

Inclusion: Children with Disabilities

Latvia, Mongolia, and Ukraine

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The International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is a nongovernmental membership organization established in the Netherlands to foster democratic principles and promote parent and community involvement in early childhood education. ISSA's vision is of an open society where the entire community helps children to reach their full potential and where children are active participants in the learning process.

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Documenting Educational Reform:

The Step by Step Case Study Project

As the Step by Step Program approached its 10th anniversary, the Open Society Institute and the International Step by Step Association launched the Case Study Project to chronicle a decade of efforts to reform early childhood education in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Mongolia, and the Americas. Step by Step had, during its first decade, accumulated a vast base of experience that could help inform international efforts to improve early childhood care, development, and education around the globe.

Seeking to understand the experience of educational transformation and capture lessons learned—from teachers, parents, program administrators, and children—a case study research methodology was selected; one that favored qualitative data collected through in-person interviews and on-site observation. To tell the story of Step by Step—a program that began in 15 countries in 1994 and spread to 30 countries in its first decade—was, in itself, a daunting task. Inspired by the vision of building research capacity in the regions where the Step by Step Program is active, the Case Study Project also aimed to develop a cadre of skilled researchers, adept at using qualitative case study methods in educational settings.

The Case Study Project supplements previous evaluations of the Step by Step Program, which include:

- Numerous national studies carried out in cooperation with pedagogic institutes, universities, and ministries in individual countries, primarily focused on children's outcomes and changes in teacher practices;
- A four-country independent evaluation of Step by Step conducted in 1999, which demonstrated the impact of the program on children's democratic behaviors, ideas, and values;
- The Roma Special Schools Initiative, which provided evidence that many Roma children in the four participating countries are unfairly assigned to spe-

cial schools or remedial classes for the intellectually challenged when in fact they are capable of reaching grade-level expectations when provided with a supportive learning environment; and

- A four-country study of the sustainability of the Step by Step Program.

The Case Study Project, led by Sarah Klaus from the Open Society Institute and the Step by Step Program, engaged an international Steering Committee including Larry Bremner and Linda Lee of Canada; Teresa Vasconcelos of Portugal; Tatjana Vonta of Slovenia; Hugh McLean of South Africa; and Cassie Landers, Steffen Saifer, and Robert Stake of the United States. Committee members used their expertise in early childhood primary education, educational reform, and qualitative case study

The work was intense. With great enthusiasm, each country selected a team of researchers and proposed a topic for their study.

methods to support the development of training and mentoring for the researchers and to develop guidelines for the national studies.

The work was intense. With great enthusiasm, each country selected a team of researchers and proposed a topic for their study. At the international level care was taken to ensure that the breadth of

the Step by Step Program would be represented by the topics selected for study. Six cross-cutting themes were identified and incorporated into plans for the national research studies, with the idea that the project could later produce a series of thematic papers:

- Children's outcomes;
- Family and community engagement;
- Equal opportunities for each child to develop to his/her full potential;
- Teacher training and professional development;
- Enabling networks and partnerships; and
- Sustainability.

Over the course of six months, more than 100 researchers from 28 countries participated in an online course and two face-to-face seminars. At the same time, and with the support of an international mentor, each national team initiated a qualitative case study on their topic. Between

The Step by Step Case Study Project was an ambitious undertaking with far-reaching goals.

December 2003 and December 2004, the Steering Committee met in person four times and kept up an active dialogue on the Internet-based course website established for the project. Each committee member mentored a cluster of three to five national cases. Mentors met their research teams at international seminars and kept up communication by e-mail, phone, and on the website between meetings. In a few cases, mentors visited countries to assist with field research or with planning the case write-up.

The Step by Step Case Study Project was an ambitious undertaking with far-reaching

goals. The Step by Step Case Study Series presents one set of outcomes, summarizing the results of individual case studies. These cover a range of topics that capture the breadth of the Step by Step Program. They include investigations that focus on family and community engagement, center-based infant care and home-based early learning, ISSA standards and teacher certification, inclusive education for children with disabilities, and access to quality education for Roma children. Each study contributes important insights to our understanding of specific program components. Taken together, they weave a rich tapestry of the Step by Step experience.

The Case Study Project has also given voice to truths about the process of educational reform that transcend the experience of individual countries. We learn in striking examples from each and every country that change is not only about program components and strategies of implementation but also about the change agents themselves: the Step by Step teachers and parents who have fueled the engine of transformation. These are stories about resilience in the face of daunting obstacles. These are stories about leadership, emerging in every Step by Step country from every level of program implementation. Most of all, these are stories about an allegiance to a new set of values and democratic principles, born of personal conviction. External conditions may foster or impede educational reform efforts, but the knowledge gained by teachers and parents, and the visible achievements of the children, cannot be discarded or ignored. After a decade of Step by Step, we have learned that this new approach will endure.

With Thanks

OSI and ISSA thank the ISSA Council Member Organizations for their work in identifying researchers and providing information for the case studies; the Steering Committee members for their dedication and guidance; Rochelle Mayer and her team of editors—Carol Sternhell, Rachel Holmes, and Hugh McLean—for their work in focusing, refining, and compiling the national studies; Jim Herrmann for publication design; and Zsuzsa Laszlo and Laura Liliom for their support in coordinating the online course and training events.

The Step by Step Case Study Roster

Outcomes from the Step by Step Case Study Project are being disseminated in a variety of forms. Monographs on cross-cutting themes are also in preparation. A brief synopsis from each country appears in *Educating Children for Democracy*, Number 9, Summer/Fall 2005.

Promoting High-Quality, Child-Centered Teaching: ISSA Standards and Certification

Azerbaijan	<i>Mentoring in Azerbaijan</i>
Czech Republic	<i>The Role of a Step by Step Certifier in Czech Republic</i> ③
Slovenia	<i>The Professional Journey of Anja—One Teacher's Experience of the Step by Step Certification Process in Slovenia</i> ②

Creating Child-Centered Environments and Learning Opportunities

Argentina	<i>Argentina: A New Frontier for Step by Step</i>
Estonia	<i>"A Good Beginning": Democratic Education in Estonia</i> ③
Georgia	<i>Imagination Unlimited: Introducing Child-Centered, Integrated Thematic Units in Georgia</i> ③
Montenegro	<i>Reading and Writing in the Step by Step Curriculum in Montenegro: Grade Three</i> ③
Uzbekistan	<i>Step by Step in Uzbekistan</i>

Reforming and Decentralizing Teacher Training

Bosnia and Herzegovina	<i>"Ecstatic to Try Something New": Professional Development of Teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina</i> ③
Kyrgyzstan	<i>"No Two Hares Looked Alike": Do Training Centers in Kyrgyzstan Have a Future?</i> ③
Lithuania	<i>"Who Said that We Can't Change the World?": Implementation of Step by Step at the Vilnius Training Center in Lithuania</i> ③
Romania	<i>Teacher Staff Development at the Tulcea Model Training Site in Romania</i> ① & ③

Social Inclusion: Quality Education for Roma Children

Bulgaria	<i>Education for Social Justice in Bulgaria</i>
Hungary	<i>Parents and School Partnerships: A Comparison of Two Families and Two Schools in Hungary</i>
Slovakia	<i>Step by Step at the Roma Settlement in Jarovnice-Karice, Slovakia</i> ① & ③

Inclusion: Children with Disabilities

Latvia	<i>Special Children in Latvia: Parents' Roles in the Education of Children with Special Needs</i> ③
Mongolia	<i>Dream for a Better Future: Inclusive Education in Mongolia</i> ③
Ukraine	<i>Inkluzia: Inclusive Education in Ukraine</i> ① & ③

Continued on next page

Reaching Children Outside of Preschools

Albania	<i>AHA! So Children Learn in Creches! Step by Step in an Albanian Creche</i> ²
Armenia	<i>The Family School: Parent Education in Armenia</i> ²
Kazakhstan	<i>Step by Step to Survival: Saving Bobek Kindergarten in Kazakhstan</i> ³
Macedonia	<i>A Place for Everyone: The Children's Creative Center in Skopje, Macedonia</i> ³

Family and Community Engagement

Haiti	<i>The School Without Socks: The Te Kase School in Haiti</i> ²
Moldova	<i>Sustaining Democratic Change in Moldova: The Role of Partnerships</i> ³
Russia	<i>"Our School Is Another Family for Us": Parent Involvement in Matreshka Step by Step Nursery School, Russia</i> ³
Tajikistan	<i>Parent Engagement in Tajikistan: A Case Study of Kulob Secondary School</i> ²

Building a Network of Networks: Step by Step NGOs and the ISSA Network

Belarus	<i>Inside, Outside, or On the Border? Negotiating the Relationship between Step by Step and the Ministry of Education in Belarus</i> ²
Croatia	<i>Step by Step Journals in Croatia</i> ²
Kosovo	<i>Primary School in Gjakova: Lessons from the Past, Hope for the Future in Kosovo</i>
Serbia	<i>Step by Step Program in Primary Schools and Curricula Reform in Serbia</i> ³

Key

- ¹ Included as a chapter in *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, Robert Stake (Guilford Publications, 2005).
- ² Published in *Educating Children for Democracy: Step by Step Case Studies*, Number 10, Winter/Spring 2006.
- ³ Case study will be issued in 2006–2007 as part of The Step by Step Case Study Series.



Step by Step case study researchers at the Central European University Conference Center, February 2004.

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: Step by Step Policy and Practice

Philosophy and Values

The case studies from Latvia, Mongolia and Ukraine offer a glimpse into Step by Step's response to families of children with disabilities, and to their teachers. Through observation of Step by Step classes in these countries, the authors document how the child- and family-centered Step by Step methodology meets the individual learning needs of these children.

An important indicator of a vibrant democracy is the extent to which people with disabilities participate actively in society. Children with disabilities must have access to high-quality, appropriate education. In Latvia, Mongolia, and Ukraine, as well as in many other countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, policies in the past promoted segregation of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities were often hidden from the public at home, deprived of an appropriate education and the opportunity to grow up with their peers, or placed in orphanages or specialized boarding schools, further isolated from their communities and their families. Moreover, prevailing public opinion and education policy created a large cadre of specialized professional caregivers invested in separate education for children with disabilities. Such inequities are only slowly being acknowledged.

Against this background, Step by Step promotes inclusive education, a system in which children with disabilities attend their local schools and learn in classrooms alongside their peers. The following activities are supported to achieve this objective:

- Ongoing training and mentoring for educators to support implementation of inclusive classrooms in preschools and primary schools;
- Integration of special educational services (for example, physical, occupational, and speech therapies) into education settings in the regular school system;
- Development of new courses and curriculum in systems that train and retrain teachers;
- Development of services, training, and information to support families of children with disabilities and strengthen

- their role as advocates for their children;
- Awareness-raising and antibias trainings to promote acceptance of children with disabilities;
- Dissemination of best practices for children with different types of disabilities;
- Development of fiscal and administrative procedures to sustain programs; and
- Development of advocacy and community-awareness programs to affect policy.

Taking a Closer Look at Inclusion

The case study from Latvia presents the experiences of two families with children with special needs. Qualitative methods, including observations, photos, video materials, interviews, and questionnaires, document the experience of being included in a Step by Step classroom. This case also underscores parents' need for concrete information, expected outcomes, and support.

The case study from Mongolia poses questions regarding the infusion of inclusive education within a preschool education college. How has inclusive education been infused into the existing course? What was the impact on faculty and students? Can reform of teacher-training systems precede implementation of model programs? What aspects need improvement?

Ukraine tells the story of one child diagnosed with autism and his parents. Observations and interviews provide insights into teacher training, parent advocacy, the role of NGOs, development of new education policies, and relationships with institutions and the media.

These cases highlight the complex challenges inherent in the training of classroom teachers. There is demand for ongoing professional development, supportive educational material, and opportunities to share experiences. The need to reform policy and legislation in order to meet the tremendous demand for services is a common theme throughout the cases. Creating responsive and developmentally appropriate services for parents as their children move from preschool to primary school is a complex and rarely acknowledged requirement of educational reform. These cases powerfully illustrate what can and must be done.

Special Children in Latvia: Parents' Roles in the Education of Children with Special Needs

Case Study Researchers: Elfrida Krastina, Professor, Daugavpils University; Zenija Berzina, MA, Director, Center for Education Initiatives; Daiga Zake, MA, Program Manager, Center for Education Initiatives; Sandra Kraukle, MA, Trainer, Center for Education Initiatives, Latvia

"The first step is made: we know the problem and have started to think about how to help our children. We have understood that there is no need to be ashamed and isolated. We have to provide our children with possibility—the hope that they will learn among their peers and live their lives of full value."

—Parent of a child with special needs after participating in a Step by Step Parent Education Program

Victoria

The preschool children in the warm, cheerful classroom are learning about textures, passing around beans, shells, stones, bits of carpet, and cotton wool. "Oh, soft!" one boy exclaims. "Smooth and sharp," observes a tiny girl. When they pass the objects to Victoria she sits quietly, but her eyes are wide. She watches solemnly. When the children hand her a big stuffed dinosaur with letters and numbers attached to its back, she looks a bit surprised. A few moments later, she smiles.

Victoria is seven years old. For the first six months of her life, she was fed through a tube because she was unable to swallow. She still needs to be fed at mealtime. At nine months she smiled at her parents for the first time. She is unable to walk, but can grasp objects from her wheelchair tray and play with them. She can hold a crayon or paintbrush and draw with the help of an adult. When she entered a Step by Step preschool—Zvaninsh in the city of Jekabpils—at the age of five, she didn't speak at all. By her second year of inclusion, she had learned to say "Mummy," "Daddy," and "Granny." She loves coming to school. The preschool nurse comments, "At the beginning, Victoria was apathetic; she did not respond to others. Now she is more outgoing and open. She feels happy in the company of other children. Her eyes are sparkling now."

To Victoria's parents, those sparkling eyes are worth more than diamonds. When new-

born Victoria, their first child, was diagnosed with cerebral paralysis as a result of birth trauma, doctors in Latvia's capital city, Riga, weren't sure that the baby would ever sit up, speak, or respond to human contact. Certainly there was little hope that Victoria would ever attend school. But Victoria's parents—and her very involved grandmother—were determined that this child would live as full a life as possi-

In Latvia, children with special needs have traditionally been isolated in educational institutions far from home.... And the "education" offered in these schools was often more medical than intellectual or social.

ble. And Latvia's Step by Step Program, with its commitment both to inclusion and to parent education, made it possible for the family to realize its dream.

"When I took Victoria outside for walks I noticed that she liked other children," says her mother, Alla, who has devoted herself to the full-time care of Victoria and her typically developing younger sister Anastasia, now three. "She always followed children with her eyes, and it seemed that she was trying to find a friend. I thought it would be a good idea if she could visit a kindergarten even a couple of hours a week, but I was afraid all schools would turn her away. When I asked the director of the Step by Step preschool if this could be possible at all, she offered me even more than I had hoped: Victoria was allowed not only to visit the school from time

to time but also to become a student. I was so happy and surprised! Of course, I accepted the offer right away.”

Before enrolling Victoria in the Step by Step school, she adds, she sometimes felt ashamed of her child and isolated from her community. “Some people have the attitude, ‘Why should we help such children if the society will never get any benefit from them?’” she explains. “They say it is much more reasonable to give the money to our ‘normal’ children. But in this classroom everybody is welcoming and understands us.”

The Education of Children with Special Needs in Latvia

In Latvia, children with special needs have traditionally been isolated in educational institutions far from home. They were often housed in these schools for weeks or months, separated from their families and their communities. Because of these arrangements, it was very difficult for parents to be involved in the education and development of their children. Parents themselves had no opportunity to become educated about how best to help their children. And the “education” offered in these



schools was often more medical than intellectual or social, with attention paid not to the child’s strengths and needs, but to the “defect.” Persistent isolation not only had a negative impact on the children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development, but affected their relationships in their local communities. Instead of the easy acceptance that comes with familiarity, communities viewed these children from afar, sometimes with suspicion and fear.

Even today, most Latvian children with special needs are isolated from the community. The inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream schools began in 1999, but only when initiated by innova-

tive schools and teachers. The 1997 Law on Special Education mandates that people with disabilities receive a basic general education and training in social and professional skills, but focuses mainly on practical skills. Most children with special needs—defined as those with physical and mental disabilities, severe illnesses, some learning disabilities, and some behavioral and social problems—attend one of the country’s 63 special schools or are placed in one of the more recently opened special classrooms within mainstream schools. Although classrooms for children with special needs bring these children closer to their families, they do not resolve the problem of labeling or stimulate genuine inclusion into the community. About two-thirds of the children attending special schools come from low-income families who cannot afford medical treatment and frequently are unable to buy suitable clothing or food. In addition, in rural areas the lack of public transportation from home to school deepens the problems of these families. Latvia’s increased unemployment and severe economic problems over the last 15 years have made it even more difficult for poor and rural families to provide appropriate care for their children with special needs.

The Step by Step Program, first implemented in Latvia in 1997 by the Soros Foundation–Latvia and continued by the Center for Education Initiatives since 2001, introduced a radically new and innovative model of education for children with special needs, the model that makes Victoria’s eyes sparkle. Step by Step’s fundamental commitment to child-centered education was transformative in the Latvian context, particularly for children with special needs. Two of its principles are key: (1) the importance of parent, family, and community involvement in children’s education, and (2) the participation of children with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

Since 1997, 120 preschools and 70 primary schools have joined the Step by Step Program. From the very beginning, parents were invited along with teachers to participate in Step by Step trainings, where they learned about the importance of child-centered, individualized education. This was shocking to some, as the traditional Latvian point of view, reinforced in Soviet times, was that whatever takes place in schools is outside of parents’ competence; parents were neither expected nor permitted to intervene.

Step by Step invited parents into both the conversation and the classroom, initiating a stunningly new model of parent-school cooperation. In 2003 the Center for Education Initiatives began offering a special Parent Education Program specifically for parents of children with special needs. More than 300 parents have participated in the Parent Education Program as of June 2004.

“At the seminar I understood the stereotypes and prejudices that exist in our society,” one parent comments. “But I also understood that we are able to cope with them if only we want to and know how to—that is most important.”

“I understood that inclusive education is our main task in the nearest future,” another parent says. “Not only children and their families, but also all of society, will benefit from it.”

Peter*

Like Victoria, 10-year-old Peter attends a Step by Step school. He is a bright boy, fluent in both Latvian and Russian, with a congenital physical limitation: his right palm is missing all five fingers. He began preschool at the age of two and has finished second grade at a Step by Step primary school, always in inclusive classrooms. All 18 teachers at Peter’s school have completed Step by Step training. “I am very thankful to the director of the preschool that she did not refuse to accept Peter when he was a toddler and that she recommended the Step by Step Program,” his father, Robert, says. “I was fully convinced that he had to be among children.”

A naturally right-handed person, Peter finds writing difficult, though he has learned to do it with his left hand. Reading came slowly, but he now enjoys reading encyclopedias. In mathematics he has always been very strong. His teacher notes that Peter thinks mathematically, so she tries to create activities for him based around this interest. Step by Step’s child-centered, individualized approach to education has been of great benefit to Peter, his father says. Choice, one of the characteristics of the Step by Step classroom, helped him develop compensation strategies as he worked with a variety of materials and allowed him to accentuate his strengths. “The Step by Step class is very suitable for Peter because Step by Step

offers choice,” Peter’s father comments. “It is very difficult to force my son to do what he does not want to do.”

Peter’s parents appreciate the ongoing feedback they get from teachers, so different from the experiences of their friends and relatives with children at traditional Latvian schools. “I find it very helpful to have the regular learning achievement reports and dynamic development charts,” Peter’s father

Parents of children with special needs come together regularly to exchange experience, offer support, and plan for the future.

says. “In such a way we can learn a lot about our child. That is very helpful. We get information, and then we know the area we have to pay more attention to. We know also how to help.”

Parent Involvement in Step by Step

The Step by Step Program recognizes that parents are their children’s first and most important teachers. According to Step by Step philosophy, parents have both the right to choose the most appropriate educational program for their children and the concomitant responsibility to contribute as much as they can to their children’s education and development. Thus it’s not surprising that both Victoria and Peter have highly involved parents who sought out the best possible educational environments for their children and became active partners with their teachers.

“The openness of Victoria’s mother and her trust of us has been of great help,” says the nurse at Zvaninsh, Victoria’s preschool, a city school serving 290 children, three with significant special needs. “I highly appreciate her enthusiasm, energy, and motivation to work with her child.”

“When Peter started to learn in the first grade his parents tried to plan their personal life so they could devote extra time to his learning, especially to reading and writing, where he struggled,” reports Peter’s teacher. “They participated in class activities and sometimes watched the learning process so they could learn how to help.”

At first, the parents stayed in class for

* The names of Peter and his parents were changed.

hours, perhaps afraid their children would be helpless without them. Peter needed help with basic tasks like dressing; Victoria didn't even speak. Separation was difficult—for the parents.

"At the beginning Victoria's mother stayed with her in the classroom," a teacher recalls. "Gradually Victoria gained interest in other children and started to follow them attentively. Children were full of love and willing to help her. Gradually Victoria's mother became engaged in activity centers with other children. She helped to prepare teaching materials for the activities. When Victoria got used to the other children, her mother no longer stayed in the classroom all day."

Peter's teacher tells a similar story. "Peter's parents showed a constant interest about their son's successes and failures," she says. "His mother participated often in different activities in the activity centers. At the beginning she tried to do everything for him. Then she realized that the process of getting involved and attempting to be self-confident was more important for Peter than the actual result he could reach. When Peter started to feel comfortable in the classroom his mother started to work in the family business. The parents were convinced that their son needed the company of peers and started to trust the teachers and the school."

In order to help more families become as involved as Victoria's and Peter's, the Step by Step Parent Education Program supports Parent Support Centers in all participating cities. Parents of children with special needs come together regularly to exchange experience, offer encouragement and assistance to each other, and plan for the future. "I hope it will be easier to solve problems concerning inclusion in the future," says one Parent Support Center participant. "Parents will be better advocates for their children after this project."

Family Support

Taking care of a child with special needs can be overwhelming for families, whatever their level of commitment or their resources. When Peter was born his mother wept in fear and shame, keeping him away from other children. He frequently fell ill, but doctors disagreed about what treatment was best. Victoria spent every other month in the hospital during her first year of life.

Victoria's family lives in a regional center, with a population of about 27,000. There are about 15 schools in the area, plus three uni-

versity branches and several art and music schools. About 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) from the city are two schools for children with special needs. Neither of Victoria's parents has a regular paid job as their lives are focused around their children. The family lives with Victoria's grandparents, who provide financial and emotional support.



Peter's family lives in a small town. There are two secondary schools and one preschool in the area, and a school for children with special needs 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) from town. Peter's parents have a small private business, but worry about future medical costs.

Although the state provides some financial support to families with children with disabilities, it comes nowhere near the real costs of their care. And dealing with the bureaucracy creates its own stress. Every year, for instance, Peter is required to go before the State Pedagogical Medical Commission in order to prove that he still has a disability. "It's absurd!" his father explodes. "Do they think that his fingers could grow in a fortnight?"

Training in Inclusion

The Step by Step Program's trainings brought parents together with teachers, educational administrators, and social workers, all committed to inclusion and to parent-school partnerships. In many cases, it was the first time these different constituencies had collaborated, or even spoken to one another. Not all teachers were open to Step by Step's approach, of course—at Victoria's preschool the former teacher assistant refused to work in an inclusive classroom—but those who made the leap are enthusiastic about the results.

"We strongly believe that inclusive school curriculum can be adapted to the needs of all children by setting the proper individual aims," comments one educator after completing a Step by Step training.

“Much depends on teachers’ will to change their traditional work, on the positive attitude of society, and on the initiative of parents—so what we need is teamwork.”

When Victoria entered her school only some of its classrooms worked with Step by Step, but now all 12 classrooms are affiliated with the program. All teachers, administrators, and the school nurse regularly attend Step by Step training seminars and workshops. Teachers who work with children with special needs are required to complete the training module Creating an Inclusive Step by Step Classroom. At Peter’s preschool, all teachers had attended Step by Step trainings. At his primary school, where the Step by Step Program was introduced in 1998, half the classes in each grade now implement the program.

“Much depends on teachers’ will to change their traditional work, on the positive attitude of society, and on the initiative of parents—so what we need is teamwork.”

“I liked that the aims of the training were clearly defined from the very beginning: to change the attitude toward children with special needs,” says a teacher. “It is good that we had a team from my school that participated at the training. Now we can promote this kind of attitude and thinking, and what is most important—the inclusion in our school—and share our experience with others.”

Teachers are eager for the pedagogical tools and methods they need to work with children with special needs. Several of Victoria’s teachers comment that they would appreciate more knowledge of how to work with a child with significant learning difficulties. “I seek the answers in my heart,” one teacher says, “but I’d like to have some scientifically approved tools, which I know could give better results. But I don’t know what they are.”

Teachers recognize that inclusion is a long-term process: “We have to remember that inclusion is a creative and not an easy process, and it will give proper results in time.”

But despite the difficulties, they are enthusiastic about the possibilities. “Children can’t be neglected or discriminated against by excluding them from school or by sending them to a special school because they have a physical disorder or learning

difficulties,” one educator comments. “The social meaning of inclusion is that all children obtain an education, which helps them create a relationship with the surrounding society and prepares them for life.”

Turning Boulders into Pebbles

Amid all this enthusiasm, the move toward inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education is slow. The process has begun in Latvia, but it will take time and legislative as well as financial support from the government. Many obstacles remain. Some communities are intolerant and even hostile toward people with special needs and their families. Some parents of children with special needs lack knowledge and confidence about what kind of education they can demand. Some teachers are unwilling to teach in inclusive classrooms or don’t have the necessary training. Many schools lack such basic resources as accessible classroom furniture and learning materials.

Sometimes obstacles loom like boulders, but when educators look at children like Peter and Victoria they suddenly skip and roll away, mere pebbles in a long but hopeful road. When he started school, Peter had difficulty making friends. Now, his teacher says, he is often a leader. “He is full of energy and sociable,” she says, “and much more patient in his relationships with other children. Peter is honest and not afraid to acknowledge his mistakes. His communication skills are strong.” Victoria, who didn’t speak at all, now proudly says her age—seven!—and understands both Latvian and Russian. Whenever anyone mentions her beloved Granny, she smiles. She likes listening to music and moves her body in delight to the sounds.

“I have come to the conclusion that it is not right to keep such children at home,” says Victoria’s grandmother. “They have to be taken out in the society. Society should get used to it that not all people are the same, that there are different people who need support and help. People will never think about another person’s pain until they see it. None of us is protected from suffering and trouble.”

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Elfrida Krastina, Daiga Zake, Zenija Berzina, and Sandra Kraukle, *Educating Children with Special Needs: Parent Involvement in Latvia* (July 2004).

Dream for a Better Future: Inclusive Education in Mongolia

Case Study Researchers: Dari Jigjidsuren, MA, Step by Step Consultant, United Nations Population Fund, and Narantuya Sodnompil, BA, Faculty, Shinjeech-21 College, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

“Now I understand that children with special needs exist, that they should be educated and their dream for a better future needs to be built up. I know they should be respected and we should work together.”
—A student at the Preschool Education College in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Educating Children with Special Needs

The Preschool Education College in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city, has been training teachers since 1964. It is currently the only institution in Mongolia educating the country's preschool teachers. Yet despite increased demand for educators trained to work with children with special needs, until the Mongolian Foundation for Open Society launched its Inclusive Education Project in 2002, the college did not train specialists in this area.

“To be frank, even the terminology we used before was different,” comments one Preschool Education College faculty member.

“We used the words ‘handicapped’ and ‘disabled.’

But now we use the term ‘special needs’ to talk about children with



various difficulties. Both teachers and students try to avoid the old attitude.”

In the past, Mongolian children with special needs were educated in segregated settings, or not at all. Children with disabilities were so severely stigmatized that many parents chose to hide them away at home. Professional special educators were “defectologists” trained in the Soviet Union. It was not considered possible—or desirable—to include children with special needs in general education classrooms.

As one Preschool Education College (PEC) teacher explains, she used to assume that students with special needs were

outside her range of both expertise and interest—excluded from both her classroom and her consciousness. She now views them as part of the larger student population with whom she has to work. “Before I didn’t pay much attention to children with learning difficulties,” she says. “I thought that it was a specialist’s job to work with them. But now when I meet such children I try to talk to and understand them.”

The Inclusive Education Project

By the time the Inclusive Education Project came to Ulaanbaatar, there was a growing realization in Mongolian society of the importance of inclusive education. After the collapse of the centrally planned economy, many special schools previously funded

“We used the words ‘handicapped’ and ‘disabled.’ But now we use the term ‘special needs’ to talk about children with various difficulties.”

by the state had to close. The country experienced a steep increase in the number of children with special needs not receiving adequate educational services and was coping with the demands of parents who were determined to ensure that their children had the same rights accorded to typically developing children, particularly the right to an appropriate education. International documents—such as the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All and publications of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA)—presented a vision of inclusive education as one basis of civil society. ISSA promotes the principle that children with special needs are part of civil society and

have the right to contribute to the development of that society.

Mongolia has a population of 2.5 million, the majority of whom are under 25 years of age. Preschoolage children make up more than 20 percent of the population. Many people lead nomadic lives and depend upon herding for their livelihood, moving several times a year. The population—comprised of about 30 different ethnic groups—is widely dispersed, with slightly less than half living in sparsely populated rural areas and the rest in three major cities, Erdenet, Darkhan, and Ulaanbaatar. In the 1990s, when Mongolia underwent the transition from a centrally planned economy to a free-market economy, the GNP per capita fell from \$1,600 to \$463. About 36 percent of the population is considered poor. According to J. Myagmar, an official of the Ministry of Science, Technology, Education, and Culture (MOSTEC), Mongolia's new openness to the idea of inclusive education reflects the country's desperate need for a more flexible and responsive education system able to adjust to changing political, social, and cultural realities.

C. Purev-Ochir, an officer at the Inclusive Education Unit located within the Ministry, but founded by Save the Children-UK (SC-UK), notes the Unit's three goals:

- Improving the quality of inclusive education services;
- Creating enabling learning environments for all children; and
- Building an understanding throughout Mongolian society that children with special needs learn best in general education classroom settings.

The Mongolian Foundation for Open Society (MFOS) was established in 1996 as an autonomous nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonreligious organization dedicated to initiating and supporting Open Society activities in Mongolia. The Step by Step Program, which operates under the auspices of MFOS, began in Mongolia in 1998. By 2004, Step by Step methodology was reaching more than 8,600 children in 267 classrooms and 53 kindergartens. A key area of Step by Step activity has been its effort to institutionalize its methodology into pre-service teacher education, most notably in partnership with the Preschool Education College (PEC). In 2000—in the wake of a National Program for Preschool Strengthening report urging improved quality of and increased access to preschool education—the college

approached MFOS with a request to support school reforms. The funding came with a recommendation that part of the grant be spent on developing and teaching an inclusive education course—and with a pledge that Step by Step would assist PEC in this process. By December 2003, when Mongolia adopted its National Program on Inclusive Education, Step by Step mentors had been



working on inclusion with college faculty for several years. Step by Step provided trainings, workshops, and educational materials on inclusive education and helped PEC faculty revise their curricula. In 2003–2004 a new course, Inclusive Education, was intro-

“Before my fellow students and I didn’t know that children with special needs also include children of vulnerable groups in our society and children whose native language is not Mongolian. Now we know that.”

duced for all third- and fourth-year preschool education students.

At the time of this case study, the Inclusive Education course was only in its first year and no students had yet graduated. But both students and faculty report that they now view inclusion much more positively, as a goal rather than an obstacle. “I think all the teachers have changed,” one faculty member comments. “We no longer are shocked or amazed about children with special needs.”

Changing Attitudes of Preschool Education College Students

Students at the college are enthusiastic about the new curriculum and are eager to gain the skills and knowledge that will enable them to work with children with

special needs. “Kindergarten teachers who graduated from the college in the past and many rural teachers do not know how to approach children with special needs and their parents, but we will know,” one student says. Indeed, students hope that their new skills will help them convince wary parents, afraid their children with special needs will be shunned, to send the children to school in the first place. “Parents tend to keep children with special needs at home,” a student explains. “As a result of learning the inclusion concepts, we will be able to convince parents to send their children into kindergarten.”

In the past many student teachers refused to accept children with special needs into their classes, feeling both inadequate and afraid. Now students say they feel more confident of their ability to ensure the social participation of all children. “We have recently had teaching practicum,” one student reports. “Because we already started learning some theory we were not surprised to see children with special needs; we approached them and tried to communicate. We believe that through learning more in our courses our knowledge and skills will improve.”

Many Preschool Education College students now believe that children with special needs learn most effectively when they can socialize with their peers in inclusive

classrooms. “Inclusive education means educating children with special needs together with other children based on their needs and interests,” one student explains. Some are even working to develop strategies to encourage this sort of socialization. “A colleague of mine has a book on sign language,” a student comments. “Now I am thinking about learning sign language to teach my children. It is important to teach sign language to normally developing children, because if only the child with special needs knows that language how will he communicate with others? Children will not tease him once they understand his language.”

Students have also learned to define “special needs” much more broadly, moving beyond the limits of defectology to more complex social and cultural analysis. “Before my fellow students and I didn’t know that children with special needs also include children of vulnerable groups in our society and children whose native language is not Mongolian,” one student explains. “Now we know that.”

Studying inclusive education as part of their curriculum has given PEC students the confidence to work with children with a variety of needs and to use individual education plans and differentiated instruction as members of a team. They believe that they are well equipped to use strategies that engage



children in learning. “During our practicum,” one student says, “we noticed that sometimes teachers ignored one child in the class. Then that child sits in the same corner all day through and doesn’t participate in activities. But after learning about inclusion, we will know more about dealing with this kind of child.”

Faculty members agree that student reaction to inclusive education has been very positive. “By the time they graduate the



students might not have mastered perfect teaching skills and methods,” one instructor comments, “but at least they will have understood that children with special needs deserve to be educated and raised along with their peers. I think this is our new curriculum’s greatest impact.”

Challenges Ahead

Despite the enthusiasm of students and faculty, the road toward inclusion remains rocky, like much of Mongolia’s terrain. As Adiya Narmandakh, the country’s Step by Step Program director, noted, “Inclusive education is a new topic for Mongolia, which still has a very segregated educational system.” Faculty and students both lack practical experience in working with children with special needs. Some parents are unwilling or afraid to enroll their children with special needs in preschools. Educational support materials and assistive devices are difficult to obtain. A number of specialists—the former defectologists—still work throughout the country and need to be retrained, but the large dispersed population makes retraining time-consuming and costly.

Some PEC faculty members are uncomfortable teaching inclusive education as they have little hands-on experience and have never themselves worked with children with special needs. While familiar with the theory, they lack practical knowledge, including

examples of effective teaching strategies.

“We only teach our students about how we should work in theory,” one faculty member comments. “About the practice we are not sure. If someone brings a child with special needs into the room I will be very nervous because I have never had direct interaction with such a child.”

The teaching of inclusion has also been difficult for faculty because of their lack of practical experience with diagnostics and assessments, and because few teaching materials, visual aids, and other educational resources are available in Mongolian. Many faculty members believe there is a need for a stronger link between their courses and the Inclusive Education course. They urge the Inclusive Education teacher to work with them more closely and to share her knowledge with her colleagues. “This course has to be compulsory,” one faculty member comments. “I think it is not enough to take this course for just two semesters.”

Students, too, lack the opportunity to put theory into practice. Some have no time to work with children at all; others complete their practice teaching in kindergartens with no children with learning or physical differences. With no chance to practice their recently acquired skills, some students fear

“Before I didn’t pay much attention to children with learning difficulties. But now when I meet such children I try to talk to and understand them.”

they will be unable to identify and diagnose children with special needs. “I simply feel afraid of working with children with special needs,” a student admits. Another student, an experienced teacher, comments, “I am now prepared to teach a few children with mild disabilities, not children with severe disabilities. I can deal with children with mild visual or hearing impairment or mild speech defects who can pronounce some syllables.”

Students feel a need for more training in both theory and practice. They have requested an expanded Inclusive Education course, with an increased number of practicum hours. “I think that the Inclusive Education course needs to have more hours,” one student explains. “We study theory and methodology, but we do not know how to incorporate them into practice. Working

with children is very different from theory; therefore, I think it is important to increase practice hours." In a heartfelt plea for more practical support, this student adds, "Also we need to know about equipment—for instance, how to operate a wheelchair. We lack handouts!"

Students and faculty both note the importance of incorporating inclusive education concepts into all PEC classes rather than isolating them into only the one specialized course. At the moment, little integration occurs, perhaps because faculty members still feel unqualified to teach inclusion.

S. Tserennadmid, the officer in charge of preschool education at the Ministry of Science, Technology, Education, and Culture, points out key challenges along the road toward inclusion, including:

- Professionals' continued inability to reliably diagnose children with special needs;
- Parents' reluctance to enroll children with severe disabilities in kindergartens;
- Teachers' and other children's lack of acceptance toward these children when they are enrolled; and
- A perceived need to provide incentives to kindergarten teachers whose workload significantly increases when children with special needs enter their classrooms.

The officer notes that the 2003 National Program on Inclusive Education—with its emphasis on improving preschool quality, extending access, and increasing enrollments by addressing the varied needs of children and parents—should help Mongolia deal with these challenges.

Reflection

At the time of this case study, the Preschool Education College students were the first in all of Mongolia to study inclusive education as part of their course work. Inclusive education models did not yet exist in Mongolia. Most children with special needs were educated in segregated classrooms or hidden away at home. The Inclusive Education Project sparked striking changes in faculty and student attitudes toward children with special needs—but behavioral changes had not yet followed.

Since the case study was completed the college has selected pilot sites for the students' practice teaching that include special kindergartens serving children with special

needs. New interactive teaching methods, influenced by Step by Step methodology, are now widely used by faculty. A Supportive Technology Resource Center has been established with support from the MFOS and Save the Children–UK. The Center, equipped with assistive technology, will serve not only PEC students and faculty but also children with special needs and their parents. Families will receive professional support and counseling—extremely important, because early identification of and support for disabilities is more effective and less expensive than late diagnosis.

Much more needs to be done, of course. While MFOS has provided the college with some literature—the Step by Step Program supported the translation and publication of two manuals on inclusive education—there is a pressing need for more. The college urgently needs user-friendly training packages for students and parents of children with special needs. And while Step by Step has provided two specialists on inclusive education, many defectologists educated prior to the transition still work in special schools, schools of education, and colleges. "These teachers were trained to work exclusively with children with disabilities," comments Purev-Ochir, the Inclusive Education Unit official. "They need to be retrained to learn more about inclusive principles."

The concepts of inclusive education must be embedded throughout the entire Preschool Education College curriculum and students and faculty must have opportunities to work directly with children with special needs. Perhaps the Step by Step approach—the selection of model classrooms, provision of training and support, and establishment of regional training centers with certified trainers—can be applied to the implementation of inclusive education in Mongolia.

Step by step, the road from segregation to inclusion may be long. But the Mongolian journey has begun.

"Before I might have turned my back on a child with special needs," comments one Preschool Education College student. "Now I will open my heart."

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Dari Jigjidsuren and Narantuya Sodnompil, *Inclusive Education at the Preschool Education College in Mongolia* (June 2005).

Inkluzia: *Inclusive Education in Ukraine*

Case Study Researchers: Svitlana Efimova, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology and Pedagogy, Lviv Oblast Scientific-Methodological Institute of Education, and Natalia Sofiy, Director, Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation

"I take him as a regular person with whom I have a common language—a language I understand completely. However, I also understand that Liubchyk has to become more adapted to life in the future. I think that together we will be able to solve all problems."

—Romanna, mother of Liubchyk, a child with special needs attending the Maliuk School in Lviv, Ukraine

"The philosophy of our program is that all children who can be involved in a regular classroom experience should be given the chance."

— Oksana Havryliuk, Liubchyk's teacher

Meeting Liubchyk*

When Liubchyk enters the bustling first-grade classroom in the Maliuk School, Halyna Stepanova, the teaching assistant, greets him cheerfully. "Halyna, at seven!" he replies (a somewhat mysterious comment that seems to refer to the time she leaves work). They look through some photographs and he comments, "Halyna, lunch twelve," pointing to the clock. "Yes, lunch is at twelve," she answers. The other children are practicing their numbers, work-

"The philosophy of our program is that all children who can be involved in general education classroom experience should be given the chance."

ing in two teams. "Liubchyk, you could join either team," the teacher, Oksana Havryliuk, says, but the quiet eight-year-old with the big gray eyes refuses. He watches steadily as the children call out answers. Then he touches Marianna, the social worker assigned to him, with a finger, says "Lunch," and leaves the room to check the day's menu.

When Liubchyk returns, two friendly girls invite him to play, but he hides his face behind Marianna. Havryliuk, known as Ms. Oksana, asks him to finish writing letters in his notebook, but he refuses. During the reading lesson he plays with a chain, first putting blue and yellow links together, then pulling them apart and placing them

in a basket. At lunch he sits carefully in his favorite spot, a corner of the long table near the lunchroom entrance. Yet during the afternoon music lesson, when the children listen to contrasting musical passages and draw their reactions, Liubchyk draws vigorously, enthusiastically. He appears to hear neither the teacher nor the music, but in fact his drawing is carefully executed. On the right side—the sad picture, he explains—is the sun, nearly hidden by clouds from which



rain is falling. On the left side, responding to a cheerful melody, is a brightly colored car driving at high speed. Liubchyk proudly prints his name and the date in careful block letters.

"If an activity makes a child happy to go to school every morning, this is a breakthrough," says Havryliuk, who also works as a trainer for the Ukrainian Step by Step Program.

Liubchyk's Special Needs

When Liubchyk's parents first realized that something was wrong with

*The names of Liubchyk and the other children, as well as of Liubchyk's mother, were changed.

their beautiful, expressive, deeply cherished two-year-old son they were devastated, his mother, Romanna, says. Liubchyk is their first, and long-awaited, child. All seemed well for the first two years, and then suddenly, the toddler stopped communicating. “For a long time, we couldn’t comprehend why it occurred or what we should do,” Romanna explains. “The doctors gave us contradictory information. Some said they saw no problem; others said the child was extremely ill and nothing would help. My husband and I made a decision: If there were even one chance, we would fight for it. We didn’t close up, to be left alone facing our problem. We started looking for support from around the world—one way or another!”

Romanna describes Liubchyk as autistic, with both serious delays and striking talents. “Liubchyk is a very interesting child,” she says. “He has unique skills. For example, when he was only two and a half, I showed him puzzles containing 15 pieces in a frame. He saw the way I was piecing them together and immediately put it together—but in a different way. He would take a piece and place it in a certain spot that later proved to be its exact place. At the age of five, Liubchyk started telling time by the position of the hands of the clock. He had other skills oriented to space. He is amused when people lose their bearings. Once his grandmother and I went to the wrong bus. He showed us where we really should go and laughed. When later we sat in the kitchen, we said, ‘Do you remember, son, how we almost got on the wrong bus?’ He only laughed. He also likes mechanical things, especially trains. Thanks to them, he learned to count. Liubchyk keeps a keen eye for things related to time. He counts everything and gets agitated about days until holidays, hours until feeding the animals, the times I am supposed to take my medicine.”

The greatest challenge, Romanna adds, was finding an appropriate school for her unusual son. The Ukrainian Psychological-Medical-Pedagogic Consultations (PMPC) office recommended educating the boy at home. A specialized kindergarten for children with speech problems turned him away, saying he was “not one of theirs,” Romanna says. “Then we remembered that extraordinary school, Maliuk. The director signed us right in.” Liubchyk began attending preschool at the Maliuk School when he was four, joining an inclusive class of children his age. He was anxious at first, but

now goes off to school in high spirits. “We can thank the atmosphere of this place,” his grandmother says gratefully.

Inclusion in Step by Step

The Maliuk Kindergarten–Primary School in Lviv, one of Ukraine’s finest schools, has been working with the Step by Step Program since 1994. In 1996 it became one of the first Ukrainian schools to include children with special needs in its classrooms. In the past, most children with special needs had been enrolled in segregated schools or boarding facilities known as internats, iso-



lated from their communities and even from their families. The Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation (USSF), committed to providing all children with equal access to a quality education, found willing partners in the educators at Maliuk. In 2001, the school became part of a seven-year national experiment, Social Adaptation and Integration of Children with Special Needs into Regular Classrooms, organized by USSF and the Institute of Special Pedagogy of Ukraine and supported by the Ministry of Education and Science. Maliuk School currently serves 205 pupils from the age of two through Grade 4, including eight children with special needs.

“We are proud of our achievements,” says Julia Kavun, USSF training coordinator. “Eight children—six of whom under former conditions would have been assigned to a special educational institution—attend

Maliuk. They are learning in accordance with the program of the general education school, modified to suit their learning abilities. The parents take an active part in the inclusion process. One mother told us, 'When our child was born, we felt that she was loved only by the family. Now our daughter enjoys an active social life, learning and eagerly anticipating her future.'

Romanna describes Liubchik as autistic, with both serious delays and striking talents. "Liubchik is a very interesting child," she says. "He has unique skills."

Adds Natalia Pastushenko, vice director of the Lviv Oblast Scientific-Methodological Institute of Education: "This practice, inclusion, has two advantages. First, all children learn to be tolerant, even to appreciate the importance of their neighbors. Second, children with special needs get a greater sense of themselves as people."

Indeed, Liubchik has his own particular friends, Anychka and Katrusia. These girls possess qualities that may not have blossomed in a classroom without Liubchik, a readiness to help and a sense of responsibility toward others. And in a nearby third-grade classroom at Maliuk, Natalia, a girl with cerebral palsy, is something of a star. The children consider it a special privilege to be the one chosen to help Natalia climb the stairs.

Liubchik's Teacher and Parents

At first, Havryliuk, Liubchik's teacher, found it difficult to imagine working with him in an inclusive first-grade classroom. An experienced Step by Step teacher, Havryliuk had been teaching at the Maliuk School since 1998. She had participated in many training seminars organized by the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation and was herself a trainer in the Step by Step Program. She was cofounder of the nongovernmental organization Lad, which assists families in the protection of children's rights, and chair of the widely recognized group Ukraine 11, a branch of the Ukrainian Amnesty International Association. Nevertheless, Havryliuk had only recently begun working with children with special needs and was apprehensive about welcoming Liubchik.

What about all her other first-graders?

she wondered, thinking, "The problems of one child cannot be solved by generating problems for other children." Perhaps Liubchik really would be happier in a special school. Perhaps she would find him difficult to control.

At their first meeting, both Havryliuk and Liubchik's parents were uncomfortable. Havryliuk felt that Romanna, Liubchik's mother, was pushing the boy to perform, perhaps beyond his abilities. Romanna felt that the teacher didn't appreciate her son's skills. But as they worked together, trust developed. Havryliuk became one of Liubchik's strongest supporters, and Romanna became a parent leader at the Maliuk School. Both women are enthusiastic advocates of inclusive education.

"In time," says Havryliuk, "the ice of mistrust melted. First, thank God, I started seeing the child with different eyes. I understood his parents' worries and concerns, their earnest desire to see Liubchik attending this very class. And they understood my insistence on protecting the academic conditions of the other children and my striving to create a friendly atmosphere for Liubchik's interaction with others."

Partly because of Liubchik's progress, Havryliuk now conducts training seminars for parents of children with special needs, teachers working with them, and representatives of NGOs. She tells other teachers, "Just like every teacher, I had my notions of how to organize education for children with special needs placed in a general education classroom. But when I was faced with the problem myself, it proved much more difficult. When we meet a child like that, we understand that he or she needs help, but we don't know much about how to help. Then, when we see that child achieving something with our help, we start having feelings that this is even more valuable than giving knowledge to other children."

Thinking perhaps of Liubchik, so carefully and proudly printing his name, or of Natalia, surrounded by children eager to be her friend, Havryliuk adds, "The neglect of children with disabilities will always echo back. But it is not the fear of punishment that compels us! I simply remember this: Inclusion is an idea implemented by people. The philosophy of our program is that all children who can be involved in the general education classroom experience should be given the chance. I have become deeply convinced that only when we work directly



with a specific child, and not merely through his or her diagnosis, can conclusions as to the potential benefit of enrollment in a general education school be drawn.”

Treatment of Children with Disabilities

When Step by Step began its work in Ukraine, even the language was resistant. Ukrainian simply didn't have a word for “inclusion” in the context of education. The term *inkluzia*—now quite common—was simply transliterated from the English. Ukrainian educators sometimes spoke of integration, the melding of dissimilar people, but never of genuine inclusion: the melding of dissimilar people in ways that ensure the sharing of benefits. Both the concept and the word itself were foreign.

During the Soviet period, children with special needs did not attend general education schools anywhere in Ukraine. Parents were pressured to send their children diagnosed as “defective” to the specialized boarding schools known as *internats*. A physical therapist describes her visit to one of these *internats*: “Children with cerebral palsy were severely disabled, all lying in one big crib. You'd have four or five children lying together, just lying there. There was no nurturing.” Parents who refused to place their child in an *internat* often felt they were sentencing him or her to home imprisonment. Many felt such shame that they kept

their children hidden. Whether hidden at home or hidden in an *internat*, children with special needs were isolated from society.

Children who remained at home through the preschool years were evaluated at age six by the Psychological-Medical-Pedagogic Consultations (PMPC) office. This first diagnosis determined where the child would

In the past, most children with special needs had been enrolled in segregated schools or boarding facilities known as internats, isolated from their communities and even from their families.

be educated, and the decision of the PMPC was usually final. One mother describes the process: “They take my child. I'm confused, and the child, what can you say? Besides, he gets scared. They ask him this question: ‘What is the weather today?’ It's sunny outside, the sun is bright—but very cold. Yarik says, ‘Cold.’ And they go, ‘Oh, Yarik, how could it be cold? Look, the sun is shining, the sky is clear,’ and he says, ‘It's cold.’ And this takes exactly two minutes. That's it. ‘Mom, we are setting up the specialized school for you. Your child’—they said ‘retard’ or something like that—‘go outside and wait for the documents.’ That is the whole conversation.”

In the last decade, however, Ukraine has



been moving rapidly toward inkluzia. In the more than 10 years that have passed since Ukraine chose to transform itself into an independent democratic society, a series of important policy changes have swept through the educational system. Even the PMPC now supports inclusion, collaborating with the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation and helping families place their children

The parents take an active part in the inclusion process. One mother told us, “When our child was born, we felt that she was loved only by the family. Now our daughter enjoys an active social life, learning and eagerly anticipating her future.”

in inclusive schools. The 2001 initiative on inclusion—the “experiment” Liubchyk enjoys—was approved by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science. Vice Minister Victor Ogneviuk, who signed the document authorizing the experiment, is an outspoken advocate of inclusive education.

“In my mind it is absolutely wrong when, using specialized boarding schools or other institutions, we create reservations for children, preventing them from seeing life in all of its forms, manifestations, and complexities,” he says. “And this is true not only for children with disabilities. The healthy children have to see that within human society, alongside the healthy ones with able minds, hands, and legs, live children who require their help and compassion. Understanding this problem should become a motivating factor for us.”

Challenges to Implementation

The promise of inclusive education is compelling. Every child is special. Every child is skilled. Every child is capable of learning. Education is available to every-

one, to children with gifts of every kind. Inclusion is a philosophy, a new model of education, and a human value.

In practice, however, inclusion is not always easy to implement. Some parents of children with special needs fear that they will be shunned in an inclusive classroom, and some parents of typical children fear that the slower pace of the pupils with special needs will hamper their own child’s education. Even today, with both the Ministry of Education and Science and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences advocating a more humanistic system of inclusive education—partly in order to smooth Ukraine’s integration into the European Community—many Ukrainian educators believe that children with special needs learn better in segregated settings. Inclusion is not yet widely considered a serious alternative to special education.

As Victor Ogneviuk, the vice minister, explains, “In the past people with deficiencies were to be considered inferior. Today we must understand that we have to resist this ill mentality. In the past the problem was unknown to most of the population, hidden away. That is the reason why today, when a child who requires specialized help enters a general education class, some parents raise questions: ‘How come? Why is a child requiring special help studying with my child?’ The community has stereotypes that have to be challenged.”

The key problems, Ogneviuk notes, are lack of funds and lack of qualified teachers. “Today it is not uncommon for these individuals to join classes in general education schools,” he says. “However, we have yet to complete a tall order: preparing teaching and mentoring personnel, equipping learning facilities. All the schools were built in such a way that it is impossible for a child with a disability or special need to enter them without the help of others.” Many schools are inaccessible and many classrooms lack equipment and teaching assistants. Even typical children in general education schools benefit greatly from the presence of teaching assistants, he comments. “The idea is wonderful. Unfortunately, financial difficulties stop it from being implemented. Possibly one day this dream will come true.”

Vyatcheslav Zasenکو, deputy director of the Institute of Special Pedagogy, believes that inclusive and segregated classrooms are both necessary and can coexist. “Inclusive

education can only exist in combination with specialized education," he says, "opening up opportunities for children with special needs and satisfying their constitutional right of equal access to quality education." Many of the specialist teachers, he adds—trained in a separatist model of education—believe that "the mainstream schools are not capable of providing a correctional program for the children with special needs."

Ogneviuk agrees that the quality of teaching is key. "Today, the most important issue is preparation of a new generation of teachers capable of helping children with special needs," he says. "Without well-prepared teachers and mentors, our talk is in vain."



Even if some segregated schools for children with special needs must remain active, he adds, "It is our preference to have children with special needs attend the general education schools, giving them the opportunity to experience the life of the society."

Liubchyk's mother Romanna has her own point of view. "We deeply hope that with time everything will be all right," she says.

Seeing with New Eyes

The first graders in Ms. Oksana's classroom sit in a circle around their teacher and discuss the fairytale *Thumbelina*. Liubchyk sits with his back to the other children, laying out geometrical shapes. "Children, let us spread our circle out a bit wider to include Liubchyk, shall we?" Ms. Oksana suggests.

Then Ms. Oksana asks, "What did Thumbelina call the mole?"

"The blind," Hanusia replies.

"Is that what we call someone who cannot see?" the teacher asks.

"He didn't like the sun," the children chorus. "He used to say that the birds were fools." "He only counted on his wealth." Halyna Stepanova, the teaching assistant, asks Liubchyk to say the names of the children answering questions. He turns around whenever he hears an answer and accurately says each name.

"Perhaps he was shallow-minded and refused to acknowledge and understand things because he couldn't see them," Ms. Oksana comments. "However, he can't be blamed for how well he can see. All living creatures have their purpose, and the moles play their important role as well."

Later each child is asked to color a scene from the fairytale and place them in the order the scenes appear in the story. The

"Today, the most important issue is preparation of a new generation of teachers capable of helping children with special needs. Without well-prepared teachers and mentors, our talk is in vain."

children work in groups. Liubchyk chooses a picture to color, but refuses to join a group. He is not pressed to do so. "What is this bird?" Stepanova asks, looking at Liubchyk's picture. "A swallow," he replies, spreading his arms into wings.

When the coloring is completed, the children gather and place their scenes in order. "Liubchyk, come here, we are missing your picture," says his friend Anychka. Liubchyk gives her the neatly colored swallow, but refuses to join the group.

"Children, you have done a very good job today," says Ms. Oksana. "Let us take each other by the hand and sing our favorite song." Liubchyk holds Stepanova by one hand and Anychka by the other. The children sing enthusiastically.

Liubchyk puts his head on Stepanova's shoulder. "Lunchtime," he says, pointing at the clock.

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Svitlana Efimova and Natalia Sofiy, *Inclusive Education: Influencing Children, Teachers, Parents, and State Policies in Ukraine* (2004).

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