

ENABLING SEN CHILDREN'S EFFECTIVE TRANSITION THROUGH THE FIESTA PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The European funded FIESTA project (FIESTA -5177848-LLP-1-2011-1-IE-COMENIUS –CNW) focuses on achieving effective transition through collaborative working for children with special needs. The project addresses the lack of cohesion between education, health and social services during periods of transition by promoting a holistic inclusive approach. Stakeholders (schools, families, policy makers, health care organizations etc) have the opportunity to collaborate in order to meet the individual needs of pupils with special needs during transition. The project outcomes include transferable tools such as the self-assessment tool, transition starter kit, 3 training modules which can be used for pupils with special needs but also for other pupils who might be vulnerable due to temporary causes. The article presents the project training modules, which focus on raising stakeholders' awareness about disability, give mentoring/learning support and suggest ways of inclusion collaborative working. They draw on hands-on experiences of children with SEN and integrate the voices of children, parents and teachers. The training programme enables professionals, pupils and parents to outline and explore the common issues, knowledge areas and skill requirements that are demanded of those working with pupils across different contexts. It involves frequent collaborative interactions between experienced, effective teachers and new teachers/parents to address the challenges that new teachers/parents encounter. The materials offer those interested everything necessary for reflecting on concepts and practices across countries and cultures, and encouraging participants to find ways which schools might bring down the barriers.

Key words: inclusive education, transition, special needs, collaboration, holistic approach

The beginning of inclusive education in Romania dates back to 1990s. Before 1990 education for children with disabilities was provided only by special schools. Children with disabilities usually fell into three categories: recoverable, partially recoverable or irrecoverable. The irrecoverable students were marginalized because the common opinion was that education was not accessible to them. Recoverable or partially recoverable students were institutionalized in special schools where the opportunities for interaction and social development of children were very small. (Ghergut., A 2005)

Nowadays international and European developments have paved the way to the adoption of a rights based approach to disability. The *United Nations Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities (2006)*, which all EU countries have signed lies at the basis of national policy for inclusion of people with disabilities. "The Council Resolutions of 2003 on *Promoting the Employment*

and Social Integration of People with Disabilities and on *Equal Opportunities for Pupils and Students with Disabilities in Education and Training* are the two main EU level statements that guide member states' policies for special education" (Watkins, 2009). All European countries have agreed on the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994). "This collective statement is a major focal point of special needs education work in Europe - it is still a keystone in the conceptual framework of many countries' policies" (Watkins, 2009).

The Romanian Constitution stipulates the right to free education to all children and people, irrespective of social or ethnic origin, sex or religious beliefs. The law includes a special chapter on the education of children with special needs and ensures equal opportunities to education through the development of inclusive school programmes. Special education and special integrated education is provided at each level of

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education, in a differentiated manner, according to the type and degree of disability. Special education services are also provided, were applicable, in both special and mainstream education establishments. Since 1993 the Ministry of Education in Romania, with support from UNICEF, has carried out a series of initiatives in order to explore ways of encouraging the development of more inclusive practices. The Romanian initiative has included a programme of awareness-raising involving teachers, inspectors and teacher trainers from around the country.

All the programmes and activities developed so far have aimed to:

- raise public awareness towards the rights of disabled children to education.
- raise the Romanian public awareness on early intervention;
- elaborate a national strategy on early intervention;
- develop early intervention methods and programs (trainings, multidisciplinary teams, curriculum);
- increase the quality of life of disabled children and their families through promoting and supporting inclusive education in mainstreaming schools and kindergartens;
- develop curricula for children with multiple disabilities;
- promote inclusive education in Romania;

The specialists in the field of inclusive education highlight the need for training trainers in the spirit of the principles and values required by inclusive education. Teachers have highlighted the need for SEN training in initial teacher training as well as knowledge on how to implement inclusive approaches.

Romanian experts in inclusive education highlight the need:

- to increase the number of institutional structures that provide educational services in school and organizing, in each community, of one resource center, able to manage teaching and methodological changes in mainstream schools and help them to become more inclusive;
- to develop and expand programs for training and further training for teachers;
- to improve the identification process of special educational needs in order to enhance services of school psychology, compensation and educational support services. (Ghergut A., 2005);
- to use a multidisciplinary method in dealing with disability. Traditionally disability, though a complex state, was dealt with uni-disciplinarily: separating health or social services from its educational functions and responsibilities. Recent

literature draws attention to the difficulties families face in assessing services and co-ordinating all the supports. The need now is to find multidisciplinary ways of working which enables inclusion and meets the child's educational, health and social needs.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The FIESTA project (*Facilitating Inclusive Education and Supporting the Transition Agenda*) aims at enabling effective transition for children with special needs. FIESTA, a three-year (2012-2014) project approved by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme is being developed by ten partner organizations from eight countries. It brings together experts in the fields of education, health and social services. The FIESTA project promotes a multi-disciplinary learning approach relying on collaborative work of professionals in education, health and social services. The project facilitates:

1. Transition of children with special needs from pre-school to primary school and primary school to secondary school.
2. Transition of children with special needs to mainstream environments.

Considering the current difficulties and gaps facing EU countries in relation to inclusion, transition and collaborative working, the FIESTA project gives stakeholders the opportunity to collaborate and meet the individual needs of pupils with special needs. Stakeholders from all three fields: education, health and social systems are brought together to set common agendas and pool expertise in order to come up with a holistic inclusive approach. FIESTA examines how multi-disciplinary ways of working can enable enhanced inclusion and a cohesive system that centres on the child's educational, health and social needs. (Bruce A., 2009).

The resulting transferable tools on the online platform such as the self-assessment tool, transition starter kit, the three e-learning modules and video learning, can be used not just for pupils with special needs but also for other pupils who may be particularly vulnerable during periods of transition e.g. pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The FIESTA project enables professionals, pupils and parents to outline and explore the common issues, knowledge areas and skill requirements that are demanded of those working with pupils across differing occupational boundaries and contexts in the fields of health, education and social care (Gheorghiu, I., 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first stage of the project was dedicated to the exploration and examination of the existing

literature on inclusive education, transition and collaborative work in each partner country (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Romania, Spain and Scotland). The findings highlight common issues and a recent tendency towards integration in all eight countries; this means the education of children with special needs in a mainstream system, in which case the special child's needs must be adapted to fit in the mainstream school. However, inclusion is the other way round: the school has to change in order to meet the child's requirements, which needs further support and training for educational professionals.

The research has identified several barriers for a proper inclusion (Bruce A., 2013):

- parents', teachers' and pupils' attitude
- lack of diversity and flexibility to meet children's needs
- professional fears/prejudice,
- scarcity of teaching methods and strategies
- inability of national policy to influence local settings and practices
- inaccessible buildings
- lack of training or professional development for teachers.
- focus on administrative rather than inclusion issues

On the other hand research has found several approaches which facilitate inclusion:

- a flexible curriculum;
- teachers' training programmes;
- communication among all stakeholders;
- collaborative approach;
- empowering children to participate in decisions concerning their own future.

Although transition was found to be a unique process particular to each individual, the research pinpoints that children are often perceived as being passive by parents, teachers or children's organizations and, as a result, they are not involved in any decisions. Transition was performed in a very informal way in most cases. The literature review also showed that transition is more difficult for disabled children than the non disabled ones and teachers found transition from primary to middle school more difficult due to lack of communication among schools.

The research has also identified best practice approaches in enabling successful transition for SEN children and has highlighted factors contributing to this:

- Access to information on transition (children and parents)
- Planning the process

- Good communication among all the participants in the process
- Collaboration with all the participants in the process.

Another stage in the project focused on professional development and key competencies through training resources. Three training 'Managing Transition' modules were created, whose topics centre on 'Disability Awareness and Inclusion', 'Mentoring/Learning Supports' and 'Collaborative Working' ('Professional partnerships in education, health and social care' and 'Enabling transition to mainstream environments from specialized settings'). The online modules (<http://fiesta-project.eu/web/>) are based on the results of the research review as well as on the feedback from the first conference.

Each online module presents up to date theories in the field accompanied by real cases and solid bibliography which invites visitors to contribute with their own views on the online forum. Learning is based on getting informed about the issue, hands on samples and exchanging opinions about the information given or participants' own experience. The first module focuses on raising awareness about disability, which means understanding, valuing and embracing difference and diversity, responding positively to what disabled children and adults consider important in their lives and respecting the human and civil rights of all disabled people. Good information also helps children understand themselves better; talking in an open and honest way ensures that children do not feel their disability is something that needs to be hidden.

The materials also examine the current tendency regarding disabled children. Thus, medicine sees a child or adult as a problem because of their disability or special needs; by labeling them as ill, medicine ignores these people's own views and feelings. Society should acknowledge the medical problem and look after it but emphasis should be placed on people's needs and rights in order to help them fulfill their potential as human beings. The information and training provided can help teachers play a key role in promoting disability awareness and acceptance of difference in the classroom.

Module 2 emphasizes the role of collaborative working, its principles and suitable techniques to be used. All participants have to work together to achieve a common goal because success depends on sharing expertise and perceptions with the others. Module 3 presents mentoring programmes, which create strong bonds between mentors and mentees on the basis

of shared strengths, interests and needs; the module also provides participants with models of mentoring for inclusion.

The online self-assessment tool and supporting documents provide schools with adequate instruments to measure their current policies and practices in relation to collaborative working, transition models and inclusive practices. The tool also points to areas which need improvement based on the findings of the research.

The online project platform provides up to date information, training and support for education, health and social services professionals; it is also a means of multi-disciplinary collaboration among stakeholders. It addresses a wide audience from various disciplines who have an opportunity to pool expertise and exchange practices in order to make changes, which favour a multi-cultural and anti-racist society (Bruce, A., 2009).

The website is meant to create a sustainable and interactive online community of stakeholders who can apply learning into practice and also redesign it through their own experience. Website content includes the following areas: general information (including EU and national perspectives), explanation of thematic areas, news/events, research findings, FAQ, contacts/support, links, networks, policy documents.

The website is governed by the principle of Universal Design (Bruce A., 2009), which, by placing the user at the centre of the design process, requires user consultation throughout the project in order to design, test and redesign the project materials.

CONCLUSIONS

FIESTA aims to develop a network for educational professionals, (principals, teachers, specialist teachers, special needs assistants, counsellors), health professionals, (psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, clinicians), social services (social workers, family support workers, educational welfare officers) to learn, exchange

knowledge and skills online, in order to facilitate collaborative working that will provide holistic approaches that enable inclusive education (Gheorghiu I., 2012).

In terms of lifelong learning for Educational, Health and Social Professionals the project:

- Develops a transferable core of professional development training resources
- Develops a multi-disciplinary centre for professionals enabling multidisciplinary working.
- Provides a review of best practice transition/ inclusion models.
- Designs self-assessment tools for measuring approaches taken during specified transition schooling phases and identifying areas for improvement (<http://fiesta-project.eu/web/>).

FIESTA can be a reliable model for schools when adopting a transition process. Using a multi-disciplinary approach FIESTA draws attention to the need of collaborative work and support of various professionals in education, health and social services to help children. This is exactly what the project focus is: collaborative teamwork, working towards higher levels of inclusion and integration (Bruce A., 2013).

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