

REMOVING BARRIERS TO MEETING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Fiesta project promotes a participative/holistic approach to harness inclusive education and facilitate collaborative working during periods of transition for all stakeholders involved e.g. pupils with special educational needs, parents/families, educators, health professionals, social workers, NGOs. The difficulties associated with transition can be exacerbated for pupils with special educational needs. Pupils with special needs are in contact with many professionals from all three social systems e.g. education, health and social care during their educational career. There must be a common understanding between these professional disciplines in order to successfully meet the pupil's needs.

Key words: inclusive, education, transition, special needs

In the last decades more and more countries have encouraged the idea of an inclusive society, a society opened and flexible to the phenomenon of human diversity. In this context, the implementation of inclusive policies to integrate children with special educational needs in schools calls for actions from different fields: legal, political, organizational, from the field of psychology, pedagogy, sociology, social work, nursing etc.(Alois Ghergut)

Transition and teamworking are core areas which have been neglected in facilitating inclusive education for disabled students. The critical issue is to address the transformation from existing segregated systems into proactive innovative learning environments for all learners – thus going beyond simple mainstreaming to shared mutual learning benefit for disabled and non-disabled students alike.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The FIESTA project (Facilitating Inclusive Education and Supporting the Transition Agenda) has been approved by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme. The project aims to develop a multi-disciplinary learning approach for professionals in education, health and social services in order to facilitate the additional learning and support requirements of children with special needs during periods of transition. It brings together eleven partner organizations from Ireland, The UK,

Romania, Cyprus, Greece, Finland, The Netherlands, Spain and Bulgaria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The needs and experiences of students with disabilities have been inadequately addressed in all European countries. The legacies of decades of segregated and specialized education (of often uneven levels of quality) have been complicated by structures and policies that were themselves seriously fragmented and unconnected. Traditions of charity or voluntarism have further complicated levels of educational provision for those with disabilities by creating levels of distance from mainstream resources and perspectives. A critical factor has been the added element of institutional resistance from professionals – themselves operating within segregated and limited perspectives.

The traditional approach to special education has been to engage with only specific aspects of administrative and delivery modalities within systems that remain distinct and separate. The innovation rests in using the extensive experience of segregated specialized environments in creative and dynamic ways to address the learning needs of both mainstream and disabled learners. The FIESTA project is based on the principle of mutual benefit in terms of learning and social outcomes. The project also advances the concept that learner-centred methodologies and individualized learning supports developed for disabled populations can be adapted productively for non-disabled populations.

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It is designed to produce a dynamic virtual circle in which all stakeholders benefit while at the same time mainstreaming is promoted through transitional phases of learning and education in community transformation environments.

The project has at its core two fundamental research aims, and these are:

- to examine examples of best practice identification of children with special educational needs who transitioned into first year of mainstream primary school from either a specialised environment or a mainstream early year's environment and,

- to identify examples of best practice identification of children with special educational needs who transitioned from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary school.

Identification of best practice will be through using a mixed methods approach where children and families along with a wide range of professionals will be asked to participate in this research. This network will facilitate children with special needs during the following periods of transition:

(1) Transition of children with special needs to mainstream environments

(2) Transition of children with special needs from pre-school to primary school and from primary school to secondary school.

In many cases the transition from pre-school to primary school centres around readiness and adapting the environment, curricula to meet the child's needs. It is also a period where professionals involved in the pupil's development begin to meet and exchange knowledge in order for successful transition to take place. Much of the more recent literature focuses on the problem of co-ordination and the difficulties families face in assessing services and co-ordinating all the supports (Meijer, C., Soriano, V. and Watkins, A. (eds.) 2003).

In the pursuit of an effective flexible and inclusive educational environment, the project will create an array of tools and methods for pupils, parents, policy makers, professionals within education, health and social sectors:

- **Research** - In the first phase of the project each country is contributing to a unique European literature review which will identify from a set of 22 research questions current practice. The questions used in the literature review explore themes from policy and context through concepts that underpin practice and critical reflection. This literature review will examine the existing best practice models and educational practices used in different European countries in order to establish a set of standardised criteria and recommendations

and overall baseline for best practice models to assist children with additional needs during periods of transition. The research aims to establish the conceptual/cross cultural basis for collaboration, to highlight the various terminology, concepts and definitions used across the different countries in relation to inclusion, transition, pedagogy, teamworking and children's rights through focus groups, questionnaires and interviews. The research will produce quality outcomes that will function as dynamic tools that facilitate transition, development and empowerment of all stakeholders:

- **Facilitate Learning/Knowledge Exchange**-develop 3 core **training modules** that examines disability awareness and inclusion, collaborative working concepts structures and relationships (including stakeholder involvement, assessment, strength based approaches and social justice), mentoring staff on transition, inclusion and collaborative working environments for professionals in education, health & social services to facilitate the additional learning & support requirements of children with disabilities during periods of transition.

- **Creative Online Learning Environments** - Develop a centre for educational professionals, (principals, teachers, specialist teachers, special needs assistants, counsellors) allied health professionals, (psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech & language therapists, clinicians) social services (social workers, family support workers, educational welfare officers) to learn, exchange knowledge & skills online in order to facilitate collaborative working that will provide holistic approaches that enable inclusive education.

- **Resource Centre**- Provide tools & resources from all stakeholders including pupils to facilitate successful transition and inclusive education e.g. transition resource pack, transition starter kit, online story telling.

- **Self Assessment**- Create a self assessment tool to assist schools and learning stakeholders involved in providing additional supports, to measure current approaches being used during periods of transition & identify areas for improvement.

The network is innovative as it will open the world of inclusive approaches to collaborative and multi disciplinary ways of working. This will in turn attract a wide audience from various disciplines who will have an opportunity to pool expertise and exchange practices in a central place. The following target groups will be sourced

through the consortium's stakeholders & associates, lobbying & extensive exploitation:

For Educational, Health and Social Professionals the project will:

- Develop a transferable core professional development training resources
- Develop a multi-disciplinary centre for professionals to learn and exchange knowledge and skills online with other learning stakeholders; this will enable collaborative, multidisciplinary working
- Provide a review of best practice models used within existing special schools and mainstream environments during periods of transition available to wider mainstream audiences through online tools and conferences
- Self assessment tool to assist schools and learning stakeholders involved in SEN in mainstream settings, to measure approaches taken during specified transition schooling phases and identify areas for improvement
- Actively involve professionals from the three social systems during the fieldwork phase through focus groups and interviews. Professionals will also have an opportunity to create and adapt professional development resources and self assessment tools
- Provide training and resource pack to professionals through the delivery of the "Managing Transition" modules.

For parents/families the project will:

- Specialised modules from the core professional development modules this will be tailored to suit the needs of parents/families (e.g. general disability awareness, assessment, understanding collaborative working and the team)
- Starter kit for parents/families to facilitate smooth transition available online
- Provide regional and European perspectives on managing transition
- Actively involve parents/families in the project during the fieldwork phase through focus groups and dissemination of shared experiences online and at international conferences
- Provide best practice models used within schools during periods of transition available to wider mainstream audiences through online tools and conferences.

For children with SEN this project will:

- Specialised modules from the core training modules to children with SEN
- Starter kit for children with SEN to use during periods of transition

- Actively involve children with SEN in the project during the research phase and dissemination of shared experiences online and at international conferences
- Provide an online space for children with SEN to communicate and shared experiences of transition through online story telling

For policy makers/ other stakeholders the project will:

- Provide best practice and evidence based research with core recommendations regarding
- Provide national and European perspectives of the transition of children with SEN to mainstream environments and the overall requirements for transition of children with SEN throughout the schooling system
- Involve policy makers to enable the network to grow and disseminate findings through conferences, online webinars etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Inclusive schools must recognize the individuality of each participant in the educational act and create an environment where pupils feel valued and integrated (Vrășmaș, 2001).

The aim of the multinational actions around FIESTA project is to develop end user relevant transferable models of access and learning support to enhance independence and engagement for disabled students at key transition points: pre-primary to primary and primary to secondary. It is anticipated that the lessons, methods and tools developed for independent engagement at key transition points will be specifically mainstreamed in two vital areas:

- one is in the transformation of schools formerly designated as special into open and inclusive learning centres with a sustained focus on universal access and support for all learners, regardless of levels of disability or function;
- second will be in the area of training for teachers. There will be specific inputs into teacher training needs.

Along with the reform there should be a reconsideration of content adaptation and diversification of learning methods and means of increasing individualization in terms of teaching and radical changes in the assessment strategies necessary for objective assessment, positive motivation and stimulation of each student without affecting their self-esteem and dignity in front of their colleagues by setting an artificial and subjective class hierarchy or by reference to a

number of standards without a realistic and objective contents (Ghergut; Stainback S., Stainback W., Forest M.,).

The adoption of a rights based approach to disability has in most countries come in some way to fruition mainly due to international and European developments. One could assume that with the adoption of policies that equity in the education system for pupils with disabilities with non disabled pupils exists. However this is not the case. We see across Europe that pupils with disabilities resulted in lower levels of educational qualifications and workforce participation (relative to those without disabilities). This results in social isolation and economic adversity.

FIESTA recognises the current difficulties & gaps facing EU countries in relation to inclusion, transition & collaborative working. The project focus is on collaborative teamwork, working towards higher levels of inclusion and integration. If this segregation is a common European phenomenon, it demands a common European response. The contrasting and comparative nature of research and findings is designed to develop a common European template of quality best practice which shares perspectives within the context of European added values. Disability and segregated education are not unique to any one national environment.

Historically uni-disciplinary pathways of care are utilised in European countries, this project wishes to examine how multi-disciplinary ways of working will enable inclusion and a cohesive system that will centre on the child's educational, health and social needs. It also aims to promote inclusive education and consider the wider aspects

of access to inclusive education. The opportunity exists for a cohesive collaborative approach in co-ordinating and strengthening relevant pieces of legislation that support people with disabilities into a coherent framework not only in education but for all services offered to people with disabilities.

By the end of the project, the network will redefine education, health and social systems in order to set common agendas, pool expertise and work together to enable a holistic inclusive approach. This project will provide learning stakeholders the opportunity to collaborate and meet the individual needs of pupils with special needs during transition. Transferable tools such as the self-assessment tool, transition starter kit, 4 training modules and video learning to name a few, can be used for not just pupils with special needs but for other pupils who may be particularly vulnerable during periods of transition e.g. pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds.

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