptions about educational failure as a result of the characteristics of individual children and their families, and a move towards an analysis of the barriers to participation and learning experienced by students within education systems'. Such a conception of inclusion has a definitive political charge. Inclusion is not seen as an educational issue only but links to wider exclusionary/inclusionary pressure in society. In terms of inclusion as a matter of debate for education this means reformulation and re-articulation of educational values with attention to the ways existing 'regular' structures and processes function to recreate and create further barriers, marginalization and exclusion.

The meanings of special educational needs and disability are not universal either and open to interpretation and contestation. Although, SEN can be seen to move the emphasis from individual deficits onto the 'education' and the educational environment, the notions of 'special' and 'need' bound it to an individual focus. Armstrong (2005:136) cites Slee (2001) who describes it as 'a deep epistemological attachment to the view that special educational needs are produced by the impaired pathology of the child'.

Disability too is contested as a term and conceptualized differently in different contexts. Conceptions vary but the fundamental differences between discourses are captured by

the medical and social models of disability (Oliver 1996). The former model sees disability as a personal tragedy and problem that needs to be fixed by individual treatment, and the latter - as a complex social problem, requiring social and political action.

In this paper, the term defectology will also appear. In both BG and BIH, 'defectology' was the term used to define special education. 'Defectology' grounded in the 'psycho-medical' paradigm' focusing on individual deficits.

Just as diverse the interpretations of inclusion are so there is a lack of consensus how schools can or should be made more inclusive. As Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou (2010:29) note 'Ironically, in the absence of any clarity about its meaning the rhetoric of inclusion in educational policy and practice has become ever more pronounced'.

Measures associated with the relocation and assimilation of individuals, where these are supported individually to fit within a largely unchanged system in line with what is usually referred to as 'integration'. Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou (2010:32,33) offer a useful overview of different conception of inclusion linking these to strategic actions and measures that are seen necessary to advance the agenda: in some a continuum of provision with special schools, units and classes is envisaged and 'the transition to inclusion is guided by the balancing of rights between groups and the majority'; in other conceptions, 'schools are capable of addressing issues of inequality through widening participation'; or inclusion is seen as a process for school communities – an approach to education offered in the Index of Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow 2002, 2011) , where a set of inclusive values are articulated. Inclusive schools are prepared to engage with development and change; inclusion framed a political struggle, and a struggle (Alan 2008) 'for participation, rather than something that is done to young people', or anybody - a continuous struggle, not an outcome. In this paper, our general aim is to explore how inclusive education are approached and developed in BG and BIH since 2009.

International Policies related to inclusion in education

In the international arena the inclusive education agenda is linked to rights policies and embedded in international conventions and declarations. Bulgaria (BG) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and both countries refer to international documents, children's rights, the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation [UNESCO] 1994) and the Framework for Action on the World Education Forum in Dakar (UNESCO 2000) in education strategies and policy documents (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in Europe [OECD] 2006). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) addressed inclusion on the level of rights, values and diversity. It states that 'Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all'. (The Salamanca Statement UNESCO 1994). According to its recommendations, children should attend their local

schools, where possible, unless there are compelling reasons against this. Apart from its strong emphasis on values, rights and inclusive school communities, it makes a strong appeal for mainstream school placement on the premise, that children who are in special schools are experiencing segregation. Recently, the call for inclusion was further strengthened by the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) that calls for States to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning and to respect the home and family. Once a country signs and ratifies the convention it will have an obligation to end the placement of children in residential educational or care institutions. This declaration requires a more definitive commitment to the closure of special schools poses dilemmas both in political (parents' rights) and practical terms.

Bulgaria has signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and the Protocol in 2008. In 2012 Bulgaria has ratified this convention but has not yet signed the Optional Protocol that allows individuals and groups to petition once all national recourse procedures have been exhausted. Currently, there is a *'National Council for Integration of People with Disabilities at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. This council includes all other Ministries and 6 related NGOs: it represents an example of trans-sectional politics, and there is obligation to consult on each strategic document. The members of this council are at level deputy minister.'* (BG government policy maker).

Bosnia and Herzegovina signed and ratified the Convention on the rights of Person with Disabilities and Optional Protocols in March 2010 without reservations. According to the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (2012) Bosnia and Herzegovina started implementation of the Convention even before the Convention was ratified through the development of disability policies and ministries coordination. Since 2010, BiH too has a Council of person disabilities, composed of government representatives and persons with disabilities and their organizations. The problem of disabled people organizations and movement in BiH is entity division and division according the type of disability.

The research

In this study we strive to understand inclusive policy and practice as embedded in the national contexts of the two countries. Geographical proximity and some similarity in political and cultural history are regarded as a common ground for comparison. We also acknowledge that there are some significant differences that may play role in how inclusive education is approached in both countries. One of the key differences between BiH and Bulgaria is in their practices of institutionalisation of disabled children. Placing children in an institution was historically quite common in Bulgaria, and much less so in BiH (UNICEF, 2005). Another important difference relates to the nature of the influence felt from their respective communist pasts. Bulgaria practised Soviet style communism, whilst BiH as a part of the former Yugoslavia experienced a more liberal style of communism - 'socialism with a human face' Becirevic (2010).

Participants and method

This research was carried out in BiH and BG between May and October 2014 with 3 elite educational policy makers from BG, and 2 elite educational policy makers, 1 NGO director, and 2 pedagogists in BiH. A further interview with a high ranked official was scheduled in BG but fell through after a number of efforts to reschedule. This is not uncommon in interviewing elites, as Mangen (1999) points out.

The main method of data collection comprised semi-structured interviews. We asked one initial open-ended question about how participants viewed changes with regard to policy and practice for inclusion in the last five years. Follow-up questions around the major themes from our earlier publication (Tsokova&Becirevic 2009) were asked. The interviews in BiH were conducted in the Bosnian language, and those in Bulgaria in Bulgarian language. The interviews in Bulgaria lasted between 150 and 180 minutes and in BiH between 90- 120 minutes. Interviewees were informed about the aims and objectives of the research and were carefully briefed on ethics, including anonymity, confidentiality and the opportunity to withdraw participation at any time.

The interviews were recorded by note taking. This is not uncommon in interviewing elites, particularly high ranked officials, where institutional protocol is to request official clearance for interview recording. The notes were translated into English language by both authors.

The raw data were subjected to cross-case thematic analysis to deepen understanding and explanation (Miles and Huberman 1994). The analysis was strengthened using the 'constant comparative method' (Glasser and Strauss 1967) and final themes were reached through negotiations between both researchers.

The main study limitation is the relatively small number of participants, and we are aware that a bigger and more diverse group may have enabled a broader perspective. We attempted to counteract this limitation by engaging participants from both government and the NGO sector. Accessing elites is not easy and we aimed for depth in our interviews. The final group of participants includes key policy makers with in-depth knowledge and involvement in inclusive education developments.

* In relation to BG data, please note that interviewees refer to CEBD government as 'the previous government', and the Socialist party led coalition as 'the current government'.

Findings

The findings are organised around three overarching themes related to our main objective, namely: to explore recent developments with inclusive education policy and practice in B& through policy makers' perspectives.

The three related overarching themes are 'Understanding of inclusive education', 'Current state of policy development to support inclusive education' and 'Current efforts with practical implementation'. These will be presented in turn below and broken down into subthemes and categories developed in the process of data analysis and interpretation.

1. Understanding of inclusive education

In both BG in BiH there seems to be a confusion and misunderstanding of what inclusion means. It seems that policy makers are becoming increasingly aware and agree that 'inclusion' implies a change in the way that schools function. Although interviewees continuously stated that inclusion is and should be for all children, most of the conversations centred on children with special educational needs and disabilities.

'Legally inclusion is undefined and there are only indications of inclusion in Frameworks Law of Primary and Secondary Education and this is poorly implemented' (BiH Government Policy maker).

Conceptions of inclusion as far as location is concerned emphasise mainstream education. However, there is a view that the latter is not prepared at this stage to offer adequate 'supportive environment'. A distinction is made between integration and inclusion, where the former is associated with relocation and adaptation of the individual and the latter with 'adjusting the environment to be responsive to 'individual needs'. Both terms are used simultaneously, with integration more often than not used to denote measures related to ethnic minorities (BG) and inclusion more strongly associated with SEN/Disability. In both countries the relationship between defectology (BiH), SEN (BG and BiH) and inclusion is not been problematized either at conceptual, or at practical levels.

In BG the term inclusion does not have direct translation in the Bulgarian language and currently, there seem to be heated debates around terminology. These extend to contest terminological/linguistic emphasis on social/societal aspects of inclusion. These debates appear to have become highly politicised but unresolved (BG).

'The term we use is 'inclusive' education 'включващо обучение' (denoting only process but into what). 'We held a broad discussion about this with governmental and nongovernmental organisations. All discussion participants seem to talk about the same ideas and measures. During the previous government's term NGOs view was taken on board and the term used in the draft policy was inclusive as 'приобщаващо' (social/societal aspects emphasised). 'This current government prefers the former. Its motivation is to differentiate itself from the previous government's ideas and to show 'radical' changes but they have no idea what these changes are or may be. They don't have a vision, a holistic conception or plan of how education should or could be changed to be made more inclusive. I think that the terminological problems stems in translation. (BG Government policy maker)

Alternative perspective is expressed by a BG NGO policy maker:

'We favour the term 'приобщаващо обучение и образование' (a term with social/societal connotations). The previous government took this on board but the current government has replaced it with 'включващо'. There has to be a debate and common agreement on language and this should not change with every government. To us inclusive education aims social and societal participation. Leading is the decision that children/people have rights to participate and enjoy adequate education and place in society. The rest of the players in the political arena here see it more as 'helping' children. The meaning we put in inclusive education places the accent on 'rights' and 'culture' but not on the 'problem'. It is about the fact that each human being is valuable and of importance to everyone else. So the idea is that these values should be instilled in children, parents and teachers early - from pre-school. Inclusive education is ill understood in BG, you hear people often say - these two children we have here are for including'. (BG NGO policy maker).

In both countries inclusion is viewed more as an aspiration – something for the future, when school systems will be 'ready' to offer supportive environments. In BG, at the current stage, efforts are modestly defined as 'opening up' of the education system for inclusion (*MON vkluchvashto.mon.bg*).

The lack of clarity and consensus about the meaning of inclusion in these contexts translate into a lack of holistic national strategies to support inclusive education developments.

2. Current state of policy development for inclusion

2.1. Education policy documents

Education policy documents supporting inclusive education in both countries remain largely unchanged (for details of existing policies see Tsokova & Becirevic 2009): in BG only minor amendments have been made since and in BiH some more significant pieces have been passed. However, in both countries existing policies are viewed as inadequate and in urgent need for major shifts in order to support inclusive education in schools.

'Policies have not changed in the last 5 years. The old policies from 2007 are still in force with some partial amendments. (BG government policy maker)

There has been little progress in policy development in BiH. State Educational law from 2003 that stipulates inclusion for all children remains unchanged, however implementation of this law in practice is still lagging. Some recent legislative developments have been made in the education sector such as the Strategic Plan for the Agency for Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary Education 2012-2016 that was developed and submitted to the Council of Ministers of BiH in 2012. Government has also started to prioritise the quality of education through the adoption of the Standards for Preschool Managers, Pedagogues and Teachers, adopted in November 2011, and the Standards for Pupil Achievements in Maths, Language and Science for the third and fourth grades of primary school (2012). An Action Plan for the introduction of a system for

monitoring quality in primary schools was approved by the Agency Steering Board in 2012 along with an accompanying set of documents: Ethics Code, Intercultural Indicator and the Instrument for school self-evaluation. The Revised Action Plan on the Educational Needs of Roma was adopted in 2011, with a more solid operational and monitoring plan (UNDP, 2013). In spite of these plans and actions respondents in this research say that law does not regulate inclusion adequately.

The subject of Roma children in relation to inclusion in BG was prompted:

'It is very complicated. The money seem to sink and disappear. Teachers are being educated about multiculturalism. At the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) there is a center for educational integration of ethnic minority children. Schools can lodge in projects for dis-segregation. There is a national programme of MOES as well and schools and pre-schools take part'. (BG Government policy maker)

2.2. Factors influencing education policy development

2.2.1 External factors

The EU integration and International policy commitments (Salamanca Statement (1994), UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disability) are seen as external factors influencing policy development. In both countries there are efforts to align education policies to EU standards and to demonstrate progress with local implementation and fulfilment of obligations related to international declarations. For both countries these commitments and efforts arise as a direct consequence of European integration or efforts to become full members of the European Union (Tsokova & Becirevic, 2009). At present, in BG this external influence is acknowledged but viewed as secondary to national circumstances and political priorities:

'The EC is influential to an extent but not a deciding factor: there are policies, directives and guidelines that are then being aligned with European standards but if we don't want to do something, we don't do it. The Declaration of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been ratified. Article 24 relates to education. At present we are thinking about practical implementation - what measures we need to put in place to fulfil this obligation. We look at old policies and make piece meal changes.' (BG Government Policy maker)

2.2.2 Internal Factors

2.2.2.1 Political instability as obstructing factor

This category relates only to data from Bulgaria. In BG political instability in the last five or more years is viewed by as a major factor hampering reforms and educational policy developments. As a Government policy maker notes, *'More 'radical' changes got stuck at draft stages and seem not to go through because of political instability'*. This was also emphasized by participants from of the NGO: *'In 2010 we took part in the drafting of the new education law. It never saw light: it kept being drafted and re-drafted and subsequent*

political changes perpetuated this process setting it back with different ideas - there is no continuity.

2.2.2.2 Underdeveloped democratic processes

In Bulgaria education policy development processes are mostly top down and highly politicised with central government playing ultimate role in policy making. There a number of NGOs that seem to take part in discussions and exercise some influence over decisions related to policy development and reforms. The participating NGO representatives see their role as a driver and advocate for inclusive education but acknowledge existing marginalisation in the policy making arena:

'The Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) invited us to take part in the policy drafting process. The Ministry then publishes it without any recognition of contributions. Now again, the new law is expected to come out in June 2014 but this doesn't seem likely considering the current political situation. This education law is a priority but as it is at the moment its content is apocryphal. It needs to be discussed. The previous government used to put out everything new. With this one things are much obscured.' (BG NGO policy maker)

This is corroborated by the government policy maker:

'The Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) is an administrative force. NGOs are also a big factor - mostly parents associations. MOES moves things along projects and NGOs push to accelerate various aspects. However, in our current state of civic society development it is difficult to have one's voice heard: policy developments and forces behind these are not transparent. It is hard to make voices heard.'

Disabled children, schools and teachers were not mentioned as a factor in policy making. They seem to be at the receiving end of policy and dependent on the volatile political situation: '

The culture in schools is very depended/influenced by politics. There is no autonomy, everyone is looking up and awaiting the law, the inspectors. Schools have no idea what will come out and down their way. There is a lot of fear: when it came into power this government changed head teachers, inspectors. So everyone will be waiting and in the end they will start applying whatever comes their way.' (BG NGO policy maker) In BiH lack of cooperation is also mentioned as a factor: *"Educational inclusion is happening very slowly. There is no cooperation with government sector and no financial resources.'* (BiH Government policy maker)

However, NGOs and international organizations in BiH seem to play important role in developing inclusive education (Becirevic & Dowling, 2013). The key challenge in the actions of NGOs and international organisations is frequent lack of sustainability, however some capacities remain and tend to persist impacting inclusion, such as teacher training. In recent years the voice of parents have become more prominent and parent's organization are taking more active role in shaping inclusion and developing inclusive practices in BiH (Becirevic & Dowling, 2010).

3. Current efforts with practical implementation

Practical reforms in BG seem to be carried out mainly through projects of the Ministry of Education and Science with participation of NGOs in various project strands or allows NGOs access to schools where they carry out their own different projects. Interviewees referred to specific projects and project strands where they play major role in organisation and/or implementation. The major current project of the MOES is titled 'Inclusive Education', BG051P000-4.1.07 (MON vkluchvashto.mon.bg).

NGOs seem to play a distinct role in working on the ground with mainstream schools, where inclusion appear to be affected by the lack of progress with policy development and teachers' and parents' attitudes. They are also involved with resource teachers and centers and in projects aiming awareness raising and changing attitudes. In both Bulgaria and BiH teacher education is seen as key to supporting inclusion but is seen to be lagging behind. However, in BiH this appears to be a key theme: the lack of prepared teachers in mainstream schools is regarded as a major obstacle and justification for special school/classes placements. In both countries, good practices in schools are being developed with dedicated schools and teachers. However, these do not seem to be acknowledged, disseminated and/or considered as influential enough to inform policy developments.

3.1. The continuing role of special education

In both BG and BIH there is an effort to end institutionalisation of children with disabilities and special educational needs, to decrease the number of special schools and to increase the number of students with SEN/Disabilities in mainstream schools.

Data from BiH show a decrease in the number of special school from 58 attended by 1050 pupils in 2009 to 54 attended by 524 pupils in 2013. This might indicate increase of children with special needs in mainstream schools but the number of special schools remains relatively high. Still, how many children in whole of BIH with special needs are enrolled in mainstream schools is difficult to ascertain since the Agency for Statistics of BIH does not segregate this data. However for the Federation for BIH, the figure is 1711 children with special needs out of 207 732 total number (Federal institute for statistics). According to one of our participant, special schools are still first points of reference:

'No, I am not satisfied with the legal regulations. The state primarily sees special schools as a form of educating children with special needs and after that regular schools. Sarajevo Canton made the biggest progress and large number of children is included in regular schools. However situation in other Cantons is unfavorable and they even have organized teams deciding if a child is for special or regular school.'(BiH NGO policy maker).

In contrast to our previous publication participants from BG were not able to provide current statistical data in relation to children with SEN relocated to mainstream schools. They explain that such data (whatever is available) can be obtained via a formal application to the MOES. However, they report efforts by the 'Agency for People with

Disabilities' to create a large database, including educational statistics relevant to disability, which is still work in progress.

Special schools continue to exist in Bulgaria, although there seem to be a reduction in number, and plans for further reduction, reported by participants:

'The previous government had a project that involved closing down special schools and centers. This government said they will stay. Currently, there are 48 special schools in the country and half of these are residential. It is not clear what will happen to them. At least half may need to be closed down and the remaining will function as in the pilot project version-a combination between a school and multidisciplinary therapeutic center.' (BG Government policy maker)

Special schools continue to cater for children with severe learning disabilities. However, their functions are somewhat extended towards resourcing inclusion in mainstream schools. Therefore, special education is seen to play a significant role for inclusive education developments either directly or in somewhat different ways through additional resource centers supporting mainstream schools.

3.2 Supporting inclusive education with material resources and specialist professionals

In BG the inclusive education reform at Governmental level is partially supported through the structural project 'Inclusive Education', BG051P000-4.1.07. One of activity involves mainstream schools and

'aims to enable transition from integration to inclusion. 84 schools take part in this project. There are 28 resource centres that supply mainstream schools with specialists at present. The idea of this project is that such resource centres can be attached to schools - one to each school- where specialist resource staff will become members of staff of the mainstream school and will take part in school policy development and management. Parents of children welcome this development because children have access to permanent specialist support. This specialist support includes a resource teacher (special education teacher), speech and language therapist, hearing and sight specialist teachers.'

In BG the success of the existing 28 resource centres is rated as variable by NGO policy makers depending on the functions that these resource centres assume, whether they focus only on identification of special educational needs or have more extended functions to support mainstream teachers. Their leadership is seen as an important factor for the different levels of synergies with mainstream schools. (BG NGO policy makers).

In BiH there is a similar idea is that such centers and teachers may need to be developed to support inclusive education in mainstream schools but there doesn't seem to be substantial practical measures in this direction. The initial policy action was to have mobile teams of professionals who will support inclusion in schools. This initiative however has shown very modest results as those professionals are not trained to support inclusive education but to work separately with children with special needs. In addition lack of resources means that mobile teams are not readily available or fully staffed. The

most often this initiative comes down to single defectologists sporadically visiting schools that educate children with special needs.

'The State needs to work on developing regular schools with special programs for all children. Financial resources are not invested in inclusive education, and there are no mobile teams or speech therapists in schools. Schools do not have elevators for children with physical disabilities, rooms for rest or any new technologies. (BiH NGO policy maker)

Material resources as obstacles for inclusion are more prevalent in accounts from BiH whereas resource teachers and resource centers/teams are regarded as equally important in both countries.

3.3. Inclusion as mainstream schools' practice

This theme was particularly prominent in BG NGO policy makers' accounts. The focus was on barriers and successes. The main barriers' appear to be negative schools' and teachers' attitudes based in the lack of autonomy and policy support, and lack of recognition for their efforts towards inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools; lacking mainstream teacher education for inclusion (both BG and BiH), and rigidity of existing mainstream systems of assessment, grading and certification(BG). The successes in BG are exemplified by projects where individual schools show very strong commitment and leadership in developing inclusive practices, or engage in inclusive developments through the use of the Bulgarian edition of the Booth and Ainscow (2002, 2011) *'Index of Inclusion'*, although rigid use of the *Index* by teachers is seen as problematic (BG NGO policy maker), and in BiH through *'pedagogists who have excellent competencies to work with children with special needs and to support teachers in their work'* (BiH government policy maker)

4. Teacher Education

Participants from both countries recognised an urgent need for trained mainstream teachers to work with children with special educational needs. Teacher education is regarded to be lagging behind school developments. In BiH training is mostly conducted by NGOs and international organisations whilst systemic teacher training is missing:

'To implement inclusion more support by professionals equipped to work with children with special needs is needed' (BiH government policy maker) and 'NGOs conduct education for teachers for inclusive education. Pedagogical standards are obsolete...Education for inclusion is envisioned through postgraduate degree but there is a lack of finances for this type of education'. (BiH government policy maker).

At present, primary teachers in BiH are regarded to be better equipped than their secondary subject specialist colleagues.

In BG too, the lack of university training with inclusive education in focus is seen as a major obstacle:

'A lot more work needs to be done in teacher training at universities. A lot of students hear about inclusive education when they go to work in school for the first time. At present, there is no professional state standards for teachers.' (BG NGO policy maker).

Conclusions and Discussion

This study aimed to explore recent developments with inclusive education policy and practice in BG and BiH through policy makers' perspectives. The findings show that there is a prevalent confusion over the meaning of inclusion. Inclusive education is rhetorically linked to all children - '*school for all*' - but at present and in policy makers' accounts, it is associated primarily with children with special educational needs and disabilities. The relationship between concepts of SEN and/or defectology (in BiH), and between integration of children with SEN and inclusion are seen as unproblematic, and in the latter case as contingent. There seems to be a difference of focus in the language and conceptions of government policy makers in BG and NGOs but the differences in positions are not well understood by parties or articulated. National policy developments seem to be influenced by European integration and commitment to international rights declarations. However, progress with national policies towards fulfillment of these obligations is slow or inadequate. In both countries there doesn't seem to be a clear holistic strategy related to inclusive education arrived at in open discussions and democratic participation. The current state of policy development to support inclusive education appears to be hampered by political instability, slow and opaque processes and lack of resources. These effect practical implementation of the reform in the school system. Special schools and classes continue to play significant role in the education system either catering for those with severe learning difficulties, or for those who for some reason (lack of resources or negative attitudes) are seen as unsuitable for mainstream education. There is some good teacher and school practice but these do not seem to be recognized or disseminated. There are urgent needs with university teacher education for inclusion but what this is expected to contain is unclear.

It is clear that the development of inclusive disability policies and practices in Eastern Europe follows a different trajectory to that taken by Western European countries. Whilst in such countries efforts with inclusion have developed over a longer period of time, post-communist countries, like Bulgaria and BiH are expected to join an already developed agenda in a much shorter time and without other necessary changes being in place. (Becirevic, 2010). These other changes and supportive factors, which preceded and facilitated inclusion in Western Europe, were initiated in the 1960s. The changes included the rise in disability movements, anti-discrimination legislation, parents' activism and the increased significance of human rights (Barnes & Mercer, 2001; Oliver 2004). These show that changes towards inclusion grew simultaneously from communities and activists, supported and theoretically developed by academic debates which were followed by policy and practice development.

We are far to imply simplistic comparisons here, particularly in terms of judging progress, since there are no universally agreed models of inclusion. What we would like to stress is that the appearance of inclusion on the policy and practice agenda in BiH and Bulgaria has not followed the same timeline or the same sequence as in other countries of the West. Instead the development of inclusion is being attempted top-down in a condensed form with a leap from segregation to integration and to inclusion in a significantly shorter space of time. It needs to be remembered that the commitment to segregating disabled children did not end with the transition from communism in 1989. The years of transition with the war in BiH and economic upheavals in Bulgaria produced an even more unfavourable situation for disabled children and reinforced institutional care, because of increased unemployment, poverty, war and economic crisis.

In BiH and Bulgaria significant questioning of the appropriateness of the care of disabled children only started in the mid to late 1990s. This was encouraged by humanitarian organisations and international NGOs, so instead of being a grassroots movement it came more from the outside than the inside of the countries and communities. When integration appeared on the agenda, BiH and Bulgaria had not developed disability movements or parents' activism. These also developed later than in other countries, again with the encouragement of international organisations.

In addition, both countries are in early stages of development of civic society and democratic processes are not fully developed. Policy makers and governments need to show more determination and political will to bring to the front and to advance the social and educational inclusion agenda in a broad dialogue with major stakeholders.

The next big step and question would be to allow space for discussion as to what inclusion is for in these contexts, who is inclusion for and into what, and on this basis what strategy allowing continuity of the education reform by arriving democratically at supportive policies and providing adequate resources. In addition more attention needs to be given at the existing resources and professionals and how these can play role in inclusion.

In BiH the unpopularity of defectology among international stakeholders prevents this and defectologists tend to be excluded from inclusive education development even though they tend to play a role when it comes to implementation.

Indeed any struggle towards inclusive education cannot be understood without acknowledgement of specific national contexts. Looking across for direct borrowing of readymade 'solutions' may prove futile, yet critical engagements with efforts for inclusion in a contextually embedded way may help generate new ideas for own practices.

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