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Joint EU/CoE Project “Regional Support for Inclusive Education”



Regional Conference: “Embracing Diversity through Education”

Tirana, 6-7 November 2013

Concept note

Regional Conference “Embracing Diversity through Education”

Rationale

South Eastern European countries have committed themselves to make their education systems open to diversity. Considerable efforts have been made towards this aspiration. The issue however still remains complex to address. Whenever inclusiveness in education is concerned several questions arise. One of the first is: to whom should education be inclusive? The answer is: to all students, regardless how different they may be, with particular attention paid to students at risk of exclusion and marginalisation.

How inclusiveness is ensured poses a challenge to educational experts. There is nevertheless widespread agreement that the key foundations on which inclusiveness should be rooted are: inclusive schools, inclusive policies and inclusive teachers. The European Union and Council of Europe Joint Project “Regional Support for Inclusive Education” has based its action on these three crucial stakes. The Joint Project is implemented under a larger umbrella of European strategies in which promoting social cohesion and inclusion remain a priority.

The Project, which started in January 2013, is working closely with 49 schools from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Kosovo*¹. The schools will serve as pilots, whose practices will be supported, enriched and later on replicated as successful examples. The Project supports the school environment to become more inclusive and friendly for school children; it supports policymakers in developing inclusive measures and policies while at the same time helping teachers in adopting child-focused, interactive and effective teaching techniques and methods.

Grounded on a regional perspective, the Project invites a wide range of educational professionals, experts, school authorities, teachers, school boards and parents’ councils, academics, individuals and organisations interested in education issues in the region, to participate in an open and professional debate in a conference to be held in Tirana, Albania. The Conference, on the 6th & 7th November, is an opportunity to learn about best practices in South East Europe and beyond. It will examine how diversity can be embraced in education and how schools, parents and children can all benefit from this approach. Above all, the Conference offers the chance for participants to explore the concept of diversity in its various levels and aspects. The Conference content is based on the assumption that *being diverse enriches life and that education systems are crucial to nurturing diversity and its impact on the lives of children, families and society.*

In the long-run the Conference outcomes will contribute to fulfilling the commitments undertaken by the countries of South East Europe to EU accession and to Council of Europe standards. The Council of Europe’s 47 Member States have agreed that all school-age children have a right to quality education, which public authorities have a duty to provide, without any discrimination.² The Conference will discuss, suggest strategies and develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that the Region is facing in finding the right approaches to avoid discrimination and embrace diversity.

¹ “This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence”.

² Recommendation CM/Rec (2012)13 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on ensuring quality education, adopted on 12 December 2012.

Furthermore the Conference represents a follow-up to the Joint Launch Conference for three EU-funded regional projects³ held on 27-29 June 2012 in Budva (Montenegro). This conference presented and discussed opportunities for improving the situation of minorities and vulnerable groups in South East Europe. In order to exchange best practices, participants discussed cross-cutting topics of: (a) the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation; (b) enhancing participation in public life; and (c) approaching diversity through inclusive education.

The crucial role of education in the promotion of social inclusion, tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and non-discrimination in the region was a major conclusion of the conference. Education was recognised as a tool that can play a role in providing equal opportunities for access to and participation in learning, i.e. when education systems themselves are inclusive. This conclusion will be followed up for discussion at the Tirana Conference.

A number of successful, comprehensive programmes and interventions of donor agencies, international and national organisations have contributed to improving the situation of inclusiveness of children in education in the region. Regionally, inclusiveness in education has been the focus of the European Training Foundation programmes⁴. ETF has been actively launching a professional, research-grounded debate on the issue, bringing it to the attention of policymakers, practitioners and experts. The Joint Project on inclusive education will benefit from the resources and learning acquired by these programmes, will build on the best practices established by them and coordinate and create synergies with their strategic interventions.

Objectives

The objective of this conference is twofold:

- (1) to foster dialogue about diversity in education among policymakers and others involved with education from South East Europe,
- (2) to explore and learn from best practices on diversity with regard to policies, innovative approaches and methodologies.

Educationalists from the South East Europe region will share experiences, challenges, issues and solutions on inclusive education. They will identify lessons and opportunities relevant for their education systems, policies and practices. The Conference will represent only the start of a dialogue and sharing process, which will continue to be nurtured through a shared communication platform and regional events within the Joint Project timeframe.

³ EU/Coe Joint Project “Promoting Human Rights and Minority Protection in South East Europe” and EU/OSCE/ODIHR Joint Project “Best Practices for Roma Integration”.

⁴ The project on social inclusion through education and training (2007-2011) in the Western Balkan countries, Turkey and Israel is the major ETF intervention implemented in this thematic area. Another important research programme implemented by ETF is the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Policies and Practices for Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion. This research has been accomplished using a Participatory Active Research (PAR) methodology with the involvement of all VET stakeholders.

Thematic areas

The event will focus on three thematic areas:

(I) *School and diversity*

Effective school structures, educational leadership and management, support systems for instructional staff, student and parent participation, transparent school-based policies and measures are among the crucial factors that influence how a school performs and ultimately to how quality education is delivered to the student. The Conference will discuss how diversity and inclusiveness can be cross-cutting to the school processes and outcomes.

(II) *Teachers and diversity*

Teachers are key to the success of inclusive education. Consequently, “teachers should be capable and willing to keep their pupils at (high) risk aboard and they should be encouraged and supported in doing so.”⁵ Competences and skills for inclusive teaching should be delivered during pre-service and in-service teacher training, but also through on-the-job coaching, resources and facilities. The Conference will try to answer the question: are teachers ready for inclusive education? The dialogue among participants in the Conference will help create a vision of the inclusive teacher, explore the reality of teaching and make suggestions.

(III) *Policies and diversity*

Measures and policies that encourage inclusive education have been developed in the entire South East Europe region. Examples of best practice are available and will be shared at the Conference by guest speakers. Moreover, the commitment of policymakers to undertaking reforms and schemes that facilitate inclusion in education of disadvantaged pupils will be reiterated throughout the Conference.

Approach

The conference will adopt an interactive model, in which all participants have the opportunity to create a vision for inclusiveness and respect of diversity, define and become aware of the reality. Consequently they will formulate actions and steps that help move from the actual state to the desired state or vision. Each activity will be designed in accordance with this model, leading to outcomes that will continue to ensure the interest and curiosity of participants after the Conference is over. Proposals for the activities representing each phase of the model are:

⁵ George Muskens. (2009). Inclusion and education in European countries. Final Report. Commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/inclusion/sum_en.pdf

Designing Vision:

- Short documentary showing successful inclusive education systems shown in the opening plenary session.⁶
- Plenary session with keynote speakers from policymakers will follow the presentation of the documentary. The presentations will be concise and focused only on presenting what is the vision and strategy of the country for inclusive education and respecting diversity in education.
- Following the documentary and the presentations, the participants will be provided with the opportunity to share their thoughts about the vision in a structured way.

Scheduled for Day 1 of the conference (one half day).

Describing Current Reality:

- Three simultaneous workshops on each thematic area, with mixed participation, aiming to describe the current situation, challenges, issues, successes and disadvantages. Sessions will include presentations of best practices from guest speakers.
- Workshops will be followed by a plenary discussion, to create joint understanding of the reality and context of inclusiveness in the region.

Scheduled for the first half of Day 2 of the conference.

Formulating Action Steps:

- Simultaneous group-work divided by thematic areas, inspired by real successful cases of inclusive education practices shared in the previous working sessions. Each thematic area may be divided into sub-themes. Sessions will be structured to generate discussions, proposals and ideas.
- Alternatively (or parallel to this activity) an open exchange of experiences and practices will be encouraged through the display of posters, stands and other group work. Preparatory work may be required from participants. *(To ensure consistency, groups can remain mixed during the whole duration of the conference, but at some point it may be necessary to divide policymakers, academics, schools, NGOs and others into separate groups).*
- Plenary session with conclusions and follow-up.

Scheduled for the second half of Day 2 of the conference.

Lead moderation and moderation of workshops will be undertaken by highly reputed experts.

A brief paper summarising the vision, reality and steps for action will be prepared and disseminated to participants following the Conference.

A Model for Sustainable Action

⁶ (Examples of documentaries can be found in the “Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education” webpage: <http://www.pearsonfoundation.org/oeed/>).

The innovative approach of the conference is designed to mobilise the participants to commit to and take action. Participants will be led through a structured process via skilful moderation. The principle underlying this approach is that setting the specific structure of 'vision – current reality' creates the driving force for change and the awareness for the required strategic actions. Good planning and excellent moderation for setting the structure, but also motivation of participants will be the key factors for the approach to be successful.

During the conference proceedings, the quality of the process is crucial:

- a) the vision should be conceived clearly and jointly
- b) reality should be described in specific terms
- c) action steps should be sufficient to achieve the desired end result.

The actions need to be formulated in a clear, specific, time-wise format. Most importantly, institutions or groups which are responsible for a particular action will be assigned and deadlines will be set. The working sessions (panels) will serve as the place to discuss and decide on specifics. The Joint Project will also have a voice when actions are formulated, as it will be contributing to implementation of some of the actions.

As the Conference helps to build the joint understanding of the desired end result, of the current reality, and of shared commitment and actions of stakeholders, the Joint Project will afterwards keep regular contacts with responsible entities and follow up on how the steps will be implemented. The follow-up plan will be communicated and agreed during the conference, so that participants know what is expected. The Conference proceedings and conclusions will be shared with the relevant institutions who will be asked to endorse the follow-up plan. Learning and proposals from the conference will feed the content of the upcoming events and activities of the Joint Project on inclusive education (including meetings, study visits and peer learning visits of the regional Inclusive School Network, the Inclusive Policy Network and the Inclusive Teacher Network). The Conference will eventually serve as the launch of the Pilot Schools Network.

Moreover, representatives of the 49 pilot schools from the region will be present in the Conference and will be active part of the working sessions. The Joint Project action is based on the close collaboration with the pilot school teams and communities. Day to day assistance will be ensured as schools implement their action plans. Also, the learning and best practices shared during the conference will serve as inspiration for designing the regional peer learning and study visits for schools and policy makers.

These combined efforts will guarantee that the objective is not just the conference *per se*, but will be a functional tool that, by endorsing good practices and knowing the aspiration for the future, captures stakeholders' interest and commitment on the issue of diversity in education.

Participants/Target groups

The Conference will bring together over 100 participants from South East Europe, representing Ministries of Education, Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs; Ministries of Human Rights and Minorities; Deputy Prime Minister's Offices and EU Integration Offices from the seven Beneficiaries. There will also be representatives of primary, secondary and vocational pilot schools participating in the project; regional associations/platforms of persons with disabilities (paraplegic; hearing; speaking; visually impaired; mentally challenged, etc.); associations of parents of children with disabilities; Roma Education Fund, Roma NGOs; European Training Foundation; Council of Europe;

European Commission; OSCE/ODIHR and other representatives (international organisations and agencies).

Expected results/Outcomes

- A pool of active and interested professionals who commit to contributing to the continuous discussion on diversity and inclusiveness in education.
- A list of commitments and actions from policymakers, schools and others in the region that will help education systems in the region to become more inclusive.
- A shared understanding of the vision and reality about inclusiveness in education.
- A list of topics, issues, questions and needs for further discussion, follow up and/or capacity building, relevant to designing the upcoming regional events of the Joint Project.

Languages

The working languages will be English, Albanian, Macedonian, Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian/Montenegrin.

Date and venue

The regional conference will be hosted by the Ministry of Education and Sports of Albania, on 6-7 November 2013, in the Tirana International Hotel.

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Project link: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/web/inclusive-education>