

Is it possible to build an inclusive school environment?

**Lessons learned by the Association for Shared Learning ELA
(the previous name is Centre for Inclusive Education)
from the implementation of the first stage of the
Model “One School for All”
or the Model for Building an Inclusive School Environment**

In Bulgaria, the year 2002 is often considered the starting point of the long road to inclusive education as it marks the beginning of the process of integration of students with special educational needs. It consisted mainly in moving students from special institutions to mainstream schools with little to no provision of support for teachers, who suddenly found themselves in a situation they were never trained for. The main resource on which they could count, and this is often valid to this day, is the support of visiting special education teachers for one-two hours per week. This dire situation, and the multitude of difficulties resulting from it, is at the core of the negative attitudes towards inclusion. Those attitudes have proven difficult to overcome both by education professionals and by parents, as illustrated by a nationally representative survey conducted by the Association for Shared Learning ELA (the previous name is Centre for Inclusive Education) in 2015 - only 36% of parents and 32.5% of teachers were in favor of inclusion in schools.

Another cornerstone year for inclusion in Bulgaria is 2016, when a new Law on Education was passed, identifying inclusive education a part of the right to education of every child. The Law stated that: “Inclusive education is the process of understanding, accepting and supporting the individuality of each child or pupil and the variety of needs of all children and pupils. This is to be achieved through the involvement and inclusion of resources aimed at removing the obstacles to teaching and learning, and at creating opportunities for development and participation of children and pupils in all aspects of life in the community.”

The new law was the result of years of advocacy efforts on behalf of NGOs and isolated successful school practices of inclusion. Today, three years later, despite having a better legal and sub-legal basis, Bulgarian education is still struggling with the practical implementation of the ideas of inclusion and hasn't made much progress on key issues such as the provision of methodological and organizational support to schools, funding transparency, channeling of support to students or ensuring the presence of students with severe disabilities in mainstream schools.

In its work, the Association for Shared Learning ELA has focused on bringing systemic change at a school level, by facilitating the engagement of all major stakeholder groups – school management, teachers, parents and children. This approach has been compiled into a Model for Building an Inclusive School Environment (the Model “One School for All”), developed in partnership with 5 pilot schools. It has since

been applied in another ten. In this article we offer 16 lessons from our practice, which we believe highlight the main pillars of our approach:

1. Inclusive education is for everybody in the school – students, teachers, parents. The definition of an inclusive school used by ELA goes further than the definition provided by the Educational law. We define it as a process of receiving and ensuring support to all children and adults in the educational process. On the one hand, inclusive school setting is possible only if every child feels safe, welcome and supported in school, and has opportunities for personal development and expression. On the other hand, an equally important condition is that every teacher feels supported, because only a supported teacher can be confident, motivated and supportive. On yet another hand, in inclusive schools every parent feels assured as to their child's safety and development, feels welcome in school and is fully aware of the opportunities to participate in school life.

2. Introducing inclusive education at school requires a systemic approach.

As many other, we started by training teachers how to support students with SEN/SpLD in mainstream schools. What we learned with time is that in order to help this small group of students, we must encompass the entire school - assist with structuring the processes at all levels – school culture, attitudes, policies, practices etc. Introducing inclusion is not a singular effort of one teacher in one classroom. It is a collective work and as such needs to encompass all the participants in the school system.

3. The school must have ownership of the change.

Instead of ready-made solutions, schools need support to understand how to help themselves. They must be aware of their needs, take responsibilities, discover their resources. The opportunity for the school team to assess the challenges and the resources of the school for themselves and to prioritize their objectives for development is the key to conducting a successful change.

4. Changes occur from the inside-out.

No doubt, building an inclusive school requires a regulatory framework and institutional will at the national level. However, coordination of systems, policies and practices at the school level plays an equally important role.

5. Four key areas.

Our Model operates at 4 areas of school development:

- School leadership
- Teaching practices



- Child protection and safety
- Partnership with parents

6. Concrete phases of the Model application

The Model guides the school team through 6 phases, offering tools and methodological support. The school setting is analysed using a specially designed self-assessment tool, consisting of key indicators in each of the four areas of the Model, involving all stakeholders;

- Priorities are selected and specific and measurable objectives are set, along with indicators for success;
- People in charge are appointed and teams are formed;
- An action plan is developed, specifying deadlines and assigning responsibilities;
- Implementation of the plan and coordination of activities;
- Progress monitoring and initiating a new cycle.

7. Indicators monitored by every school team in the four areas

1. School leadership
1.1. The school has developed a shared vision with clear focus on building inclusive, accessible and supporting school environment for all children and adults.
1.2. The school earmarks resources and invests time in building up teams in order to involve the necessary specialists and all stakeholders to ensure timely and efficient support of pupils' varying educational needs.
1.3. The school has introduced policy and procedures targeted at prevention, timely identification and support to pupils with learning difficulties.
1.4. The school has efficient qualification programme in place which is designed based on purposeful analysis of teachers' and pupils' needs.
1.5. The school ensures supplementary support and care for the mental health of those teachers who wish to benefit from it, offering them opportunities to get involved in formats led by external specialists (in case a format requires specific expertise) or by resources available inhouse.

2. Teaching practice
2.1. Teachers can recognise any learning difficulties timely and can identify every child's strengths and weaknesses by using different tools and approaches to this end.



2.2. Teachers apply traditional, multisensory and interactive teaching methods based on information about every pupil collected in advance so that they can meet the different learning preferences and needs of every pupil. Whenever possible, teachers match the way in which they check and grade pupils' success with their strengths, so that pupils are able to show the best of their capacities.

2.3. Teachers analyse purposefully any additional competences they may need in order to work with their pupils, and they plan ways to acquire and develop them. Teachers actively look for opportunities to get further training and take part in various formats (professional meetings/communities in schools, workshops, conferences, intravision, supervision, etc.) which meet their needs and they monitor the benefits they get.

2.4. Teachers arrange classrooms in ways matching the diverse learning needs and preferences of all pupils (including pupils with learning difficulties) and the specific teaching methods they have selected in order to meet those needs and preferences.

3. Child safety

3.1. Clearly regulated and defined (step by step) reporting procedure is available to the staff to refer to whenever concerns and incidents related to child safety have to be notified; the procedure is also in compliance with the national legislation.

3.2. The school has a procedure in place to select teaching and non-teaching staff, which takes into consideration the principles of child safety.

3.3. There is a code of conduct clearly indicating which conduct of adults to children and children to children is acceptable and which is not.

3.4. The school has adopted and implements policy of pupils' protection and safety.

3.5. The school ensures that all pupils are granted the same right to protection.

3.6. All decisions and policies related to safety and protection at school are consulted with the pupils and their parents.

4. Partnership with parents

4.1. Teachers hold focused (clearly targeted) individual talks with parents, which may have different goals, whenever necessary and with such frequency as to facilitate the achievement of the set goals.

4.2. The school offers environment that sets equal opportunities for parent involvement, irrespective of parents' ethnic group, religion, social status or another distinctive feature.

4.3. The school offers environment that gives parents opportunities to get involved in different initiatives, events, clubs and other formats.

8. Building analytical and self-reflexive skills of teachers.

9. Improved teachers' attitudes to classroom diversity can be achieved by combining capacity-building trainings with a dedication to fostering dialogue, promoting discussions, analysis of existing and potential school practices and sharing of observations and results.

10. New knowledge, in combination with development of analytical and reflection skills lead to **increased confidence and self-efficacy of the teachers** that leads to improved support for the students with learning difficulties which otherwise would be directed to resource support.

11. Using non-traditional professional development approaches

Sharing classroom experience and observations with other teachers can bring about new practices and help "polish" old ones. Experience sharing is most beneficial if a topic and specific goals are set. If sharing occurs between teachers from different schools, then other school contexts may become familiar and more points of view may find common ground.

12. Teacher training on partnership with parents

Creating an understanding that partnership with parents is a process rather than a one-off attempt increases teachers' confidence in working with parents. Teachers become proactive in searching new forms of communication and cooperation.

13. The power of school management

School management has a leading role in establishing the principles of inclusive education as part of the school vision, promotes a new model of relationships based on sharing of experience in the school team, team work for solving problems and a new philosophy and culture of acceptance of diversity.

14. Open communication

When the school management communicates openly with the teachers and shares responsibilities with them, the teachers become more confident and willing to take on initiatives.

15. Support creates support

Any teacher is supportive only if s/he feels supported. By support here we mean any practice contributing to teachers' emotional and mental wellbeing. Opportunities to cope with professional burnout, other than one-time team building events, enabling open conversations, mental health care, etc. are just few of the forms that the leadership team should offer to the teaching staff as care for teachers' wellbeing.

16. Child safeguarding

The inclusive school elaborates its own tailor-made policy for child safeguarding which establishes procedures, roles and responsibilities for all, according to the specific school context.

What's next?

The new Law on education and the sub-legal Disposition on inclusive education are the expression of the political will to introduce inclusive education in schools. From now on, these texts have to become the basis for the planning of long term policies that will guarantee the access, participation and learning of every child. The real reform towards inclusion only starts with the new legislation. To become a reality it requires constant efforts from the political leadership in the Ministry of education so that all students with disabilities, migrant students, and students from ethnic minorities enjoy equal access, participation and support in schools.

According to the European agency for special needs and inclusive education, for the reform to inclusive education to be successful there is a need to restructure the systems and analyze the human and financial resources. As a first step, the Association for Shared Learning ELA, since its creation in 2007, has advocated for a nationally shared vision and a road map towards inclusive education which is to bring clarity about the values, objectives, resources, deadlines and responsible parties. This vision is more needed now, when the application of the legislation shows that the change of the existing school practices will not happen easily and will face a lot of resistance among teachers and school principals. The process of elaboration of such a national vision and a road map should be done in a participatory and transparent way, with community discussions at regional level, including teachers, principals, parents, governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This process will allow the stakeholders in education to understand the starting point, the logic of the reform and its milestones and it will help the change in attitudes towards inclusion of the participants.

Access to school is important, but the quality of education that the students receive is equally important. In this context, there is a pertinent need to create a mechanism of monitoring and evaluation of the quality of inclusive education in the short term in every school and kindergarten and to offer the respective support to those schools that have shown that they need it. Failing to do so, will result in simulation and imitation of inclusive practices in many schools. Concurrently, there is a need for incentives for the schools that are making progress in implementing inclusive policies and practices, in order to motivate and encourage them.

Another important focus of the future work for the successful introduction of inclusive education is the need of improvement of the cooperation between the systems - educational, social and health structures at national and local level.

We expect that parental organizations will become more active at schools, they would act either as promoters of inclusion, or as advocates for special classes in the mainstream schools for their children.

In the last *Concluding observations on the initial report of Bulgaria* of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from October 2018¹, the Committee recommended that the State party: “(a) Replace segregated education systems with quality inclusive education; (b) Raise awareness of the advantages of quality inclusive education for society, in particular for teachers and other education staff, and also for parents of children without disabilities; (c) Intensify its efforts to ensure quality inclusive education and the provision of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities in mainstream schools, including by allocating sufficient human, technical and financial resources for it; (d) Collect data on the number of children and young people with disabilities not currently enrolled in any form of education, disaggregated by age, sex, type of impairment and place of residence, and develop a strategy to include these children in the mainstream education system” (p. 8, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2018).

Last but not least need - we will indicate the need to deeply reform the training and preparation of pre-service teachers in general education and in inclusive education.

Some data from the evaluation of change in teachers in the partner schools throughout the years when the above described system approach is been applied:

How would you describe your attitude towards inclusive education? 1-I don't support it; 5-I definitely support it - %		2014 n=114	2015 n=93	2016 n=78
1		1,0	0	0
2		2,9	1,1	0
3		29,1	5,4	7,7
4		24,3	20,4	20,5
5		34,0	60,2	66,7

Doubled support of inclusion

Is your school inclusive? 1-not at all; 5-definitely - %		2014 n=114	2015 n=93	2016 n=78
2		0	1,1	0
3		23,3	18,3	5,1
4		35,0	31,2	52,6
5		31,1	33,3	37,2

¹ Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, accessible at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx?CountryCode=BGR&Lang=EN

Improved perception of the school environment

Do all children with learning difficulty need to get resource support? - % (only those who answered)		2014 n=114	2015 n=93	2016 n=78
Yes		70,9	34,4	25,6
No		24,3	40,9	55,1
Don't know		0	11,8	14,1

Increased teachers' confidence in their own skills

How would you rate your level of confidence regarding SEN, in a conversation with parents? - % (only those who answered)		2014 n=114	2015 n=93	2016 n=78
1 – not confident		8,7	4,3	1,3
2		25,2	7,5	5,1
3		45,6	23,7	26,9
4		7,8	41,9	50,0
5 – confident		6,8	16,1	11,5

Improved teachers' confidence in communication with parents

Are you able to identify the strengths of your students with SEN -% (only those who answered)		2014 n=114	2015 n=93	2016 n=78
Always		13,6	22,6	16,7
In most of the cases		45,6	50,5	65,4
From time to time		19,4	15,1	10,3

Improved teachers' skills

Do you use differentiated instructional approaches with students with SEN? -% (only those who answered)		2014 n=114	2015 n=93
Yes		63,1	80,8
No		3,9	5,1
Not sure		7,8	5,1

Improved teachers' skills