

Inclusive Education in Bulgaria

November 2007

Save the Children UK started working in Bulgaria in 1926 and as such it has been one of our longest running programmes. With the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union, we closed our programme in Bulgaria in September 2007. The work done by the Bulgaria programme has produced real change for children, working in particular with vulnerable and excluded children in giving them a voice and improved prospects for the future, as well as changing the ways that local communities and the government view children's rights. Our programme in Bulgaria focused on education, child rights, child protection and participation. The country programme was part of the South East Europe subregion, managed by the LACMESEE regional office encompassing Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa.

This learning case study outlines the programme's work on inclusive education, bringing the challenges and successes together in order to learn from the Bulgaria programme and the changes they have made for children in Bulgaria.

The programme

In Bulgaria, every citizen has the right to education without discrimination based on race, nationality, gender, ethnic or social origin, religion or social status. Many Bulgarian children, however, are denied access to quality education and regularly face such discrimination.

This represents a breach of one of the basic human rights of these children, recognised under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The existing education model of "special schools" for children

with disabilities and learning difficulties, and children from ethnic minorities, not only causes stress and psychological damage, but exacerbates social marginalisation, eventually increasing the number of unemployed and those dependent on social assistance.

Save the Children UK worked in Bulgaria to ensure that children are able to claim their right to education without discrimination. Our programme on inclusive education focused on getting children currently enrolled in 'special schools' into mainstream schools.

Why we did it

The Bulgaria programme first started work on de-institutionalisation and inclusive education in 1998, with a strong advocacy focus on numbers of children in institutions. In 2005 however, the Bulgaria team realised that due to pre-accession pressure from the EU, it was certain that children

would eventually be taken out of institutions. This realisation led to an evaluation of the programme's focus, and the team decided that in order to maximise their potential impact on children, there was a need to identify and tackle existing gaps for children in the three years leading to the programme closure. After initial research, the principle gap identified was the issue of children in 'special schools'. Save the Children's position is that these are actually institutions, but as they are



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called special schools, and thus fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, they fall outside of all governmental plans for de-institutionalisation. Having identified this issue, the programme began to increase its focus on inclusive education and taking children out of the 'special schools' and into alternative care.

Main challenges

Initially, it was tough to renegotiate with the donor, whose focus was on prevention of violence and abuse against children. De-institutionalisation was not the main issue on their agenda, but it could be justified as children in institutions are vulnerable to abuse. When we began discussing inclusive education, the concern was that the focus shifted away from abuse specifically. The key was using the right language so that the programme could still receive funds and do the work we felt was needed. One tool we used was a case study about children in special schools. These special schools don't fit the official government definition of institutions, but the compelling accounts of children documented in the case study demonstrated that they are in reality institutions. This experience highlighted the importance of advocacy work with donors, showing them how their funds are put into producing real change for children. Bringing the situation of these children to the attention of donors and using the children's own perspectives were essential in order for the inclusive education programme to be effective.

Having secured funds, the principal challenge in implementing our programme was the prevailing attitude in Bulgaria. During the communist regime, anyone that was different, whether talented or disabled, above average or below, was hidden. This culture of separation and exclusion is the main reason for why a segregated schooling system exists today. Every child who wouldn't fit within the norm was taken away and put in 'special schools', which are located in very small villages in the mountains, secluded and removed so that people don't see them. There is such a stigma around disabilities; if parents decide

to keep their disabled children they will hide them. They go to a segregated school and then move to a specialised institution for adults, from where it is nearly impossible to leave. The government supports this system by paying for its maintenance, which limits the life opportunities of thousands of children and adults in Bulgaria.

Those who disagreed with our perspective argued that the mainstream education system is not prepared to accept children with disabilities. Although this was true, we believed that if we didn't start simultaneously changing people's attitudes and preparing mainstream schooling, change for vulnerable and excluded children would never happen. We had to start changing attitudes and social perceptions.

How we did it

We worked with three different sectors of society, beginning with the schools. We successfully worked in 36 mainstream schools, making people recognise that inclusive education is possible and achievable. We chose which schools to work with based on their level of motivation and the willingness of the leadership. Whenever there was an example of best practice we tried to share it, enabling others to learn how to successfully carry out inclusive education.

The second sector we targeted was the decision makers at policy level, the government ministries. Their participation was due to high levels of pressure from the media and the EU monitoring reports.

The third sector we worked with to achieve change was the Bulgarian people, trying to promote a change of attitude and mentality, which is where the programme's campaign work fits in. The main message of the campaign was that inclusive education is happening, and it is time you join in. If you are keeping your child away from mainstream schools because you are afraid, this is not good for your child. If you are a parent and there are no children with disabilities in your child's school, something is wrong. We wanted to show that this whole idea is feasible, highlighting the best interests of the child.

Results

Our biggest achievement was that in three years we managed to motivate society so that many people now have a clearer understanding of the idea of inclusive education. The values of inclusive education were previously alien to Bulgarian mentality and we succeeded in engendering a sense of ownership of inclusive education by the schools with which we worked. This then influenced society through the children, teachers and parents involved.

There was little understanding of disabilities amongst school teachers, who often didn't want university experts coming to deliver a lecture on what disabilities are in medical terms, as the terms meant little to them and their work with children with disabilities. Teachers need to know how to work with these children in the classroom. An important shift in thinking was for teachers to focus on a child's capacities—what they can do as opposed to what they can't do. This has been a revolutionary approach in Bulgaria, where parents themselves are often still focused on what their children with disabilities can't do.

In addition to achieving this change in attitude with teachers and within the educational system, another achievement has been changing public awareness and perceptions. The programme has put the issue on the public agenda. Now that the programme has closed, people will be more aware of main issues around children with disabilities and marginalised children, and will be questioning previous norms and behaviours.

Another achievement is the relationship we have developed with government, particularly the Ministry of Education, with whom we now work closely. At the time of writing, they had already committed to changing legislation to refer to inclusive education instead of integrated education.

What we learned

It is not our role to deliver services in any way, but to make people want to deliver proper services. The approach we took was to liaise with those within the educa-

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tion system, creating important dialogue and prioritising children's needs. It is not our role to do the government's work, it is to make the government do their work. By using effective tools such as the media and the EU monitoring reports, the programme created increased levels of government accountability. We found it helpful to start by encouraging and promoting dialogue, and providing incentives for change. If the changes do not materialise, we found moving to a more assertive approach, such as direct advocacy, to be quite helpful. If the carrot doesn't work, try the stick. It is our job as a leading children's charity to push policy makers in government and make them do what they are supposed to, as they are paid through our taxes.

A related lesson is that successful advocacy is crucial. It is very difficult to create concrete and sustained change for children if you are not projected at the national level. De-institutionalisation and inclusive education became much more attainable having secured government-level support.

Programme legacy

Now that Save the Children UK has closed its programme in Bulgaria, an important question to consider is the future of children in Bulgaria. The campaign strategy designed for inclusive education was very ambitious, as the team wanted to make a lasting impact before closing the programme. In this sense, the Bulgaria programme has managed to put the issue in the public eye, making inclusive education a recognised issue that people talk about.

Towards the end of the campaign, and realising the large success of their work and the strength of their team, a number of Save the Children Bulgaria staff decided that they would continue their work on inclusive education. They have established the Centre for Inclusive Education, a Bulgarian organisation. They are currently fundraising and applying for more projects, and hope to access some European social funds. The Centre for Inclusive Education has formed a consortium with several municipalities, a few schools, a few small businesses and one large business. They have started writing projects and have de-

veloped a portfolio, as they plan to provide training and consultancy for teachers and parents in different areas, and advocate for child rights in Bulgaria.

The Centre for Inclusive Education

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The inclusive education programme in Bulgaria has been part of the South East Europe (SEE) education programme which is currently working on "Ensuring systemic provision of inclusive quality education for children in South East Europe, 2007-2012" through its Thematic Programme Plan (TPP) covering Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia. This TPP has been developed with the Education and Economic Justice & Poverty teams at the London office.

The SEE Education Thematic Adviser, Dragana Strinic, can be contacted for further details of our ongoing work in the region, at 00 387 (51) 220 280 or d.strinic@savethechildren-uk.org.ba

Feedback:

If you have any comments regarding any of the issues highlighted in this case study or are interested in acquiring further information on "Inclusive education in Bulgaria" or any of our other work in the Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and South East Europe region, please contact the LACMESEE Regional Office at lacmesee@savethechildren.org.uk

Learning case studies:

This case study is one of a wider series focusing on learning from experience in key areas of our programmes work.

If you have ideas for topics we should examine in other learning case studies or any other comments please contact Gema Vicente at g.vicente@savethechildren.org