

Inclusive Education in Bulgaria - Opportunities and Perspectives

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Abstract: Achieving inclusion involves eliminating all forms of exclusion. Along with the more obvious forms of discrimination, exclusion also means all those cases of short-term or long-term pressure that create obstacles to full participation. They may be the result of problems in the relationships between children, between practitioners employed in different children's and educational institutions, between children and practitioners or within families; may be related to activities that are not of interest to children; or they may be rooted in the feeling that others in the daycare do not value you. Inclusion means removing all barriers to play, learning and participation for all children and students. Inclusion implies recognizing both the differences and the similarities between all children and youth. In this regard, the scientific publication analyzes the state and prospects of inclusive education in the Republic of Bulgaria, which is developing very dynamically, effectively and constructively.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Bulgaria; present; perspectives

Introduction

On the website of the European Commission, section Education and Training, we read the following about inclusive education policies: European Pillar of Social Rights. In December 2017, the European Council, the European Parliament and the Commission adopted the European Pillar of Social Rights. (European Commission. Education and Training) Their agreement underlines the importance of the social, educational and cultural dimension of EU policies for building a common European future. The first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights emphasizes: "Everyone has the right to access quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and successfully makes transitions in the labor market" (European Commission. Education and Training).

Promoting equality, social cohesion and active civic participation is one of the strategic objectives of cooperation in the field of education and training at EU level. (Eyubova, S., 2020, Jumaev, U., etc. 2023, Daneva, M., etc. 2022, Doncheva, J., 2017). In the 2015, Commission-Council Joint Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Framework "Education and training 2020" as priority areas for European cooperation in education and training are indicated "inclusive education, equality, justice, non-discrimination and promotion of civic competences". (The Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework).

The Europe 2020 Strategy and the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework set out two main objectives to be achieved in Europe by 2020:

- the share of premature leavers from education and training aged 18-24 should be below 10%;
- at least 40% of people aged 30 - 34 have completed higher education.

In its contribution to the social summit in Gothenburg, the European Commission sets out its vision for a European education area. This initiative emphasizes the importance of quality and inclusive education - right from childhood - for laying the foundations of social cohesion, social mobility and a just society.

This vision is further supported by a Commission Communication on the role of youth, education and culture policies in building a stronger Europe, which states that one of the objectives of the European Education Area should be to support Member States to improve the inclusive nature of their education and training systems. (Ivanova, E., 2017, Daneva, M., Nikolova, M., 2021, Neminska, R., 2018b).

Education is a constructive force, but at the same time it can reproduce existing inequalities and exclusionary practices in society. In order to stop this process, it is necessary to start with education. In the beginning, internationally, inclusive education as a philosophy was focused entirely on children with disabilities. In addition to disability, the reasons for exclusion include gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, and a number of others (Liqa, H., 2019, Nikolova, M., M. Daneva, 2022, Shivacheva-Pineda, 2018). Until recently, it was argued that children with special needs should be categorized and educated separately, according to their disabilities, because of the prevailing notions that physical and mental endowments are measurable and fixed. And also, that disabled people should not be together with others.

Together with the achievements in science and technology, which fully have changed modern society, the role of human capital in economic growth is also changing - humanity has completely different ways of healing, working,

and even communicating. There are completely new industries, new needs, new ways to reduce costs, new ways to generate profits. And all this is due to evolutionary human cognition (Shoilekova, K., 2021, Sulichka, I., 2021, Nikolova, Yo., 2018, Tileva, A., 2021).

The Bulgarian education system is based on European and national democratic principles and values, which guarantee prerequisites for the full development of the personality. One of the aspects of the European educational model is related to the need to unify the criteria for the quality of education in the member countries of the European Union. A more specific such document is the European Qualifications Framework, which has an impact on education systems, the labor market, as well as on individual citizens. In general terms, the quality of education is measured by the relevant results - knowledge, skills and attitudes. They are indicators of what the learner knows, understands and can apply after completing the learning process. Skills in particular are defined as the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how in performing tasks and solving problems.

Exploration

Roma schools, since the last century, have been a form of educational segregation. In the second half of the 1940s of the 20th century, Roma children started going to school en masse in the newly built schools for them, in every large neighborhood/neighborhood. In these general education schools, the students are mostly of Roma origin (usually over 50%). According to the NSI* in 2001, there were 60 primary, 350 basic and 9 secondary general education Roma schools on the territory of Bulgaria. They were located in villages with a predominantly Roma population, and in the Roma neighborhoods of smaller cities and in the ghettos in cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora and Ruse.

From around 1940-1960, during these first twenty years, the new "Roma" schools successfully performed their activities: educating not only Roma children, but also their parents (within evening courses). Thanks to their good work, the level of education of the Roma is approaching that of the other ethnic groups in the country for the first time.

After the success of the first years of Roma education, the schools in which they were educated declined, leading to extreme marginalization. The material base is worse than that of other general education schools, there are no gymnasiums, specialized classrooms for different subjects, and sometimes the rooms even lack blackboards and chalks. The quality of teaching is at a lower level, the criteria and requirements for students are greatly underestimated.

These schools deprived the Roma children of contact with Bulgarians and in fact laid the foundations for the segregation of the Roma community from early childhood. In most cases, the teachers were less qualified and unmotivated to work. Often the children in these schools remain illiterate after completing IV, V or even VIII grade. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), together with representatives of the non-governmental sector, began work on the desegregation of Roma schools and overcoming their status as the most backward. In his publication "Why does the integration of the Bulgarian Roma fail?", the author Yosif Nunev writes the following: "It is known that both knowledge and cultivated intellectual skills and abilities are related to the accumulation of facts, information and skills that young people acquire as in the first circle of socialization - the family, as well as in educational institutions - kindergarten, school, university, work team, informal meetings, friendship circles, etc. The vast majority of Roma children grow up in families with a limited resource of knowledge about the various areas of life and a limited range of cultivated intellectual abilities, acquired by their important relatives and friends. This leads to their one-sided socialization (they acquire abilities to survive in the difficult conditions of living in their own living space), as a result of which the majority of them during their conscious life suffer from a lack of elementary knowledge about a number of areas of life. One-sided socialization, in turn, leads behind it to a number of restrictions that make the life of a modern person much more difficult and limited in a certain socio-cultural environment. This is the fate of several hundreds of thousands of Roma living in the conditions of socio-cultural stigma in the modern Roma neighborhood (*italics by the author J. N.*) (Nunev, Y., 2018, p. 233).

It is a proven fact that children from families of low socio-economic status have behavioral difficulties related to learning twice as often as compared to the rest of their peers. (Samodova, S., 2022, Neminska, R., 2018a, Topolska, E., 2020). Also, a mother's socioeconomic status is directly related to her child's levels of concentration, motivation, and willingness to cooperate in school. 29.3% of children who drop out in primary school and 27% in junior high school drop out of school due to poverty. The main obstacles created by the unfavorable economic situation in the families of the children, both from the Bulgarian ethnic group and from the Turkish and Roma minorities, are the inability to provide themselves with the necessary school supplies and appropriate clothing. The inability of these children to work or raise their younger siblings is also among the leading reasons for not attending school. "Every Bulgarian citizen has the right to education, but unfortunately many

children do not have access to quality education and are victims of segregation. Often, they are vulnerable, they belong to: *those persons and groups of people who are limited in their participation in social life and the use of social parva. Vulnerable groups fail to access or take advantage of the opportunities offered by society and the economy and fall victim to or at risk of marginalization and social exclusion. The reasons for this are various and varied such as: living in extreme poverty or low income and material deprivation; social and psychological factors; inaccessible environment; health and age problems; lack or insufficient social skills and education; attitude based on prejudice; lack, limited access or inadequate services, etc.* (White Paper 2009).

Following the Commission's proposals, several policy initiatives have already been adopted:

- Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.
- Council Recommendation on the promotion of common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching.

In May 2018, the Commission adopted a proposal for a new Erasmus+ program with twice the budget. The new program enables millions more young Europeans from different social backgrounds to study and train abroad. The program also includes a European framework for inclusion and national strategies for inclusion.

For Bulgaria, the "Law on Public Education" of 1891 for the first time mentions the education of children with physical or mental disabilities. In practice, what is foreseen in the law begins to be realized after a certain number of years, thanks to initiative specialists in medicine and pedagogy. "Progressive humanist thought has long associated its hopes for the renewal of society through scientific and political enlightenment, which would guarantee the freedom, life and dignity of people. The idea of inclusion arises within the framework of large-scale changes in the understanding of the value, rights and dignity of the person, of the policies, mechanisms and social changes determining his status and life prosperity. The concept is an opportunity for a new understanding of the challenges of a social, moral and economic nature aimed at ensuring the equality of people in terms of gender, race, national, ethnic, religious affiliation and disabilities of a different nature.

In this context, the current understanding of the importance of human dignity is built on a series of social theories and documents that place the person at the center of policies to guarantee his freedom and human rights (Velcheva, K., 2019, Tileva, A., Bodzhukova, 2019, Epitropovaq, A., etc. 2019, Angelova, Sv. 2022, Alexadrache, C., 2019). The idea of human rights elevates man, his overall development as a free and responsible person, the protection of his life and

dignity, as the most important value and goal in modern society. The new doctrine of man also requires a change in education, a serious challenge for which is to overcome inequality and achieve social justice, through which to provide opportunities for millions of people to expand their choices for realization, to give meaning to their lives, to preserve their dignity, to be able to participate fully in the economic, social and cultural life of their communities.

Education is an important moment in the life of each of us. As is known, in every society there is a group of people whose status, opportunities for development and training require more special conditions. It is a fact that integration, inclusion, is connected with the process of socialization. In the context of inclusive education, integration, inclusion, socialization and adaptation can be considered as processes of adjustment of the child's personality in the conditions of kindergarten and school, and social adaptation is a process of active adaptation to the changing environment with the help of various social means.

For greater detail, *Figure 1* shows the relevant groups of children and individuals identifying with inclusive education, both internationally and nationally.



Fig. 1. Groups of children and persons identifying with inclusive education

Furthermore, according to the Law on Pre-school and School Education (LPSE), inclusive education can be synthesized as:

- Inclusive education is an integral part of the right to education.
- Support for personal development is general and additional.
- It is provided by the institutions in the system of pre-school and school education together with the state and local bodies and structures and with the providers of social services. (Law on Preschool and School Education)

It must be said that in our national inclusive education until recently the terms integrated (accepting the different children in the mainstream school try to change them to meet the standard of the system) and inclusive (representing a specific act of inclusion, not a whole, systematic and continuous, process) education were taken as synonymous with inclusive (the environment must adapt to the individual to meet his needs). Enough has been written on the subject, so it will not be detailed here. Just one example will be cited to mark the

unification around the 'controversy': 'There are even opinions that inclusive and inclusive education are two different terms, which are justified in respective ways. In fact, both terms are argued through the same English language sources containing the term "inclusive education" (Chavdarova - Kostova, S., 2019, p. 23). From here, it is specified that inclusive education does not refer only to different groups of children, but also to those interested in this process - teachers, parents, the public, politicians, etc.

One such alternative to the traditional ones are precisely the so-called "innovative schools", not only when it comes to technical, computer and digital resources, which by default are accepted as such, but also those with a new model of behavior, of teaching, of a vision regarding the interactions and relationships between the two groups of participants - the trainers and the trainees. *Figure 2* shows a schematic view of some of the fundamental components of the environment in such a school.

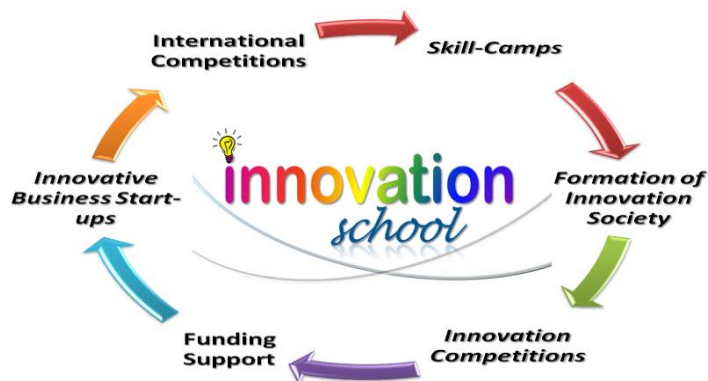


Fig. 2. Fundamental components of the environment in an Innovative School

In order to include each child, their personality must be considered in its entirety. This is one way in which differences in interests, knowledge, skills and achievements become resources and supports for learning. Inclusion implies change. It is a continuous process of promoting learned and active interaction between all interested groups. It, the inclusion, begins to happen at the moment when the process of team interaction is started on behalf of the specific person (child), so that the socialization of the personality can take place in the continuum. (Balkanska, N., 2020, Cvetkova - Arsova, M., 2002, Fatima, R., etc. 2019).

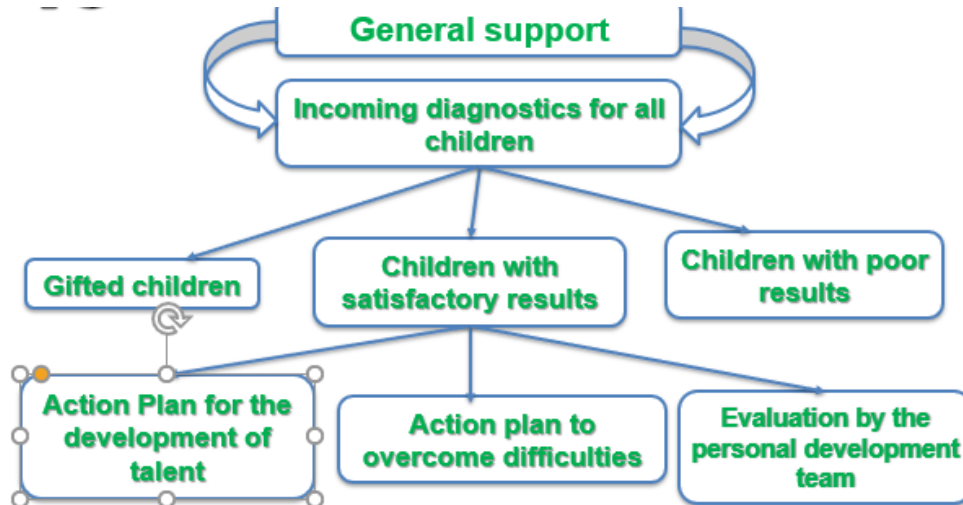


Fig. 3. General support

According to the Ordinance on Inclusive Education in Bulgaria, two types of support are applied to children and students. The first is «General support», Figure 3 - In it, the incoming diagnosis of all children is carried out. From this diagnosis, 3 types of groups are obtained: Gifted children/students, Children/students with average results and Children/students with extremely poor results.

A talent development plan is made in the group of gifted children/students.

In the group of children with average results, a plan is made and work is done to improve their academic knowledge and skills. If successful, these children/students are re-mapped for individual work with them, that is, it is assumed that they had temporary difficulties.

The children/students who do not have positive results are referred to the so-called **Additional support**. In the group of children/students with poor results, the actions are the same.

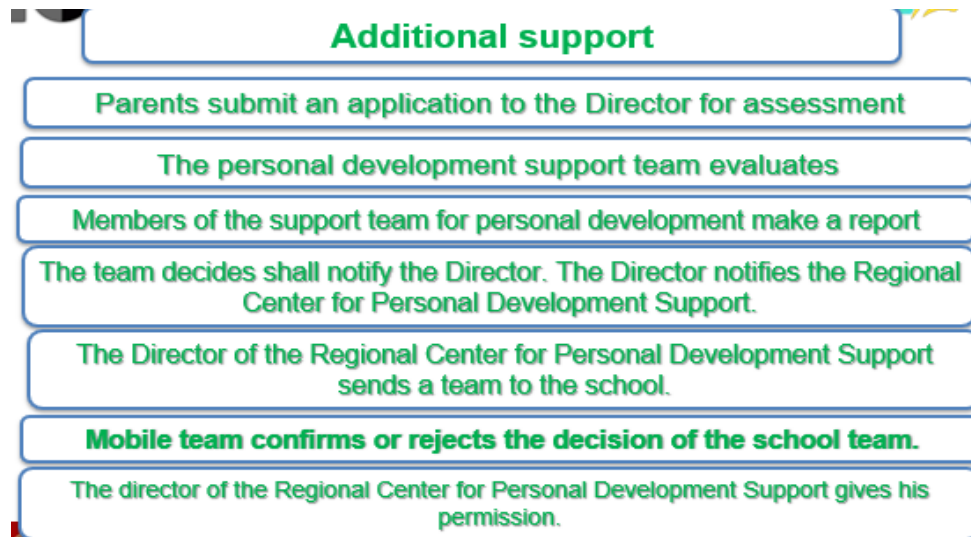


Fig. 4. Outline of the sequential procedures regarding the provision of additional support

Additional support, Figure 4, is realized at the following levels:

- Parents apply to the director of the school for their child to receive additional support.
- Each educational institution has a Personal Development Support Team formed by order of the Director. This team examines the children/student.
- The members of the team prepare their expertise's and submit them to the chairman of the Personal Development Support Team.
- The team informs the Director of the educational institution. The director of the educational institution informs the Director of the Regional Center for supporting the process of inclusive education. In Bulgaria, there are such Regional Centers in each district city, i.e. 28 in number.
- The Director of the Regional Center for Supporting the Early Childhood Education Process sends a mobile team to familiarize themselves with the documents and meet with the parents and the child. The chairman of the team prepares a report to the Director of the Regional Center for supporting the process of early education, with which the report confirms or rejects the finding of the school team of Personal Development Support.
- The Director of the Regional Center for Supporting the Early Childhood Education Process gives permission to open a procedure for Additional Support for each child individually.

It can be said with conviction that in Bulgaria, even in pre-school educational institutions, stable foundations are laid for the development of children's personality - emotional, motivational, intellectual and communication spheres. The inclusion and socialization of the personality are brought out as one of the most important priorities of the pedagogical interaction in the XXI century. (Ivanova, E., Doncheva, J., 2021, Lazarov, L., 2021, Voinohovska, V., 2020, Cvetkova - Arsova, M., 2022). Ensuring effective functioning in a dynamically changing world is the leading goal of reforms in Bulgarian education, which is successfully integrated into the European educational space.

Conclusion

The self-affirmation of the child in the socio-cultural environment and bringing him to the position of the subject of his own activity, behavior and communication is determined by his potential for realizing active communication with others. It corresponds to the system of ideas, skills, attitudes and competences that have fundamental functions for personal prosperity. Their significance for the individual and society necessitates the need for targeted pedagogical support for each child. Providing it is a challenge for the pedagogical community, focusing the attention of scientists and practitioners on developing and justifying technologies for mastering communicative competences and behavioral attitudes - key for the future of children's personality.

Every child deserves to be respected and loved, based on the principle that there is no human being who does not need to be loved. Love affects his overall development, existence and being in general. The principle of respect for the individual can also be interpreted through the prism of the need to create a positive emotional climate within the activity and communication, which in their dynamism diversify and enrich the performances, optimize the possible interpersonal relations, stabilize the individual tone and make his work more productive and desirable.

It is known that the pedagogical activity is joint between the teacher and the student. This means that we should consider the principles as a system of rules for subject-object interaction. In addition to the student-teacher relationship, the principles also refer to the overall organization of training and education, to the determination of the content, methods, conditions and factors for the implementation of the pedagogical activity.

It could be summarized by answering the three aspects in the support systems of education - Access to what, for what, how? Accessibility ensures motivating participation. Involvement of whom, for what, how? Personal development and achievements are achieved through active participation. Achievements how, for what, how much?

Inclusion as a form of joint social life is a humanistic idea that has its history and development in the direction of changing not only the educational system, but also the place of man in society. That is why the orientation of political and public attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education should be considered in a broad context of normative documents affirming the rights of all children to study in a general educational environment, in the name of development, upbringing and love for each and every child.

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