

SDG 4: Quality Inclusive Education in Serbia

Summary

In 2019, Serbia is marking the 10th anniversary of quality and inclusive education reforms. In the past 10 years, the Government has undertaken extensive changes and reforms in the education system with a comprehensive focus on improving the equity, quality and efficiency dimensions of education. The main objective of current policies and strategies is to improve the access to quality preschool and primary education so to enhance the educational achievement of all students in general, and children from vulnerable social groups in particular.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD) passed a Law on the Foundations of the Education System, which provided the legal framework for inclusive education.

The law supported the enrolment of all children within the regular school system and defined additional support in education for students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties and students with disadvantages. Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education.

Case study is summarizing the efforts of the Serbian MoESTD to introduce and support implementation of policies related to enrolment of all children within the regular school system and supporting schools and teachers to provide relevant additional support in education for students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties and students with disadvantages. In the last decade, inclusive education policies have enabled inclusive education of thousands of excluded children and young people.

Situation

Prior to the enactment of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System in 2009 in Serbia, children with disabilities predominantly attended special schools and classes. Entry in the first grade of children with disabilities in Serbia, prior to adoption of the Law in 2009, was determined by local commissions for categorization in health centers, comprising of a doctor, special education teacher and psychologist. Their assessments were based on whether the child can adapt to the existing requirements of schools and curricula, and if the assessment was negative, they would send the child to a special school, or categorized him/her as "uneducable" child, where the child remained at home or was housed into certain residential social protection institution. There was no further monitoring of the child and his/her progress: he/she remained in that "category" practically until the rest of his/her life. That policy resulted in a number of children separated from their families in order to attend school, a large number of children who unduly attended special schools and classes, and children outside the education system, either placed in social institutions or staying at home. A large number of children from Roma families, without disabilities, were enrolled in the special schools and classes, in multi-segregated environments. Without relevant and appropriate support drop-out of Roma children was high. New legislative framework in 2009 and introduction of inclusive education including inter-sectoral commission for assessment of additional educational, health and social support completely changed the paradigm, and introduced transition from the medical model to social model, in which the school and whole social environment adapt to the needs of the child by removing physical and social barriers, in order to ensure his/her learning, acquisition of self-confidence and inclusion into community. At the same time, the MoESTD was trying to raise the overall quality of education for all students and launched reforms and adopted legislation and policies in almost all aspects of education.

Strategy

Inclusion is understood as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing their participation in learning in regular schools and reducing and eliminating segregation and exclusion. Children with disabilities are mainstreamed in regular schools and the 'categorization of children' based on disability was abolished. Legislation from 2009 was requiring the establishment of new support structures aimed at inclusive education at national, local and school levels.

Throughout the reform process, the Ministry of Education has been the main driver of change. In last 10 years, main strategies to support implementation of inclusive education were: establishment of school inclusive teams; introduction of individual education plans; establishment of intersectoral committees at local level comprising of education, social welfare and health sectors aimed at inclusive education; establishment of institutional capacities for management, coordination, monitoring and implementation of inclusive education policies; strengthening teacher's competencies for inclusive education through teacher trainings and support to schools to implement inclusive practice.

The Parliament and independent bodies (Ombudsman and Commissioner for Equality) play an important role in monitoring the implementation of inclusive education. NGOs are an important factor when independent monitoring is concerned, and an important corrective to the whole educational system. Few external evaluation studies were conducted and served as a basis for policy development and fine-tuning.

Results and lessons learned

Impact on children

- Number of children with disabilities in “special” schools decreased from 5.348 (2013) to 4.760 (2017)
- Number of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) increased from 4826 (2014) to 8.149 for IEP1 and from 3.018 (2014) to 5.897 (2017) for IEP2¹
- 345 schools and pre-schools were supported with 183 793 children (2583 children with IEP 1, IEP 2) and 10 298 teachers
- 1 525 children and 2 900 school staff and preschool teachers directly supported

Results

1. Since 2015, the Group for Social Inclusion of the MoESTD remains the main resource in the Government for strengthening institutional capacities, further development, monitoring and support to IE
2. Quality of teaching in diverse classrooms was improved through training of more than 30000 teaching staff through two “generations” of training programmes: 2009-2013 training programs were aimed at changing the mindset of individuals and educational institutions, as well as at acquiring and developing professional skills to work in a diverse classroom which includes children with disabilities; second phase 2013-2019, focus is on differentiation, classroom management; novelties in teaching strategies and support to students.
3. In all schools in Serbia, school Inclusive Education Teams are established (teachers, psychologists and pedagogues) and IEPs are introduced
4. Network for Support of Inclusive Education is composed of 120 practitioners and experts for inclusive education, covering the entire territory of Serbia. It is established and functional, fostering horizontal learning as a mechanism to spread good practice, peer learning and communities of practice is established and functional.
5. 30% of schools in 96 % of Serbian municipalities were supported through small grant programme to support inclusive education (WB loan, 2009-2012), to build capacity of the staff, eliminate physical and communication barriers, promote cooperation with parents, awareness raising activity in local communities on the importance of inclusive education etc.
6. In all municipalities, mechanisms of coordination have been established between the educational, health and social care sectors aimed at providing resources and additional support to education and social inclusions of children with disabilities and other children requiring additional support.

¹ Resources:

III National report on social inclusion and poverty reduction in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014–2017 - Education - 144-183 p

http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Treci_nacionalni_izvestaj_o_socijalnom_ukljucivanju_i_smanjenju_siromastva_2014-2017_eng.pdf

Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia - Education

http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/SerbiaProfileLauncher/files/profiles/en/1/DI_Profil_REPUBLIC%20OF%20SERBIA_EURSRB.pdf#page=6

7. Monitoring the quality of inclusive education is integrated within the overall school quality assurance policy/ quality standards for schools and it is part of the regular external evaluation of the Institute for Evaluation of the Education Quality.

Challenges

- Financial constrains to support inclusive education implementation.
- Functionality of EMIS
- Social norms, which were greatly based on belief that children with disabilities should be schooled in special education,
- Insufficient communication to actors and wide public to understand long-lasting impact of inclusive education to quality education for every child
- The transformation of special education in terms of its function, efficiency and pedagogical work.

Lessons learnt

- Introduction of inclusive education is comprehensive education reform that requires changes at national, local and school level. Most importantly, the progress was possible as inclusion and quality were seen as interlinked and inter-dependant. In addition, alignment with social welfare and health policies is needed.
- System of support for child, family and school staff needs to be developed and provided.
- Broad coalition of partners is needed.
- Communication campaigns are needed.

Contact

Name: Vesna Nedeljkovic

Organisation: Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development

E-Mail: vesna.nedeljkovic@mpn.gov.rs

