

Final report 1st phase

Slovakia

Methodology

In Slovakia the schools that could be considered to be inclusive are in an absolute minority. Moreover, there are not any official indicators that could show which school is inclusive and which is not. Therefore, we could not fully rely on the school statistics in the selection process, as they are not of a significant information value when it comes to the school's inclusive capacities. Moreover, the school statistics in Slovakia do not contain data on ethnicity of their pupils, just on nationality, which is a major hindrance considering the fact that the biggest group of children affected by the lack of inclusiveness are of Romani ethnicity, but Slovak nationality. Due to this fact we decided to contact the authorities active within the field of inclusive education and ask them for their qualified opinion on the selection of schools. These authorities were mainly representatives of non-governmental organisations active within the field of education who used to cooperate with the primary schools in the past and, therefore, could assess more precisely the school's ability/inability to promote inclusion towards its pupils. Based on the recommendations of these actors we made a wider list of potential candidates.

Secondly, we used the available school statistics and triangulated the school profiles provided by the authorities with the statistical indicators such as achievement in the country wide testing of nine-graders, drop-out rates, number of the absent hours, percentage of pupils coming from the disadvantaged backgrounds and percentage of individually integrated pupils. We also took into consideration the geographical locality of the schools bearing in mind the potential regional differences. Based on this process we excluded from the list the schools that were underperforming in the above-mentioned indicators.

Third, we went through the websites of the schools and checked their philosophy statements and the extracurricular projects they were involved in. We searched for the signs of inclusions either on the declarative level, or through the involvement in the specific inclusion promoting projects.

Last, but not least, we contacted the school principals of the pre-selected schools, introduced the project to them, asked them to describe the inclusive practices they perform at schools and as such to justify why their school could serve as a source of good practices for the others. This last step proved to be very effective as it provided

useful information that eventually helped to conclude the selection and to choose best three candidates.

The main characteristics of the selected schools

The schools selected for the project are located in three distinct regions of Slovakia and differ in their internal characteristics. As such they constitute an interesting mosaic and represent somehow authentically inclusive educational efforts in Slovakia with their successes and failures.

The Friendly school in Poprad is based in a mid-sized city (53 000 inhabitants) under the Tatra mountains in the eastern part of the country. It is an associated school that brings under one roof a kindergarten, a primary school and an elementary arts school. It works with all children based on the catchment area principle and is currently attended by 430 children.

The Welcoming school in Smolenice is based in a small village (3370 inhabitants) in the western part of Slovakia. It is currently attended by 237 pupils and its inclusive character is mainly given by its capacity and willingness to work with physically and mentally disabled children.

The School under the castle is located also in the rather small village Krásnohorské podhradie (2247 inhabitants) in the eastern region of Slovakia. What makes it distinct from the other schools is the proportion of Roma children that attend the school. 242 children are currently enrolled, most of them Roma. This is mainly a result of the so called "white flight" which the school faced in the past few years. In this sense it should not be considered to be inclusive, but still the inclusive practices are somehow present. We decided to include this school in the selection as focusing on the white flight dynamics helps to understand the situation of many more Slovak schools attended by Roma pupils.

Main findings

School management - frame for inclusion

What proved to be absolutely crucial in the schools capacity to promote inclusion is the presence of a person (in one case a special pedagogue with a support of the school principal, in other two the school principals themselves) who would take the inclusive principles for their own and would be willing to introduce them in the school. These actors would be the key figures to set the school's inclusive character. The selected schools, however, differed in the extent the inclusive principles were widely shared among the team members. Whereas in the Welcoming School in Smolenice the school's inclusive policy was mainly a result of an active involvement

of a special pedagogue who had been trying to create the inclusive milieu in the school for past 15 years, in the Friendly school in Poprad we observed more widely shared consensus about the need for inclusion. This capacity to get all team members on the board we assign to the fact that in Poprad inclusion is something which is being discussed on a regular basis during team meetings every week and, therefore, it is not a distant concept, but becomes a tangible set of practices. With the weekly frequency of these meetings (that some of the teachers also understand as too demanding, but still stress out their importance) the school succeeded in creating the atmosphere of an open communication.

Another aspect that helps to promote inclusion on the institutional level is related to the school's involvement in the extracurricular projects. May it be the enrollment into UNICEF children-friendly school program, or a wider cooperation with schools from abroad with the aim of information and teaching methods exchange, these projects seem to create an important frame for school's further development.

School atmosphere

The important feature of the inclusive approach of the schools would be an open communication. All three schools practised until different extent partner like approach with the children. The basic demonstration of this approach would be the childrens' involvement in the creation of the school rules or the existence of the school parliament, but it could go as deeply as inviting opinion of the children on issues related to school's general modus operandi. Important part of the school atmosphere would also entail the trust and willigness to understand the specific situation of each pupil, may it be his/her special learning needs, his/her family situation, or his/her actual mood and state of health. In this sense could be the institutional setting altered towards more friendly and understanding setting.

Our research showed that it is not only approach of the teachers, but also the physical setting and equipment of the school that helps to co-create its inclusive character. The presence of the objects for rest (e.g. sofas) and objects for play (e.g. table tennis or playground) in the area of school corridors and courtyards help to create the friendly atmosphere. Perhaps even more importantly, the creation of the sitting/playing zones with carpets and pillows at the back parts of the classrooms not only helps teachers to use different teaching approaches during the classes, but also creates the refuge and safe space for children. As the example of the Friendly school in Poprad showed, the school does not necessarily need much resources for this kind of milieu, as most of the things could be donated.

Teachers and auxiliary team members

The inclusive education requires teachers to focus not only on the class as a whole, but until some extent also on each child individually. This puts an additional burden on their shoulders, therefore the motivation of teachers and constant and fluid communication with school management and parents play a crucial role. What proved to be even more important is a possibility to seek support by other auxiliary team members - teaching assistants, special pedagogues and school psychologists. It is the vital cooperation between these actors which makes inclusion possible. Not only are they able to assess the individual situation of the child, create an individual learning plan and help with its implementation, but they could also assist with solving out the situation during the classes and create the space where children could calm down/rest/seek support. In this sense the example of great Britain, in which the school employs the coordinators of inclusion, could serve as a space for further development.

However, all three schools identified lack of auxiliary team members as a major obstacle in their inclusive efforts. The lack of human resources in this sense prevents the school significantly to respond flexibly to the needs of the children, especially when it comes to specific learning needs. Even though the schools tried to tackle this through different initiatives (e.g. cooperation with the municipality and employment of people as a part of a specific internship), the shortage of human capital has been a reoccurring theme.

The pupils in the focus

One of the most crucial principles of inclusive education put into practice would be the focus on individual progress of pupils instead of on their marks. In this sense also the specific learning needs could be understood not as a limitation, but as a source of further development. All three schools tried to assess and map the progress and develop the specific talents each child possess. In this regard it seems to help when the school gets familiar with the child and his/her situation already prior to his/her enrollment, either through the kindergarten, or through consultations and if the school remains in close contact with the family.

Also, what seems to be helping to develop the rapport with the teachers and support the capacity of children to express themselves is the existence of so called communities (regular meetings in a circle with pupils and their homeroom teacher that are used for different purposes, but mainly to invite children's opinion and solve problems in the class).

School parents relationship

Despite the fact that all three schools' representatives were fully aware of the importance of working with parents, not in all cases the cooperation went smoothly. In this sense especially in the School under the castle the involvement of parents into the life of the school was identified as not sufficient and would therefore probably need more institutional support. However, in the remaining two schools the parents' involvement was not only recognized as highly needed and relevant, but also actively promoted through different modes of cooperation such as alternative PTA meetings, open classes or joint activities such as e.g. reparation of the playground.

Relationships with the wider community

Despite the involvement of the community still does not seem to be a priority or common practice for neither of the schools, the three selected schools showed some successful efforts in this regard. May it be the tourist guide of the city of Poprad created by children under supervision of their arts teachers, organisation of different events such as Apples day or Children's day or a symbolic live chain in the name of the burned castle in Krásnohorské Podhradie, this kind of events helps to enhance the credit of the school, as much as provide their pupils with important social awareness.

Success ingredients in the schools

- open and fluid communication between the school management and teachers
- regular team meetings taking place weekly or once a month in which the individual situation of children is also discussed
- presence of auxiliary team members such as teaching assistants, special pedagogues or school psychologist
- focusing on individual progress of children instead of the marks or class comparison
- communities or other forms of regular meetings between children and teachers promoting children's self-expression and inviting their opinions
- partner-like approach to children and their involvement in the formulation of the school rules
- welcoming physical setting of the school enabled by relaxation and playing zones
- active involvement of parents into the school life
- community outreach of the school

Conclusion - obstacles yet to overcome

The three selected schools in Slovakia have undertaken some major steps towards inclusive education. Despite the fact that neither of them could be considered to be

fully inclusive, in the light of institutional drawbacks, lack of finances and lack of auxiliary team members their efforts to create an inclusive and friendly milieu for all children are outstanding and as such could serve as a source of good practices and successful methods for other schools.

Besides the above mentioned systemic barriers that prevent the schools to pursue inclusive principles more thoroughly, it is mainly the ability to get all the team members on one inclusive board that is crucial for the school. Also, the ability to seek support outside and include the parents and the wider community into the child's teaching process is something that the schools have to enhance even more.

The major drawback also remains the fact that in some cases even the schools selected as good practices of inclusive education tend to stream pupils into different classes based on their performance. This points to the fact, that despite existence of good practices more systemic school reform in Slovakia is needed.