Building Open Societies Through Quality Early Childhood Care and Education:

Case Studies of the Step by Step Program

INTERNATIONAL STEP by STEP ASSOCIATION

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

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Step by Step case study researchers at the Central European University Conference Center, February 2004.

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INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

Established in the Netherlands in 1999, the **International Step by Step Association** (ISSA) is an innovative network of early childhood development professionals and organizations working to make quality early childhood education accessible to all children. While ISSA offers general membership and information sharing to all interested individuals and organizations, ISSA's core members are the 29 nongovernmental organizations, located primarily in Central/Eastern Europe and Central Asia, that implement the Step by Step Program initiated by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in 1994. Within its network, ISSA supports a wide array of programs that collectively provide a comprehensive set of educational services and advocacy tools intended to influence policy reform for families and children, with a special focus on the years from birth through primary school.

If you would like to know more about ISSA, please visit: www.issa.nl.

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The Step by Step Case Studies are available electronically at the websites of the Open Society Institute, www.soros.org/initiatives/childhood, and the International Step by Step Association, www.issa.nl.

Documenting Educational Reform:

The Step by Step Case Study Project

As the Step by Step Program approached its 10th anniversary, the Open Society Institute and the International Step by Step Association launched the Case Study Project to chronicle a decade of efforts to reform early childhood education in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Mongolia, and the Americas. Step by Step had, during its first decade, accumulated a vast base of experience that could help inform international efforts to improve early childhood care, development, and education around the globe.

Seeking to understand the experience of educational transformation and capture lessons learned—from teachers, parents, program administrators, and children—a case study research methodology was selected; one that favored qualitative data collected through in-person interviews and on-site observation. To tell the story of Step by Step—a program that began in 15 countries in 1994 and spread to 30 countries in its first decade—was, in itself, a daunting task. Inspired by the vision of building research capacity in the regions where the Step by Step Program is active, the Case Study Project also aimed to develop a cadre of skilled researchers, adept at using qualitative case study methods in educational settings.

The Case Study Project supplements previous evaluations of the Step by Step Program, which include:

- Numerous national studies carried out in cooperation with pedagogic institutes, universities, and ministries in individual countries, primarily focused on children's outcomes and changes in teacher practices;
- A four-country independent evaluation of Step by Step conducted in 1999, which demonstrated the impact of the program on children's democratic behaviors, ideas, and values;
- The Roma Special Schools Initiative, which provided evidence that many Roma children in the four participating countries are unfairly assigned to special schools or remedial classes for the intellectually challenged when in fact they are capable of reaching grade-level expectations when provided with a supportive learning environment; and
- A four-country study of the sustainability of the Step by Step Program.

The Case Study Project, led by Sarah Klaus from the Open Society Institute, engaged an international Steering Committee including Larry Bremner and Linda Lee of Canada; Teresa Vasconcelos of Portugal; Tatjana Vonta of Slovenia; Hugh McLean of South Africa; and Cassie Landers, Steffen Saifer, and Robert Stake of the United States. Committee members used their expertise in early childhood primary education, educational reform, and qualitative case study methods to support the development of training and mentoring for the researchers and to develop guidelines for the national studies.

The work was intense. With great enthusiasm, each country selected a team of researchers and proposed a topic for their study.

The work was intense. With great enthusiasm, each country selected a team of researchers and proposed a topic for their study. At the international level care was taken to ensure that the breadth of the Step by Step Program would be represented by the topics selected for study.

Over the course of six months, more than 100 researchers from 28 countries participated in an online course and two face-to-face seminars. At the same time, and with the support of an international mentor, each national team initiated a qualitative case study on their topic. Between December 2003 and December 2004, the Steering Committee met in person four times and kept up an active dialogue on the Internet-based course website established for the project. Each committee member mentored a cluster of three to five national cases. Mentors met their research teams at international seminars and kept up communication by email, phone, and on the website between meetings. In a few cases, mentors visited countries to assist with field research or with planning the case write-up.

The Step by Step Case Study Project was an ambitious undertaking with far-reaching goals.

The Step by Step Case Study Project was an ambitious undertaking with the far-reaching goal to document and understand educational reform. Individual case studies included investigations on promoting quality early education through ISSA standards and teacher certification, creating child-centered learning environments, reforming and decentralizing teacher professional development, providing inclusive education for children with disabilities, providing access to quality education for Roma children, promoting family and community engagement, and reaching children outside of preschools. Each country's case study contributes important insights to our understanding of specific program components. Taken together, they weave a rich tapestry of the Step by Step experience.

The Case Study Project has also given voice to truths about the process of educational reform that transcend the experience of individual countries. We learn in striking examples from each and every country that change is not only about program components and strategies of implementation but also about the change agents themselves: the Step by Step teachers and parents who have fueled the engine of transformation. These are stories about resilience in the face of daunting obstacles. These are stories about leadership, emerging in every Step by Step country from every level of program implementation. Most of all, these are stories about an allegiance to a new set of values and democratic principles, born of personal conviction. External conditions may foster or impede educational reform efforts, but the knowledge gained by teachers and parents, and the visible achievements of the children, cannot be discarded or ignored. After a decade of Step by Step, we have learned that this new approach will endure.

With Thanks

OSI and ISSA thank the Step by Step NGOs for their work in identifying researchers and providing information for the case studies; the Steering Committee members for their dedication and guidance; Rochelle Mayer and her team of editors—Carol Sternhell, Rachel Holmes, and Hugh McLean—for their work in focusing, refining, and compiling the national studies; Jim Herrmann for publication design; and Zsuzsa Laszlo and Laura Liliom for their support in coordinating the online course and training events.

The Step by Step Program: An Overview

The Step by Step Program grew out of the belief that democratic education in the earliest years—child-centered, inclusive, individualized, responsive, community-based—can prepare an adult population that will be ready to take active, informed roles in civil society. Although its goal is educational transformation, the Step by Step Program is not a "curriculum" or a "methodology." It is a vision, a network, and a series of program initiatives to make quality early childhood education accessible to all children.

In 1993, research linking experiences in the early years to lifelong human development inspired philanthropist George Soros, founder of the Open Society Institute (OSI), to make a significant investment in new programming in early childhood education in regions where OSI was then active. Evidence repeatedly demonstrates that quality interventions early in life disproportionately improve outcomes for those children most at risk, offering an opportunity to alleviate the effects of social disadvantage. OSI's Step by Step Program, launched in 1994, directly responded to the decline in social service systems supporting families and children in Central and Eastern Europe. Through implementation of quality early childhood programming, OSI sought to improve chances for target groups such as Roma and other minorities, children with disabilities, and children living in poverty to participate actively and equally in democratic societies.

Designed to implement child-centered reforms and community engagement in preschools and systems that train preschool teachers, the initiative has grown to encompass a wide range of interventions that serve children from birth through age 10 and their families, including:

- **Early Childhood Programs (0–6):** Center-based preschool and infant/toddler programs, and parent- and community-based programs for children without access to preschool;
- **Primary School Programs (grades 1–4):** Child-centered methodologies for the early grades, school improvement, community education, and transition to middle school;
- **Equal Access Programs:** Education for Social Justice (anti-bias adult education, diversity in the classroom, second-language learning), inclusion of children with disabilities, and Roma and minority education;
- **Teacher Education**: Pre-service and in-service teacher-training courses, student practicum opportunities, and preparation of adult teacher trainers;
- **Civic Participation in Education:** Parent advocacy and development of national early childhood NGOs;
- **Professional Standards and Assessment:** Program and teacher standards, trainer standards, preschool and primary school child observation instruments.

Step by Step has gained respect for its comprehensiveness and the continuity of services it provides for children from birth through age 10, as well as for its effective implementation model, which links pilot programs with teacher-training institutions and policy reform.

In most countries programs were initiated under the auspices of national Soros Foundations and later established themselves independently, forming some of the first national professional nongovernmental early childhood education and development organizations in the region. National Step by Step programs operate currently in 27 countries in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Baltic States, as well as in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mongolia. These national networks leverage a combined force of 1,300 trainers, 400 school- and preschool-based training centers, and 190 collaborating pre- and in-service institutions to provide ongoing professional development in innovative pedagogies to more than 30,000 early childhood educators, parents, and other stakeholders annually.

At their initiative, the Step by Step NGOs established the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) in 1999, a Dutch-registered international association operating out of Budapest. ISSA serves as an international voice for the Step by Step Program, providing venues for professional exchange of information and experience as well as deepening implementation and development of the Step by Step initiatives in participating countries.

Quality Early Education: Building a Foundation

ISSA's mission statement begins with a dedication to quality and a core set of principles: "To fulfill the promise of quality care and education for each child the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) shall promote principles based on democratic values, child-centered approaches, active parent and community involvement, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion." Translating this mission into effective educational practices requires a clear delineation of what is meant by "quality care and education." It also means supporting teachers—through training and mentoring—to implement classroom practices that help each child to reach his or her full potential.

ISSA provides a spectrum of services and resources to promote the continuous professional development of teachers. Underlying the concept of professional development is a view of learning and mentoring as an ongoing, lifelong process.

Two Key Tools: Standards and Certification

The ISSA Pedagogical Standards—developed by an international task force of early childhood professionals—provide a tool to monitor and assess teacher performance based on principles of child-centered education. The Step by Step standards include individualization, learning environment, family participation, teaching strategies for meaningful learning, planning and assessment, professional development, and social inclusion (see table below).

Standards help to educate children and families in principles of democracy. They advance educational reform by encouraging administrators, government entities, and other professional organizations to recognize the importance of child-centered education. They also help parents understand and advocate for learning environments that promote intellectual curiosity, creativity, and social development.

ISSA Pedagogical Standards*

Standard 1: Individualization
Teachers use their knowledge of child development and their relationships with children and their families to appreciate the diversity of each class and to respond to each child's unique needs and potentials.
Standard 2: Learning Environment
Teachers promote a caring, stimulating, and inclusive classroom by organizing the environment in ways that best facilitate children taking learning risks, practicing democracy, and working both cooperatively and independently.
Standard 3: Family Participation
Teachers build partnerships with families to ensure optimum support for children's learning and developmental needs.
Standard 4: Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning
Teachers design and implement varied strategies to promote conceptual understanding and to encourage innovation, creativity, independent inquiry, social cooperation, and exploration within and across the disciplines.
Standard 5: Planning and Assessment
Teachers create plans based upon national standards, program goals, and individual needs of children and use a systematic approach for observing and assessing each child's progress.
Standard 6: Professional Development
Teachers regularly evaluate and strengthen the quality and effectiveness of their work and collaborate with colleagues to improve programs and practices for young children and their families.
Standard 7: Social Inclusion
Teachers model and promote values and behaviors that support human rights, social inclusion, and the foundation of open democratic civil societies, including protection of the rights of all minorities.

*Previously known as ISSA Teacher Standards.

The Step by Step standards also provide a framework for teacher certification and professional development. ISSA and OSI accredit nongovernmental organizations operating Step by Step programs to certify teachers. Teacher certification follows a systematic process consisting of self-assessment, portfolio review, classroom observation by a Step by Step certifier, development of an individual improvement plan, and a second observation. ISSA accredits nongovernmental organizations operating Step by Step programs to function as regional certifiers. These NGOs in turn train certifiers and certify individual teachers. Certification provides teachers with international recognition of their commitment to a child-centered environment and high-quality teaching skills.

The following resources are available from ISSA:

- ***Pedagogical Standards for Preschool and Early Primary Grades***
- ***Step by Step Mentoring Guide for Quality Improvement: A Master Teacher Trainer Handbook***
- ***Teaching for Quality Improvement: Applying ISSA Pedagogical Standards in Classrooms***

The Case Studies

This monograph brings together three case studies that explore questions of evaluation, certification, and educational quality. The first case study, from Slovenia, investigates the validity of the ISSA Pedagogical Standards themselves and asks whether the certification process, using the standards, could also be an effective strategy for both teacher evaluation and professional development. The answer is "yes"—when the use of ISSA standards is combined with constructive feedback, reflective conversation, and the active participation of teachers in creating a plan to improve quality.

The second case study, from Czech Republic, documents the emergence of the process of certification in the Czech education system and explores the role played by certifiers from the perspectives of both teachers and the certifiers themselves. Certifiers are inspired by their new role; they feel it is an exceptional opportunity to observe and learn from others. The researchers note that the sustainability of Step by Step certification in Czech Republic is uncertain. On the positive side, the Step by Step standards reflect the general trend in both Czech and European education toward child-centered classrooms and democratic values. However, the demand for certification will be low if teachers themselves are responsible for covering the cost of the process.

The third case study takes another close look at the certification process, this time through the eyes of one teacher from Slovenia. The researchers followed Anja, a teacher widely recognized for her excellence, through the process in order to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between teacher certification and classroom practice, and to garner insights about teacher motivation and the personal challenges of engaging in the certification process. Participation in the certification process had a direct impact on Anja's teaching. The principal and parents agreed that a very good teacher had become even better. Yet Anja, despite the accolades of others, still regarded involvement in the pilot certification process with trepidation. The challenge will be to demonstrate to teachers that the personal and professional benefits they gain from the certification process are worth any initial anxiety they might feel.

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Conclusion

ISSA's experience with the certification process underscores the need for close collaboration between ISSA's Pedagogical Standards and those accepted by the Ministries of Education. Understanding the barriers to, and motivation for, certification underscores the role of legislation in supporting professional development. The challenges and insights raised by these case studies will be of interest to those concerned with the interface between policy and practice.

Teacher Evaluation Using ISSA Standards: A Tool for Professional Development and Quality Improvement

Researcher: Tatjana Vonta, EdD, Director, Developmental Research Center for Educational Initiatives "Step by Step," Slovenia

Photographs by Tatjana Vonta

Observation in the classroom.

The ISSA Teacher Standards, developed by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA, 2002), provide a model for teacher certification in the Step by Step Program. We were interested in the question of whether the certification process, using the ISSA Teacher Standards, could also be an effective strategy for teacher evaluation and professional development. A study was implemented in Slovenia (Vonta, 2003) to address the following research questions:

1. How good are ISSA standards as a measure of quality?
2. Does the quality of teaching improve for teachers who participate in the certification process?
3. What kinds of factors influence the results on ISSA standard scores?
4. What are teachers' opinions about the certification model and process?
5. What are certifiers' opinions about the certification model and process?
6. Do these opinions change over the duration of the whole certification process?

Research Design and Instruments

Based on the following characteristics, a representative sample of 20 preschool teachers was drawn from all 123 preschool teachers implementing the Step by Step methodology in classrooms for children three to six years old during the 2002–2003 school year in Slovenia:

- Years of job experience
- Level of formal education
- Average age of children in the classrooms
- Amount of in-service training
- Number of Step by Step classrooms in the preschool
- In-service training of teacher assistants

Two instruments were used to measure quality: the ISSA Teacher Standards Observation Form (ISSA, 2002) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

ISSA Pedagogical Standards*

Standard 1: Individualization
Teachers use their knowledge of child development and their relationships with children and their families to appreciate the diversity of each class and to respond to each child's unique needs and potentials.

Standard 2: Learning Environment
Teachers promote a caring, stimulating, and inclusive classroom by organizing the environment in ways that best facilitate children taking learning risks, practicing democracy, and working both cooperatively and independently.

Standard 3: Family Participation
Teachers build partnerships with families to ensure optimum support for children's learning and developmental needs.

Standard 4: Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning
Teachers design and implement varied strategies to promote conceptual understanding and to encourage innovation, creativity, independent inquiry, social cooperation, and exploration within and across the disciplines.

Standard 5: Planning and Assessment
Teachers create plans based upon national standards, program goals, and individual needs of children and use a systematic approach for observing and assessing each child's progress.

Standard 6: Professional Development
Teachers regularly evaluate and strengthen the quality and effectiveness of their work and collaborate with colleagues to improve programs and practices for young children and their families.

*ISSA Pedagogical Standards, previously known as ISSA Teacher Standards, now include a seventh standard on social inclusion.

ECERS (1980): 37 Items organized into 7 Subscales

Personal Care Routines
1. Greeting/departing
2. Meals/snacks
3. Nap/rest
4. Diapering/ toileting
5. Personal grooming

Furnishings/Display
6. Furnishings (routine)
7. Furnishings (learning)
8. Furnishings (relaxation)
9. Room arrangement
10. Child-related display

Language/Reasoning
11. Understanding language
12. Using language
13. Reasoning
14. Informal language

Fine/Gross Motor
15. Fine motor
16. Supervision (fine motor)
17. Gross motor space
18. Gross motor equipment
19. Gross motor time
20. Supervision (gross motor)

Creative Activities
21. Art
22. Music/movement
23. Blocks
24. Sand/water
25. Dramatic play
26. Schedule (creative)
27. Supervision (creative)

Social Development
28. Space (alone)
29. Free play
30. Group time
31. Cultural awareness
32. Tone
33. Exceptional provisions

Adults
34. Adult personal area
35. Adult opportunities
36. Adult meeting area
37. Parent provisions

with 37 items (Harms & Clifford, 1980). We selected ECERS as a second instrument because ECERS has frequently been used for comparative studies on quality.

The study proceeded in two phases: preparation and evaluation. In the preparation phase we trained certifiers in the use of the instruments, tested the certifiers on inter-rater reliability, and created instruments for assessing teachers' and certifiers' opinions. In addition, we held meetings with teachers to share information and materials about the certification process. Teachers completed a self-evaluation according to the standards and registered for certification.

The activities in the evaluation phase of the research are listed in **Table 1**.

Quality Improvement Planning

A key strategy for promoting professional development and quality improvement was the development and implementation of a Quality Improvement Plan. Based on findings from classroom observation, the teacher and Master Teacher Trainer (MTT) jointly developed a plan for improving the quality of teaching. Areas identified in the plan might include:

- Structure of the physical environment
- Individualization
- Involving children in the planning process
- Transition between activities
- Systematic observation and assessment of children's development and learning
- Meaningful and process-oriented learning
- Cooperative learning
- Developing elements of critical thinking (anticipation, inference, asking questions, argumentation, planning, and assessing)
- Active parent participation in the learning process
- Planning
- Experience-based learning
- Teamwork

Results

1) ISSA standards are a valid tool for measuring teacher quality.

In order to ascertain the validity of the ISSA standards, we compared the results of the findings from the ISSA standards with the ECERS findings. We found a high and statistically significant correlation between the results on the ISSA standards and the ECERS at the beginning of the certification process (first observation) and at the end of the process (second observation). After the first observation the Pearson's coefficient of correlation was 0.88; after the second observation it was 0.84. We also measured the regression between ISSA and ECERS results and found them to be statistically significant. These results confirm that ISSA

Table 1

Activities in Evaluation Phase		
What	**When**	**Who**
1. First observation with ECERS (37 items) and ISSA standards	Beginning of November	2 Master Teacher Trainers (MTT) receive training to become ISSA certifiers
2. Discussion with teachers after observation in the classroom	Beginning of November	2 Master Teacher Trainers
3. Quality Report	Middle of November	2 Master Teacher Trainers create and write the report; 1 MTT communicates the findings in the report
4. Development of a Quality Improvement Plan (with teacher's active involvement)	Middle of November	Teacher coaching by 1 Master Teacher Trainer (the same MTT who communicated the findings from the Quality Report)
5. Implementation of the Quality Improvement Plan	Middle of November through the end of March	Teachers
6. Second observation with ECERS (37 items) and ISSA standards	End of March to beginning of April	2 Master Teacher Trainers
7. Discussion with teacher after the observation in the classroom	End of March to beginning of April	2 Master Teacher Trainers
8. Quality Report	End of March to beginning of April	2 Master Teacher Trainers writing the report; 1 MTT communicating the findings from the Quality Report
9. Quality Improvement Plan (with teacher's active involvement)	End of March to beginning of April	Teacher coaching by 1 Master Teacher Trainer (same MTT as communicated the findings from the Quality Report)

Teacher Standards are a valid tool for measuring teacher quality.

2) Teachers who participate in the certification process show improvement in the quality of their teaching.

The results on the ISSA standards after the second observation are statistically significantly higher than after the first observation on all standards (see **Table 2**). Moreover, the data indicate that teachers improved their quality no matter what kind of instrument was used to measure quality.

These findings suggest that the activities entailed in the certification process—observation with follow-up discussion, identification of the teacher's strengths and weaknesses for each standard, and active participation of teachers in the creation of a Quality Improvement Plan—provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and improve their practice.

3) The amount of in-service training has a positive effect on ISSA standards scores.

We also examined the relationship

Table 2

Differences in Scores between First and Second Evaluation with ISSA Standards				
	MAXIMUM	AVERAGE SCORES IN FIRST EVALUATION	AVERAGE SCORES IN SECOND EVALUATION	DIFFERENCE
STANDARD 1 Individualization	9	7.0	8.3	1.3*
STANDARD 2 Learning environment	9	6.4	7.9	1.5*
STANDARD 3 Family participation	18	13.5	16.1	2.6*
STANDARD 4 Teaching strategies for meaningful learning	15	10.8	13.2	2.4*
STANDARD 5 Planning and assessment	21	15.0	18.2	3.2*
STANDARD 6 Professional development	12	10.2	11.4	1.2*
ISSA together**	72**	52.7**	63.7**	11.0*

**Differences are statistically significant (analysis of variance: Huynh-Feldt test).*

*** Total scores without scores at Standard 6.*

between the results on ISSA standards with such variables as amount of in-service training, amount of formal education, and number of years of teaching experience. As indicated in **Table 3**, we found that one variable—the amount of in-service training—was positively related to ISSA scores (Pearson's Coefficient of Correlation). However, we found no correlation between the level of teacher's formal education and ISSA scores. This result is surprising since we are aware from other research of the importance of a high level of teacher education for achieving quality. It may be that the content and teaching approaches in higher education, based on traditional educational methods, are too dissimilar from the knowledge and skills measured by the ISSA standards to have a positive effect on ISSA scores. On the other hand, in-service training that was in tune with the content and methods of the new educational paradigm—provided mostly by the Step by Step Program—resulted in high correlations with scores on the ISSA standards.

The amount of in-service training has a positive effect on ISSA standards scores.

4) Overall, teachers' opinions about the certification model and process were positive.

Teachers who were involved in the certification process said, at the end, that they would recommend certification to their colleagues. They affirmed that quality improvement can be achieved because it is based on a plan that is clear, operational, and proactive. They valued the certification process because it was goal-oriented, promoted higher responsibility, and was better than self-evaluation because help was provided.

5) The certifiers identified challenges as well as positive aspects about the certification process.

The certifiers noted that aspects of the certification process were stressful and difficult, especially the process of engaging low

Table 3

Correlation between ISSA Scores and Some Independent Variables				
	FIRST EVALUATION		SECOND EVALUATION	
	N	CORRELATION OF SCORES WITH ISSA	N**	CORRELATION OF SCORES WITH ISSA
DAYS ON TRAINING-SUM	N=20	0.58*	N=19	0.61*
AVERAGE AGE OF CHILDREN IN THE CLASSROOM	N=20	-0.25	N=19	-0.03
JOB EXPERIENCE OF TEACHER	N=20	0.33	N=19	0.11
NUMBER OF SBS CLASSROOMS IN PRESCHOOL	N=20	0.03	N=19	0.01

**Correlation coefficient is statistically significant.*

*** One teacher didn't participate in the second observation due to an extended leave of absence for health reasons.*

ISSA-scoring teachers in reflective conversation and quality improvement planning. However, they had a high opinion of the ISSA observation form and their preparation for the certification process. Moreover, they viewed their experience as one that positively influenced their own professional development as well as that of the teachers.

6) Opinions change, becoming more positive, over the duration of the certification process.

At the beginning of the process, teachers thought that the certification process was good because of the opportunity to receive feedback on their teaching. At the end of the certification process they felt it was good because it contributed to their professional and personal development and increased their satisfaction and motivation.

Conclusions

Our research confirmed that ISSA standards are a valid instrument for external evaluation of teachers and, at the same time, can be used as an effective tool for professional development when combined with constructive feedback, reflective conversation, and the active participation of teachers in creating a Quality Improvement Plan. The certification process is, however, only one small piece in a larger system of professional development that seeks to change the culture of the school and the culture of teaching to improve children's (and adults') learning. This larger system includes training and workshops, exchange of ideas, and support from colleagues, principals, and Step by Step team members. Step by Step seeks to build capacity for coaching and mentoring teachers in reflective teaching to achieve better quality and to develop a "learning community" on both the school and network level.

Coaching the teacher in preparing an individual Quality Improvement Plan.

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The Role of a Step by Step Certifier in Czech Republic

Case Study Researcher: Lenka Franova, PhDr

Snapshot: A Morning's Visit

It is a cold February morning, but in the dining room of a Prague nursery school it is warm and comfortable. Three of the new certifiers, Dana, Vera, and Ida,* are at their first training in-class visit. They have already been observing for an hour. Children are all around in ripped-up and painted T-shirts, smiling and talking. They are working on their prehistory project in activity centers.

Vera is sitting under the blackboard at one side of the room. She watches the children and their teacher make spears from colorful paper. Suddenly, a red-haired girl comes up and shows her a picture of a brontosaurus she has just finished. Vera looks at the girl and says, "That is a very nice picture." The girl wants her to come to the center. Vera smiles at her, but says, "I have some work here, you know," turning away toward her observation notes.

Educational Reform in Czech Republic

Since the fundamental political changes of the 1980s, the Czech education system has been in a process of ongoing reform. The National Education Development Program, published in autumn 2000, known also as the White Book, formulated a clear vision for the medium-term reform of the Czech education system and provides the foundation for its development. Promoting child-centered education and democratic values, the White Book shares close affinity with both the key progressive directions currently advocated by the European Union and the core principles of Step by Step methodology. Representatives of Step by Step participated in the development of the White Book, and the Czech Republic Step by Step team were chosen to design and implement education modules presenting the Ministry requirements and reforms to the public. New directions in teacher evaluation are central to these reforms.

As national education policy has become increasingly child-centered, demand for the Step by Step education methodology has skyrocketed. "This year, the demand for the Step by Step seminars, courses, and summer schools is almost twice as high as this time last year," says Zuzana, certifier and certifier coordinator. The Step by Step Program is now working in 60 kin-

*The names of the individuals in the case study were changed in order to keep confidentiality.

dergartens and 45 primary schools in Czech Republic. Its sustainability is conditional upon maintaining the quality of the program and developing a well-functioning network of teachers trained in the program methodology and its effective implementation.

Initially, Step by Step Czech Republic focused mainly on the number of teachers trained and schools involved in the program. Now priorities are shifting. "How well the program works in the classrooms became more important than the number of classrooms," says Zuzana. Only a high-quality program can achieve change for children and have the potential to survive in the competitive environment of Czech education. The certification process is a powerful tool for supporting teachers in reaching and sustaining high-quality work, and thus is also a crucial tool for the survival of the Step by Step Program.

Previously, teacher evaluation was state-controlled, using criteria that evaluated the quantity, not the quality, of teaching results. It measured errors, but offered little support for improvement. Over the past few years, Step by Step certification practice has brought a new method of evaluation into the education system, integrating evaluation with support for the professional development of teachers. Dana, a Ministry official and Step by Step certifier, summed up the importance of this difference: "For the Step by Step certifiers, reporting on the current quality means just a starting point of a systematic support process."

"For the Step by Step certifiers, reporting on the current quality means just a starting point of a systematic support process."

It is anticipated that soon every school will have to comply with the policy requirements of the White Book and its reform principles. Ivana, a former Step by Step nursery school coordinator who is now head of the Division of Further Education for Education Staff, comments, "The great shift from the previous education policy is that the basic goals stated by the provisions are not expressed as a certain amount of knowledge, but as crucial competencies children should gain." Decisions on practical ways to achieve the stated goals are delegated to the management of each individual school. Each will need to write up an individual curriculum specifying the methods for achieving the goals in their school. This legislative change promotes individualization and diversification of education methodologies.

The Development of Certification in Czech Republic

The initial certification trainings for a group of seven education specialists took place in Bucharest in October 2002, followed by training for nine additional people in Prague in February 2004. Between November 2002 and March 2003 the procedural framework was put in place for the successful implementation of the certification process. Several concerns were raised in these early days, the main one being that Czech teachers did not traditionally aspire toward certification—a legacy of the conventions of the Soviet education system, which stressed uniformity. There was also a fear that underpaid teachers would not be able to afford this service, even though teacher fees cover only a portion of the costs, with the remaining costs funded by Step by Step. As this funding model is not sustainable for the long term, schools are looking to the Ministry for financial resources for professional growth.

Despite the concerns raised, by March 2003 18 teachers had applied to participate in the certification process. Of the 12 teachers who embarked on the process, eight had received their certification by April 2004 (six after the second observation, and two after their third observation). Four teachers were still going through the process.

The teachers who were successful in certification had spent on average eight years in the Step by Step Program, and taken an average of three trainings a year. Zuzana comments: "The basic conditions of the certification procedure and the certifier's role have already stabilized."

The Case Study

Between January and July 2004 a case study was undertaken to describe and evaluate the role played by the certifiers in the certification process. The case study explored how different people, from beginning certifiers like Dana, Vera, and Ida to veterans in the field to the teachers being observed, view and experience their roles in the certification process. We conducted in-depth interviews with Marie, a certifier

and International Step by Step Association (ISSA) lecturer; Tereza, a primary school teacher; Jiri, a school director; and Ivana, the former Step by Step coordinator and future certifier who is now a Ministry official. We focused on how different people involved view the role of certification, and how certifiers experience their role.

The case sought to identify the emergence of the process of certification, and the shaping and defining of certifiers as a professional group. Combining document review, in-person interviews, observations, and questionnaires, we explored the key issues determining the role that certifiers play, and might further develop, in the Czech education system.

The Certification Process in Practice

The certification process begins with the submission of a teacher portfolio prior to the first observation visit. This portfolio provides an instrument through which the teacher can self-assess the quality of her/his work and reflect on professional-development requirements. The certifier reviews the portfolio, looks for all potentially useful information, and makes notes that might be used later in an interview or in writing reports. Trained certifiers then observe the classroom to assess the teacher's quality level, using the Step by Step Teacher Standards.

After the first observation, a development plan is devised to help the teacher improve implementation of the standards in the period between observations. Teacher and certifier work together to create this plan, a mechanism that provides constructive and concrete suggestions for professional growth and quality improvement. Six months later, the certifier returns to observe the classroom to evaluate the teacher's attainment of ISSA standards. If the quality achieved is high enough, the teacher receives an ISSA Certificate. If not, the teacher and certifiers refine the individual development plan.

In-class observation is the main source of information about the quality of teaching. The observation usually takes three hours and involves three certifiers at a time. It is not common practice to have three certifiers present at one observation in other Step by Step countries. However, the Czech Step by Step team decided to work this way, at least for a while, because it allows team learning. The certifiers can discuss and compare their observations, thus increasing reliability, providing quality assurance, and ensuring the continuing development of certifier expertise. As certifier and ISSA lecturer Martin explains, "There is a need to learn how to rate the teachers well and how to ensure inter-rater reliability."

What does a certifier's typical day look like? "A lot of traveling and effort," says certifier and ISSA lecturer Marie, and most certifiers agreed that traveling provides time for essential preparation. "It's good to know the portfolio very well," Marie adds. The observations take the whole morning. Following the observations the certifiers do the scoring, discuss their findings with each other, and prepare questions and topics for interviews with the teacher. Teacher interviews take place in the afternoon, and the next steps in the process are arranged before the certifiers leave the school.

It is crucial to "establish a cooperative atmosphere, to ask very concrete and clear questions" and, when giving the teacher feedback, "to praise her/him for specific behavior that complies with the standards."

While observing, the certifiers do not communicate with each other, the teacher, or the children. They carefully observe the teacher's and children's behavior, their mutual interactions, and the classroom environment, making detailed notes on the observation sheet. After the observation, each certifier scores to what extent the teacher meets the criteria outlined in the Step by Step Teacher Standards. The certifiers then analyze and discuss the observation sheet together and arrive at a consensus scoring. Each certifier counts the percentage of overlap between her/his scoring and the consensus scoring. This overlap is called reliability, and for every certifier it needs to be at least 80 percent to consider the conclusions of the observation reliable. If 80 percent reliability is not achieved, the observation visit has to be repeated.

The scoring and preparation of interview questions usually takes two hours. The teacher interview follows, with all three certifiers present. Sometimes, especially when the teacher is nervous, only

one certifier conducts the interview while the others observe. More often all three certifiers ask questions, a more natural and personal approach, but one that may be more stressful for the teacher. According to Martin, it is crucial to "establish a cooperative atmosphere, to ask very concrete and clear questions," and, when giving the teacher feedback, "to praise her/him for specific behavior that complies with the standards." He also believes that it is very important to "formulate the criticisms in a constructive way and offer some concrete suggestions."

Searching for Quality or Correcting Mistakes?

All the people interviewed agreed that the main role of a certifier is to support teachers in improving their work, which corresponds with the task of a certifier as formulated by ISSA. However, the various people involved in the process have a different understanding of what such support means. These divergent views reflect different approaches to the role, and different definitions of what is meant by quality and improvement.

An interesting contrast emerged between the teacher's perception of the role played by certifiers and the perceptions of others involved in the process. While talking about the nature of the role, Marie, the certifier, Jiri, the school director, and Ivana, the Ministry official, use only positive language, employing such vocabulary as "help," "guiding," "support in personal and professional growth," "taking care," or "opening the door to improvement." In contrast, Tereza, the teacher, says the main role of a certifier is "pointing out the mistakes, pointing out what the teacher is doing wrong and what could be done better and how." She says she appreciates the certification process because before she did not know what she had been "doing right and what wrong." These positions represent two distinct points of view. One looks at the personal and professional needs of a teacher to achieve quality teaching—asking, *How can we support this teacher to achieve her/his goals?* The other focuses on fulfilling given norms and external criteria that set what is right and what is wrong—asking, *What are the mistakes that should be corrected*?

Training emphasizes that the certification process is a service for teachers and "does not mean control or seeking mistakes," but this case study suggests that this understanding is not yet commonplace among teachers. Ivana, the Ministry official in charge of professional growth of teachers, says: "Many teachers do not understand it is a service, they do not understand the certifiers are there for them." Czech teachers are used to being controlled and evaluated by the school management and by the Czech School Inspectorate; they do not have previous experience with a service like this, and are not used to receiving intense support on a partner basis.

Providing feedback on quality is a difficult and sensitive task; some teachers are nervous and not ready for a partner dialogue about possibilities for improvement in their practice. As one certifier explains, a problem arises when a teacher perceives "the certification as sort of an examination—'Am I good or not?'"—and views the certifiers as authorities from whom s/he needs to get "reassurance and praise." Receiving suggestions for improvement and new stimuli for further growth might then become unpleasant and unwanted. Although such a problem is not common, the certifiers face it and need to deal with it.

Rewarding Aspects of the Role

Jane, a certifier and ISSA lecturer from the United States, emphasizes that certifiers

represent a completely new Step by Step position, a new level of responsibility that advances the development of the program. She notes the great impact this position might have on an individual. "A certifier has an exceptional opportunity to observe and learn from others, to gain fantastic experience she or he can use to improve as a teacher or anywhere else," she says.

Certifiers most frequently say that they appreciate the opportunity to see how Step by Step works in the classroom. One of the certifiers describes the role as "a constant inspiration." Marie delights in her close contact with teachers in classrooms. As a Step by Step lecturer, she says, she is really excited to see the program working, "to see results of my work."

Difficult Aspects of the Role

Certifiers reported that providing feedback in the interviews with teachers and writing reports are the most difficult aspects of their job. It is demanding to reflect the teacher's work objectively and to communicate this to the teacher—"to perceive and be able to express even fine nuances of his/her work." Feedback has to be provided in a precise way that supports and helps teachers in improving their work. Such a task is especially difficult if the teacher is nervous and "not at all prepared to talk about possible growth opportunities."

Marie emphasized the need to use descriptive language and to be sensitive so as not to hurt or discourage the teacher. Certifiers follow this rule also in writing reports. They always describe the teacher's behavior and evaluate according to the standards. Findings must be backed by the observation.

Writing reports is demanding and time-consuming. When discussing concerns for future certifiers at the February 2004 training in Prague, report writing was frequently mentioned. Thus, trainings on providing effective and sensitive spoken and written feedback represent a vital educational need for certifiers.

Looking to the Future

The future of certification is closely connected with the future of educational reform in Czech Republic. This study showed that certifiers are devoted to development of the practice. The certifications completed at the time of the case study in 2004 proved that the process was valuable for the teachers and certifiers involved. But the process is not yet widely available. According to Zuzana, "There was a strong need for broadening the network, because it was often difficult to arrange an observation date when three certifiers were free, if there were just seven certifiers in total." The February Prague training was an important first step in the process of extending the network.

Cooperation with the Ministry, sustainable financing, and an analysis of cost-effectiveness are vital for the future, and the case study developed questions and strategies for tackling these key areas.

What will the role of a certifier look like in the future? It became apparent in the case study interviews that there was no need for major changes in the role. However, two concrete suggestions emerged. Jiri, the school director, suggested the need for closer cooperation between the certifiers and the teacher. This might take the form of consulting with the teacher on lesson plans between the scheduled observations. Marie suggested expanding the certifiers' role and treating them as consultants able to provide schools with a wide range of services, which might include help with designing individual education programs.

Case study participants offered sweeping visions of the future of certification. Some hoped certification would become a natural part of the systematic education and career growth of teachers, while others envisioned its use as a mechanism for external evaluation by an independent organization. "The work of certifiers could develop in connection with the career growth of teachers," comments one certifier, "and also with joining the European

Union. I think that maybe a teacher with the Step by Step certificate could get a job in the EU more easily than others. And I believe that the certifiers' experience might be used in creating a team of education supervisors and consultants."

The future role of certifiers depends upon many unpredictable factors. One important issue is the question of recruitment: Will future certifiers be mainly the Step by Step teachers and lecturers, or will they be recruited from other professions? The ISSA lecturers Jane and Martin, as well as all those interviewed, believe that recruiting certifiers from a variety of different professions will benefit teachers; the teachers, however, disagree with this view.

According to Step by Step Director Klara, "The people from the whole area of education, not only teachers, can bring a bird's-eye view into our system. The quality would not be jeopardized. There is a need to overcome the opinion that only a teacher can understand the teacher's work. We are not afraid to look for new certifiers also in other professions."

Ivana, the Ministry official and future certifier, agrees. "There should be a wide range of professions, including teachers from various types of schools, lecturers, education specialists, psychologists, and other helping professions," she says. "However, among the three certifiers who observe in the classroom, there should always be at least one who has experience with teaching."

In contrast, Tereza, the teacher, believes certifiers should definitely be teachers. She considers teaching experience to be essential to the integrity of the process. "To be honest," she says, "if somebody from the outside is telling me something, I think he/she might not understand it, whereas I really respect the people who come from the practice." Tereza's comments point to the crucial issue of trust. At the time of the case study, all the certifiers were experienced Step by Step lecturers, which probably accounts for the high levels of trust teachers placed in them. How teachers will perceive a new generation of certifiers—which may include people with little education experience—remains a question.

Reflection

Dana, the Step by Step certifier and Ministry official, points out that the educational reform contained in the National Education Development Program, or White Book, "is the first time when legislation has overtaken the reality." In this context, she considers "the situation for implementing the Step by Step Program as very favorable," adding, "It is not appropriate to call it 'an alternative pedagogy' as some people do, because it corresponds to the basic documents setting the rules." Schools need concrete methodologies to help them design curricula that meet reform goals. Given this reality, Ministry official Ivana, the former Step by Step nursery school coordinator, suggests, "The Step by Step Program standards might be the answer the schools are seeking."

A number of important challenges remain for the future. Certification is a new phenomenon within both the Step by Step network and the Czech education system. Perceptions regarding teacher evaluation will have to change, as will the perceived value of professional development. The role of certifier is recognized as being rewarding for all involved; but how can it be expanded further in a sustainable way while maintaining the credibility it must have to remain effective? The strategies developed to address these questions will be critical in determining the future of certification in Czech Republic.

Meanwhile, demand for Step by Step methodology, of which certification is such an important element, is growing. More and more teachers follow, or take inspiration from, the Step by Step Program when designing their school curriculum. According to Ivana, teachers "can be sure that if their school meets the Step by Step standards it will also meet the compulsory standards of the general programs without taking any additional measures." The Step by Step certification process plays a vital role in motivating professional growth, deepening and extending teacher qualification, supporting career development, and providing quality assurance for teaching standards in the classroom. It helps strengthen the partnership between Czech education reform and Step by Step Program methodology to address the needs of children, families, and communities by promoting the implementation of child-centered education and democratic values.

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Lenka Franova, *The Role of a Certifier: The Czech Republic Case Study*.

The Professional Journey of Anja—One Teacher's Experience of the Step by Step Certification Process in Slovenia

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"To have a quality relationship with children and parents you always have to work at it—a quality group does not happen by itself."

—Anja, Step by Step preschool teacher in Ljubljana

A Concern for Quality

Step by Step took off quickly in Slovenia. In 1995, a year after it was introduced, seven preschools began implementing the program. By 2002, 220 preschool teachers were using Step by Step, with approximately 400 more using elements of its methodology in their classrooms. This success, although gratifying, produced a new challenge. Ongoing evaluation had been part of the implementation process from the outset, but the rapid expansion of Step by Step led to concerns regarding program quality in Slovenia, as well as in other countries implementing the Step by Step Program.

In 1999 the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) established a Task Force on Standards to address these concerns, comprising representatives from 10 countries, including Tatjana Vonta, EdD, director of the Developmental Research Center.[1] The Task Force developed the *Step by Step Program and Teacher Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades*, intended to ensure the development of child-centered programs "in which teachers facilitate learning in ways that are consistent with children's developmental levels, individual needs, interests, and different learning styles."[2]

The ISSA Teacher Standards include six areas[3] of emphasis (see **Table 1**).

The Pilot Certification Study

How can the ISSA Teacher Standards best be used to ensure program quality? In 2003, Dr. Vonta undertook a Pilot Certification Study in Slovenia to determine the validity of using the ISSA standards as a teacher certification tool and to examine whether the certification process could be used as an effective strategy for professional development.[4] ISSA selected experienced Step by Step preschool teachers to train as certifiers. Certifiers learned how to observe and evaluate Step by Step implementation within the framework of the six Teacher Standards.

The Pilot Certification Study included the following components:

1. *Self-evaluation.* Using an instrument for self-evaluation, the teacher assesses the quality of her/his work.
2. *Classroom observation.* Using the ISSA standards, a trained certifier observes the classroom to assess the teacher's quality level.
3. *Professional development plan.* Following the observation, the certifier and teacher discuss the results. Working together, they create a plan for professional growth and quality improvement.
4. *Implementation and mentoring.* Over the next four or five months the teacher implements the professional development plan, with coaching from the certifier.
5. *Second classroom observation.* The certifier again observes the classroom to evaluate the teacher's attainment of ISSA standards. If the quality achieved is high enough, the teacher receives an ISSA certificate. If not, the teacher and certifier refine the individual development plan.

Table 1

ISSA Teacher Standards
Standard 1: Individualization Teachers use their knowledge of child development and their relationships with children and their families to appreciate the diversity of each class and to respond to each child's unique needs and potentials.
Standard 2: Learning Environment Teachers promote a caring, stimulating, and inclusive classroom by organizing the environment in ways that best facilitate children taking learning risks, practicing democracy, and working both cooperatively and independently.
Standard 3: Family Participation Teachers build partnerships with families to ensure optimum support for children's learning and developmental needs.
Standard 4: Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning Teachers design and implement varied strategies to promote conceptual understanding and to encourage innovation, creativity, independent inquiry, social cooperation, and exploration within and across the disciplines.
Standard 5: Planning and Assessment Teachers create plans based upon national standards, program goals, and individual needs of children and use a systematic approach for observing and assessing each child's progress.
Standard 6: Professional Development Teachers regularly evaluate and strengthen the quality and effectiveness of their work and collaborate with colleagues to improve programs and practices for young children and their families.

Anja's Journey through Certification

To develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between teacher certification and classroom practice, the Slovenian case study research team participating in the international Step by Step Case Study Project decided to follow the journey of one teacher who had completed the pilot certification process. Anja, a preschool teacher in Ljubljana, was selected because of the significant increase in her performance scores on the ISSA Teacher Standards between the first and second classroom observation periods. For the case study, data from the Pilot Certification Study were supplemented with in-person interviews with Anja, her principal, and the certifier, as well as with parents and their children.

Prior to the certification process, Anja was recognized by her peers and parents of children at the school as being an outstanding teacher. The case study team examined what motivates a teacher who is already recognized for excellence to participate in the pilot certification process. The core questions that formed the basis of the study were:

1. What motivated Anja to participate in the pilot certification process?
2. What impact did the certification process have on her practice?

Anja's School

The Ljubljana preschool where Anja teaches is situated in an affluent neighborhood with an ethnically homogeneous population, reflecting the composition of Ljubljana—there are few recent immigrants or visible minorities. Ninety percent of the children attending the school come from dual-income families. Only 2 percent of the students are other nationalities, mostly children of foreign consulate representatives.

> "I knew feedback would not be terrible. I was doing my best, but maybe I could do things a little differently."

Opened in 1967, the school has approximately 600 students, ages one through six, and 70 teaching staff, 35 teachers and 35 teaching assistants. Between 90 and 95 percent of children entering the preschool at age one stay until they begin elementary

school. The preschool is open five days a week from 7:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Children receive breakfast, a morning snack, lunch, and an afternoon snack. The school has an excellent reputation. Parents, who are actively involved in school life at many levels, subsidize the preschool fund.

Motivation and Values

By August 2004, Anja had been teaching preschool children for 31 years. She has been involved in Step by Step for eight years, and is currently the Step by Step coordinator in her school.[5] Anja loves children and wants to be the best teacher she can be. According to Anja's self-evaluation undertaken during the first stage of the pilot certification process, she holds high expectations for herself, achieves her goals, stands up for herself, is not afraid to disagree with others, values the opinions of others, and admits to her own mistakes. She regards "life as a process of change, transition, and permanency." Reflecting on her personal motivation, she says, "All these years I have been trying to change that part of me which calls for change and at the same time I have been trying to remain true to myself. … I have always felt the need and wish for personal and professional growth."

On her questionnaire Anja wrote, "I would like to know more about my weaknesses and strengths in teaching and hope it will help me be a better Step by Step coordinator." She also said that she felt responsible for the professional development and growth of the whole team, and regarded the certification process as a source of knowledge. As she put it, "You need knowledge to lead." Anja had the desire "to learn more, to get a better understanding of my practice … I wanted another person to observe me."

Overall, the case study found that Anja's core motivations for certification were:

- The conviction that continuous improvement is a professional responsibility;
- A quest for validation of her teaching quality;
- The desire to obtain an objective view of her own practice;
- A wish to gain insight into her strengths and weaknesses to develop strategies for self-improvement;
- A commitment to develop professional tools and self-assurance for mentoring other teachers; and
- The desire to gain more self-confidence in her mentoring practice.

The Process of Certification

At the beginning, Anja was unsure of what to expect. Although she had volunteered for certification, she admits now that she had hoped not to be chosen. When she was selected, however, she threw herself into the experience. "I put my real self

Table 2

Certifier's Opinion about Teaching Style—First Observation

Standard 1: Individualization

- She trusts the children and gives them opportunities for self-initiated learning and independence. She gives the children enough time to organize themselves, supporting them with clear goals in mind.
- There is less attention to multicultural approaches, since the group is ethnically homogeneous.

Standard 2: Learning Environment

- She provides well-equipped centers of activities.
- There is less attention to the visual learning style.

Standard 3: Family Participation

- She involves parents in the classroom and organizes educational workshops for them.
- She has meetings for creating good relationships and a positive climate between families and the school and for sharing experiences and information.
- She recognizes children's interests and needs from conversations with parents individually or from the parents' group meetings.
- She is planning long-term cooperation with parents.

Standard 4: Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning

- She enables cooperative learning and social cooperation.
- In times of transition and during routine tasks, she gives the children opportunities for informal learning.
- Tasks are developmentally, individually, and culturally appropriate.

Standard 5: Planning and Assessment

- The teacher and children together plan daily activities and evaluate daily work.

Standard 6: Professional Development

- She is a Step by Step Program coordinator in the kindergarten. She is a trainer on Step by Step trainings and workshops.
- She is actively included in other educational trainings, with the aim of professional growth.

behind and was acting as my professional self," she says. The most important part of the process, she adds, was the "feedback from the certifier on how I was working with—and my relationship with—the children." Anja admits to having been a "little threatened at the beginning … but I knew feedback would not be terrible. I was doing my best, but maybe I could do things a little differently." Professionally, she found the pilot certification process gave her "inner strength," in that "it reinforced my beliefs about my practice."

Following the first classroom observation, the certifier shared the results with Anja (**Table 2**). Together they developed an improvement plan that Anja believed she could accomplish (**Table 3**).

After four months of working on the plan, Anja felt she was progressing according to the Teacher Standards. During this time, she worked with her mentor—the certifier—and had meetings with school-based pedagogues and other teachers in the school. She consulted with her teaching assistant and participated in a Step by Step workshop organized by the Developmental Research Center. She studied educational literature, reviewed her training and seminar records, and revised her documentation on observing and assessing children's development and the planning process.

Growth and Change

In Anja's experience, "Certification was the meeting point of theory and practice." It gave her the opportunity to see "what I had to change and how to go about it." As a result of the pilot certification process, and as evidenced by the improvement in scores from the second classroom

Table 3

Professional Development Plan after First Observation
Standard 1: Individualization **Goal:** Presentation of the families, their culture and family traditions. **Strategy:** Develop folders about families, which will recognize children's identity and help to build good self-esteem. Organize meeting with fathers, who are less involved in the school.
Standard 2: Learning Environment **Goal:** Rich environment for learning in a classroom. **Strategy:** Display plans, graphs, summaries, daily schedule, attendance, weather chart in the place for group meeting; present everything with attention to different learning styles.
Standard 3: Family Participation **Goal:** Keep parents informed about their children's work and learning in the group. **Strategy:** Display information daily on the board in front of the room.
Standard 4: Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning **Goal:** Develop long-term integrating units. **Strategy:** Children participate in planning based on constructive learning: *What I think I know/ What I would like to know/ How I will get the information about it.* Plan displayed on the wall.
Standard 5: Planning and Assessment **Goal:** Transfer from content-oriented planning to goal-oriented planning. **Strategy:** Define the goal first; then define content and activities.
Standard 6: Professional Development **Goal:** Improve teamwork with teacher assistant. **Strategy:** Share the tasks and responsibilities at work; share the power. Develop higher expectations of the teacher assistant.

observation (see **Table 4**), Anja's teaching has improved in quality. Discussing how reflective practice has become a bigger part of her teaching strategy, Anja says, "I think more about my work … I critically reflect on what I do to help and plan on what I need to do to meet students' needs. … I always try to act from behind, not the center."

The certifier agreed that the pilot certification process had a positive effect on Anja's practice and the learning environment. "Anja has more interaction with her students. She is more open; animated. Now she thinks more about all children, not just those who question or who are bright. Before she was intrinsically good, but she has started to think more about meaningful learning, structured planning, and assessment."

Anja became a role model and mentor to others, able to share insights and knowledge with colleagues, helping in turn to improve their practice and improve children's learning outcomes. She described to colleagues how she had made adjustments to her pedagogy, including a revitalization of thematic teaching, the introduction of student feedback on classroom activities, and enhanced vehicles for parent contact.

Parents and children supported these findings, and were very positive. Anja was viewed as having an inclusive classroom in which children are engaged in diverse activities. Anja's "interaction with the children is more open," one parent reported. "There is deeper cooperative learning. She has girls and boys do things together; interaction is better." Another

Anja's "interaction with the children is more open," one parent reported. "There is deeper cooperative learning. She has girls and boys do things together; interaction is better."

Table 4

Anja's Scores on the ISSA Teacher Standards							
Scores	**ISSA Standards**						
	Individualization	Learning Environment	Family Participation	Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning	Planning and Assessment	Professional Development	Total
MAXIMUM SCORES	9	9	18	15	21	12	84
Anja's scores after first observation	*6*	*5*	*15*	*10*	*15*	*11*	*62*
Anja's scores after second observation	*9*	*9*	*18*	*14*	*20*	*12*	*82*

noted that she uses "more charts—visual things for children," especially when teaching mathematics. She was seen as skilled in her ability to motivate children—getting them to do things they might not otherwise want to do.

The high esteem in which Anja is held by parents was evident throughout the interviews. Parents said she requested and respected their opinions and input. They feel welcomed when they go to the school and mentioned field trips, picnics, and home visits as ways in which Anja involves them. They commented that Anja has a positive impact on children's academic learning and supports their social and emotional development: "She knows how to individualize very well. She gives the children the time needed for good performance; she encourages every child in strengthening her/his weak points." Importantly, parents regard Anja as "encouraging children to independence without unnecessary stress … every child has an opportunity to express her/himself in her/his own distinctive way."

Children don't distinguish between their teacher's performance before and after certification, but their enthusiasm for the learning opportunities and activities in their preschool classroom is demonstrated in interviews. Talking about class activities, some of the children described working with cubes: "I can build a ship or something like that." Others said they liked to work in the kitchen, or another activity area.

One child declared, "When we take a walk, we learn something new." Another said, "When we are in the woods and we find something we talk about it."

Art materials were available and children liked having the opportunity to work with them "because you can stretch them and make different shapes." One described how he had learned "about dinosaurs and how to build a bear's house." Another revealed she had learned "we should not shout and rage around … we should walk down the street calmly."

The principal and parents agreed that a very good teacher had become even better. A teacher's practice is not limited to teaching methods, but also includes strategies for building relationships with students and their parents. The powerful combination of good pedagogy and a positive learning environment, where everyone is welcomed and valued, creates the necessary conditions for achieving student learning outcomes.

Reflections on the Certification Process

Anja's experience demonstrates clearly the importance of the pilot certification process, which supported an already high-quality teacher through collegial assessment and critical self-reflection, resulting in positive personal and pedagogical changes.

The benefits of the pilot certification process were also reflected in its impact on other teachers, who concluded that certification gave their colleague credibility in her role as a leader and mentor: "Giving the person importance." There was initial resistance to Step by Step from some teachers because they recognized that implementing a child-centered program requires additional time and work. However, as the principal notes, "Many elements of Step by Step have been taken and implemented throughout the school."

The challenge that remains is how to engage reluctant teachers in a personal and professional development process that demands critical self-reflection. Perhaps the answer lies in sharing personal stories like Anja's.

The process is seen as augmenting staff skills and enhancing the reputation of the school, particularly among parents. A sustainable model for the delivery of this type of programming would be welcomed.

A potentially difficult issue remains. Anja, despite the accolades of others, still felt trepidation, initially, about involvement in the process. In this case, Anja had the strength to put aside her "personal self" and focus herself as a professional. Not all teachers may have the courage and resilience to place themselves in a situation which is perceived to be potentially high-risk. Indeed, it may be the teachers who most need help with their practice that are least likely to engage in the process. The challenge is to demonstrate to teachers that the certification process is not risky, and that the personal and professional benefits are worth any initial anxiety they might feel. Appealing to teachers' intrinsic motivation, the goal that originally attracted them to the profession—helping children learn—may be one answer.

It is essential to establish trust with the teachers to reassure them that the certification process will be nonthreatening. The process of certification has to be presented to the teacher as an ongoing process of personal and professional development, rather than as teacher assessment. Teachers need to be provided with individual support throughout the certification process.

Anja's experience shows the power of certification to create structures and processes that support teachers' professional learning. The challenge that remains is how to engage reluctant teachers in a personal and professional development process that demands critical self-reflection. Perhaps the answer lies in sharing personal stories like Anja's.

Notes

1. Throughout the rest of the discussion, the Developmental Research Center for Educational Initiatives "Step by Step" will be referred to as the Developmental Research Center.

2. International Step by Step Association (2002). *Step by Step Program and Teacher Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades*. Hungary: International Step by Step Association.

3. A seventh standard, on Social Inclusion, has since been added to the ISSA standards: Teachers model and promote values and behaviors that support human rights, social inclusion, and the foundation of open democratic civil societies, including protection of the rights of all minorities.

4. A report of the research study "Teacher Evaluation Using ISSA Standards: A Tool for Professional Development and Quality Improvement" is included in this monograph, 11–15.

5. In Slovenia each school implementing the Step by Step methodology has a Step by Step coordinator who is responsible for building a team of teachers and who acts as a bridge between teachers and the Developmental Research Center.

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Larry Bremner, Proactive Information Services Inc., and the Developmental Research Center for Educational Initiatives "Step by Step," Slovenia, *A Slovenian Case Study Step by Step Pilot Certification Process: One Individual's Experience*.

Creating Child-Centered Environments and Learning Opportunities

Step by Step's child-centered education is built around two core beliefs: that children create their own knowledge from their experiences and interactions with the world around them; and that teachers and parents foster children's growth and development by building on their needs and strengths. Using a thematic approach, classrooms are organized around developmentally appropriate learning and activity centers. Step by Step teachers facilitate children's learning and focus on creating a community of learners. Highly valued student skills include intellectual curiosity, independent learning, enthusiasm, empathy, and caring.

The case studies from Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro illustrate the educational context in which many Step by Step programs operate. Traditional educational standards reflect an overemphasis on knowledge-based curricula with little emphasis on practical life skills. Content is fragmented with few links between subjects. Teachers struggle with outdated bureaucratic authoritarianism. By comparison, these cases show how Step by Step methods alter traditional methods and environments. Through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, parents, and children, the day-to-day workings of Step by Step classrooms come to life. Issues raised include the impact of child-centered teaching on children's language and self-esteem, the creation of high-quality teaching environments in spite of limited resources, and strategies for overcoming barriers to change.

Highly valued student skills include intellectual curiosity, independent learning, enthusiasm, empathy, and caring.

Estonian educators describe how child-centered methods complement and reinforce democratic principles. Since Estonia became independent in 1991, there have been some remarkable changes in education, including curriculum reform, freedom of choice, and the creation of a technology-based global learning environment. Despite these dramatic shifts, Soviet-style teaching methods still characterize many institutions. According to some educators, such terms as democracy, democratic education, and child-centered education are unfamiliar and difficult to understand. The confusion has in turn fueled a tension between a child-centered and subject-centered focus. This case study examines how the terms democracy and child-centeredness are understood in Estonian Step by Step. Noting that some teachers feel that child-centered teaching requires extra time and energy, the case study investigates the degree to which Step by Step methods are actually applied in classrooms.

In Georgia, teachers' creative energies are unleashed through thematic lesson planning. Information is conveyed through observation, exploration, and experiment. These methods stimulate children's thinking as they learn to explore and reach conclusions. There is a positive impact on language skills, self-esteem, and creativity.

The case study from Montenegro focuses on the impact of Step by Step principles on reading and writing. Through classroom observation, interviews, and photography, the case study researchers explore how the Step by Step Program was implemented in a third-grade class in Podgorica, the capital city of Montenegro. The case study documents how the methods used to develop reading and writing skills encourage listening, storytelling, and a joy in learning.

Children create their own knowledge from their experiences and interactions with the world around them.

These case studies all show how Step by Step's child-centered learning methods are consistent with and complement ongoing reform processes. Step by Step has firmly established child-centered approaches, and has paved the way for democratic educational practices.

"A Good Beginning": Democratic Education in Estonia

Case Study Researchers: Kristel Pau, Project Assistant Manager, Hea Algus; Judit Strompl, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Tartu; Maili Vesiko, MA, Academic Consultant, Tallinn University; and Meeli Pandis, MA, Lecturer, Tallinn University

"This word 'democracy' is actually so difficult. I always thought that democracy meant freedom of speech and saying out loud everything you think. But then we went to one lecture where someone said that actually democracy means that there are elections; then decisions come back from above. That is not ever so much freedom as I imagined. Is it?"

—Eva, a Step by Step teacher*

Learning Democracy

The children in Eva's third-grade class at Vanalinna School sit around tables in small groups of four or six. Often this means that they have to twist their bodies uncomfortably to see the blackboard at the front of the room, but this is one way they practice democracy: teamwork every day, and no rigid, old-fashioned lines of desks. The room—shared with a first-grade class—is bright and cheerful, with alphabets, poems, children's drawings, and a big map of Estonia on the walls. Children gather on the fuzzy carpet, surrounded by pillows and a comfortable armchair, for meeting at the beginning and end of the school day. At other times, they sprawl on the carpet to play with puzzles and Legos, read books, or listen to music. Blooming houseplants make the room feel cozy, alive.

An ordinary classroom, perhaps—not so different from child-centered classrooms around the world—but to many Estonians, quite remarkable. For decades the aim of education in Estonia—following the Soviet model—was to teach children to be obedient citizens. A good student was one who didn't think for him- or herself and who always knew the right answers. A good teacher followed the rules and offered fixed and predetermined lessons. In Eva's lively classroom, the children freely share their opinions. For some, this is a novel experience.

Gathering her pupils on the carpet, Eva asks, "Does anyone have something to share about what you did this weekend?" and "What has delighted you and what has made you sad during this week?" Each child gets a turn to speak, and each one listens to the others. Everyone's contribution is important. Everyone's voice is heard.

Eva, an experienced Step by Step teacher, has implemented the program's child-centered methods for seven of her 15 years in the classroom. Her own daughter was a pupil in the first Step by Step class in Vanalinna School, so she has both a parent's and a teacher's appreciation for the program's philosophy. Now many young teachers come to observe her classroom as part of their Step by Step training.

During one class, when the students wanted to talk about the war in Iraq and how it might affect Estonia, Eva abandoned her prepared lesson plan and followed the children's lead.

In traditional Estonian classrooms students were expected to be deferential to teachers, even subservient. Step by Step children, teachers say, are outspoken, inde-

*All the names of persons and places have been changed to assure the confidentiality of the research subjects.

pendent, and confident. If something is wrong in society, they believe, it is up to them to take action and spark change.

Anna, a Step by Step teacher trainer, recounts—with both bemusement and pride—one child's reaction to a new teacher: "It was a first Valentine's Day with the new teacher and this child, Hendrik, wrote the teacher a letter. 'You are a good teacher, but you could teach us in a different way. And if you don't know how you could do that then go to my previous teacher and ask her. But if you don't want to do it, then it would be better if you were not a teacher.'"

Hendrik, Anna comments, has understood how to change a situation he feels is not acceptable. He had the courage to speak out and offered a very democratic solution: teamwork. The new teacher could have been offended—could have punished the child for rudeness—but in fact she went to another teacher and asked her to collaborate.

Education in Estonia

Since the restitution of Estonia's independence in 1991, the words "democracy," "democratic," and "child-centered" have been frequently used when talking about education. The changes from the old Soviet-era school system have been striking: the curriculum has been revised, students have been given more freedom of choice, and new technologies have been introduced in most classrooms. Despite these changes, however, the Estonian educational system remains troubled. And despite the rhetoric of reform, many teachers and institutions remain mired in the old ways.

In the first years after independence, the emphasis was on forming a new government and expanding economic opportunities, not on education. Teachers' salaries declined and fewer young people went into the profession. The teaching and administrative staff at many schools became steadily older. Teacher-training colleges were academically in deep crisis. Truancy and school violence were on the rise.

Today most Estonian educators are committed—at least in theory—to child-centered methods. The goal of education, they say, is to prepare students to be citizens of a democracy and to give them the lifelong skills and knowledge that will help them function in their personal lives, work, and the wider society. But despite the new rhetoric, older teaching methods persist at many institutions. There is a contradiction between the new language of child-centeredness and the old subject-centered curriculum. Indeed, in the post-Soviet era, Estonian education became even more subject-oriented than it was previously. Even preschool and primary education focused more on academic knowledge and less on the social and emotional development of children.

Step by Step children, teachers say, are outspoken, independent, and confident. If something is wrong in society, they believe, it is up to them to take action and spark change.

Step by Step—known as Hea Algus or Good Beginning, in Estonian—was introduced to Estonia in 1994, by the Open Estonia Foundation and the Open Society Institute. Hea Algus, a member of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), was officially registered as a non-governmental organization in 1996. Today, Step by Step is widely accepted in Estonia, with its methodology implemented in about 500 preschool and primary school classrooms in all the country's 15 counties. Some 10,000 children—about 10 percent

of Estonia's pre- and primary-school-level population—have been reached by the program. Elements of Step by Step methodology have been integrated into the curriculum at three teacher-training institutions, Tallinn University, Haapsalu Teachers' College, and the University of Tartu School of Teacher Education.

Currently much of the Step by Step Program's activity in Estonia is devoted to providing further education to preschool and primary school teachers. The Hea Algus Koolituskeskus, or Training Center, known as HAKK, offers in-service training on Step by Step methodology, including special training courses on such topics as inclusion of children with disabilities or parent involvement in the classroom. Hea Algus also offers individual counseling to families who are unable to provide optimal conditions for the development of their children from infancy until age three.

One goal of Step by Step's approach to educational reform is democracy building, an idea discussed explicitly during trainings. The program's child-centered teaching methods, and its encouragement of family and community involvement in education, aim to engender democratic principles in young children and their families. By offering choices, encouraging personal responsibility, teaching children to show respect to one another, practicing honesty, developing critical-thinking skills, and rewarding independent thinking, the program helps educate the citizens a functioning democracy requires. Yet what does "democracy" really mean? Even Step by Step teachers aren't always sure.

Democracy at School

To many teachers, democracy is associated with freedom—freedom of choice and freedom of speech. Children are free to choose their activities, teachers are free to teach as they wish, parents are free to choose the best school and class for their child. All parties are free, and encouraged, to speak their minds.

At Kalda School, in another cheerful, plant-filled classroom, the children's desks are in traditional rows so everyone can see the blackboard at the front of the room. Besides, says their young Step by Step teacher Iiris, they can no longer all fit on the carpet. Nevertheless, Iiris never skips the morning meeting. "It's important to tell the news every morning even if they sit behind their desks," she says. Like Eva at Vanalinna School, Iiris sometimes puts aside her own lesson plan in order to respond to student interests.

Step by Step children tend to be very independent. They know where to get information and they take responsibility for the different tasks, whether they have to work alone or cooperate with others. At Kalda School, the director notes, the students, on their own, arranged parent-teacher conferences, contacting teachers and parents and scheduling the meetings.

Some teachers worry that too much democracy will make classroom management impossible. Rita, a Step by Step teacher who defined democracy as "the freedom to decide everything," comments, "To be honest, in our situation we can't let the children decide everything."

But even freedom comes with rules, as other teachers point out. Democracy always has some bounds. "The laws are the basis for everything and if you don't follow them the democracy has no sense,"

Iiris says.

"We have freedom, but within the laws and rules," agrees Mare. "Children have to follow the class rules, have to take into consideration their classmates, have to make sure everyone has enough peace to work, have to put their things in order—all the elementary things." The simple—yet difficult!—lesson that everyone must raise a hand and be called on before speaking is a powerfully democratic message. "Rivo, you're very helpful, but let the others also provide answers," Eva gently reminds a small boy who keeps calling out the solutions to math problems. The next time he wants to speak he almost trembles with the effort of keeping still, but he dutifully raises his hand until Eva calls his name.

To many teachers, classroom democracy is as much about consideration as it is about freedom. "This is already a little bit a democracy for me," comments Anita, "the tolerance and good attitude and taking other people's needs into consideration. And if teachers consider the children, then I think they get used to considering others as well."

In Eva's classroom, when Andreas reads a story out loud he makes many mistakes, although he tries very hard. Some of his errors make the story sound comical and the other children begin to laugh. But Eva turns the laughter aside. "Andreas, how wonderful; your reading has become much better," she says.

Learning to think of other people, and recognizing each child's individuality, is what some Step by Step teachers mean when they speak of child-centeredness. "I take all the children as equal," Kristiina says. "I don't favor one more, and I take into account the individuality and abilities of everyone." Another Step by Step teacher, Ingrid, agrees. "You have to consider the child, be fair, and offer them work appropriate to their abilities. You have to understand that he or she is a child, not an adult—yet you do not communicate with a child as if you were higher and the child lower."

Democracy in Society

Estonia is a democratic state, with a constitution that says the supreme power is held by the people, yet many in the country argue that the people are too ignorant to make important decisions. As one politician, Peeter Kreitzberg, famously put it, "The biggest danger for democracy is uneducated voters." Estonian educators thus feel a grave responsibility: to produce a new generation of informed citizens, with the knowledge to decide, the ability to think critically, and the courage to speak out.

"The people in a democratic state can make their decisions themselves; not only someone high up can decide," Kristiina says. "The people can also execute their decisions. The freedom to choose—the young and old people would be taken into consideration—everyone would have an even chance for living, for being, for education, and for culture."

Some teachers hope for democracy in the future. "I imagine that democracy is a freedom to decide absolutely by yourself," says Rita. "Everything. Our society is not yet ready for such a democracy."

Others note that the political authori-

ties seem far-removed from the lives of ordinary Estonians. "I think all these high-level decision makers should step down a little bit and visit the schools," Anita comments. "It's very easy to write the laws if you don't know how difficult they will be to carry out. I think the people who write the laws for schools should work at a school for some time. I would like it if the people who govern had such forbearance and understanding toward the people. That is democratic government for me."

It isn't always easy for teachers, themselves educated under the old system, to implement the new child-centered methods in their classrooms. But Eva, Iiris, and their colleagues share a vision of the society they hope to bequeath to their students, a new world these children will be ready to embrace.

"From society democracy demands very much," says Step by Step teacher trainer Anna. "The generation who have never experienced it and who have difficulties making decisions now should think even more about giving a chance to children to do it better in the future."

"From society democracy demands very much. The generation who have never experienced it and who have difficulties making decisions now should think even more about giving a chance to children to do it better in the future."

Challenges

Vanalinna School, an architecturally beautiful old schoolhouse in the center of town, is always crowded. Because it is too small for its 500 pupils, classes are held in two shifts. Thus Eva's third-graders share their classroom with a first-grade class. Kalda School, surrounded by beds of flowers and greenery, was built at the end of the Soviet era for more than 1,000 pupils. Fewer than 300 children are studying there now. If the school is closed—a step the town is considering—Iiris's students will be displaced.

Both school directors have welcomed Step by Step, but neither can offer additional resources. "We have a lack of rooms," says the Vanalinna director. "We cannot go further. Let it be a good beginning."

At Kalda School—originally established for children with special needs—the director credits Step by Step for the school's ability over the last decade to offer regular and special-needs classes side by side. "Hea Algus was the key that helped us bring the parents and bring the tolerance flowering from the walls of the school," she says. "I consider that a very good achievement. I don't know how it was even possible that we managed to get the ordinary classes here beside the special-needs classes. The parents who took their children here had a very positive attitude. And only a very few went away. The Hea Algus classes were just so good!" Now, though, she worries that the school will have to close after all.

Although Step by Step classes ideally include two teachers, most Estonian

schools simply don't have the resources to hire assistant teachers. "Our material resources have never allowed us to send two teachers to one classroom," the Vanalinna director comments.

Kalda School hired one assistant teacher for two classes, but Iiris found that the teacher was frequently unavailable and in practice she had to prepare the materials for and teach two age groups alone. She was constantly exhausted and wasn't able to implement as much of the Step by Step methodology as she would have liked. "If I had an assistant teacher I would have done the learning centers," she says. "But I just don't because if I have even a moment of free time I have to give classes for the teachers who are ill or in in-service training. Anything more is absolutely above my head."

Though both schools appreciate Step

by Step, neither offers primarily Step by Step classes. At Vanalinna the administration encourages collaboration and the sharing of experiences so the Step by Step philosophy has a chance to spread—but careful not to spark rivalries among the teachers, they don't privilege the Step by Step team in any way. "We can't say that here ends Step by Step and here begins everything else," the director explains. "We have too few people here for that and we have too small a physical space." Each year the school opens one new Step by Step class and one new common class. Until all parents choose Step by Step for their children, the director notes, Vanalinna will continue to offer more than one option.

Indeed, not all parents welcome alternative methods of education. "What's Hea

Algus?" asked one mother. "No, don't tell me. Let's register for an ordinary class—you'll not do any strange things with my kid."

Not all teachers embrace child-centered methods either. For one thing, they're a lot more work, demanding more time, more energy, and more creativity. It may be easier for a teacher when the children just sit still and listen to what they're told. "It is simple to teach when children are sitting quietly," Eva explains. "It's very comfortable. But the children are suppressed and don't dare speak—that's no way to learn."

School administrators say that teachers have to want to use child-centered methods; they cannot be forced. They get no extra pay for the more intensive work, and not all teachers are willing to do more work for the same salary. "If a person does not take herself such a burden willingly," says the Vanalinna director, "then there will not be anything. We have heard this many times after someone has seen our teachers' classes: 'I will not do so much work for the same money!'"

Lauri's Story

A boy sits alone at a desk near the back of Iiris's third-grade classroom. He is cheerful, frisky, active; eager to talk about sports. He seems to know every good athlete in Estonia. It is hard to believe that the year before he had given up going to school entirely.

Lauri was a street child, Iiris explains. He went to a school for children with special needs on an evening shift, but was frequently late to school. He had difficulty managing the work. By the time a social worker approached Iiris and asked her to consider letting the boy into her class, Lauri had dropped out of second grade. His file was thick and disturbing, but Iiris decided to talk with him and find out what was going on.

"I asked him why he didn't go to school anymore," Iiris recalls, "and he explained that he never knew when to go. School started at a different time every day. There was no one to tell him, and besides, he didn't know how to read the clock. The teacher at his old school never asked him why he was late, she only shouted at him. Lauri didn't like it when people shouted at him."

Today Lauri has a safe place to live and comes to school every day. He enjoys learning and offers his opinions on many issues. Because one caring teacher listened to him, Lauri has found his voice. Not a miracle, perhaps—but a good beginning.

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Meeli Pandis, Kristel Pau, Judit Strompl, and Maili Vesiko, *Understanding Democracy: The Case of Step by Step's Democratic Education Idea and Its Realization at Estonian Pre- and Primary Schools.*

Imagination Unlimited: Introducing Child-Centered, Integrated Thematic Units in Georgia

Case Study Researchers: Mariam Shonia, PhD, Step by Step Master Teacher Trainer, Center for Educational Initiatives; Marine Japaridze, PhD, Step by Step Trainer, Department of Psychology, Tbilisi State Pedagogical University; and Mariam Goguadze, MEd, Step by Step Master Teacher Trainer, Center for Educational Initiatives

Borscht: Delicious Integration of Vegetables

The children of Tbilisi Preschool #1 are thoroughly absorbed in making borscht. "Last week we had borscht for dinner," teacher Natela Kobakhidze tells us. "Tiko mixed the soup with the spoon, carefully observing the ingredients. She asked questions, and when I saw the other children listening with interest, I decided to 'explore' borscht with them as a thematic unit."

The children are familiar with these everyday vegetables, but their involvement in the cooking process increases their interest and knowledge. They work together, touching, smelling, and tasting beets, carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, green onions, red and white radish, and potatoes, all prepared for cooking.

The class discovers it has enough vegetables to make a salad as well. "My father also cooks sometimes," says Zura, and proceeds with grinding the beets. "I bet you won't be able to do this, it's hard," he tells Keti. "Besides, beets can color the fingers, which women do not like!" Natela laughs. "How many tomatoes do we need? Let's put five leaves of lettuce on this plate and seven spoonfuls of salad over them! Don't forget the salt!" The children listen attentively to their teacher as they decorate the salad with greens. When it is all ready, everyone sits at the table beautifully laid with colorful, delicious-smelling borscht and salad.

This case study observation from a Step by Step classroom in Georgia exemplifies best practice in an integrated theme-based curriculum. We now know that developmental domains in children do not progress separately and that an integrated teaching and learning approach fosters the most favorable conditions for whole-child development. In post-Soviet education, where traditional authoritarian practice and a highly fragmented subject approach still tend to dominate the educational process, an integrated teaching and learning approach—one that promotes independent thinking and competent problem solving based on cognitive and analytical skills—is a core innovative trend.

The Traditional Approach

The goal of centralized Soviet preschool education was to bring children up according to Communist principles, drilling them to remember factual information whose practical application was de-emphasized. Early childhood education was based on a teacher-centered authoritarian approach that ignored individualization. Thematic teaching existed, but was defined by ideological pressure. Obligatory units, such as Collective Farms, the Day of the Red Army, and Pioneers, were set for all preschool teaching. Even more "neutral" topics were mostly knowledge- and information-based, not skills-based, and had little to do with

children's interests or initiative.

Even in art activities, creative thinking was rigidly controlled. Children had to draw according to a sample provided by the teacher, with emphasis placed on precise representation rather than the child's own perceptions. One teacher poignantly recalls a little girl, Natya, crying from nerves when she had to draw a "Frontier Guard with Dog," as prescribed by the state curriculum. "I was very upset and suffered together with the daughter and the mother," the teacher says. "I realized the absurdity of the situation, but I was obliged to show children's works to the inspector. The requirements were very strict: they checked the obligatory number of works which every child had to draw monthly; they even checked the dates on children's artwork." These so-called thematic units were not designed for integrated teaching and learning, the teacher adds, but served mostly the purpose of "pouring the obligatory information into children's heads."

The key elements of a traditional approach included:

- Teacher-centered thematic lessons delivering topic-based information using visual aids, requiring children to memorize, then answer questions;
- Hostility toward a child-centered approach: active discouragement of children's creativity, interests, individualized accomplishments;
- "Equality" defined as setting the same goals and requirements for every child, rather than creating equal opportunities for all children;
- Teachers addressing themselves to a notional "collective child" instead of individual children;
- Criteria for best performance based on the most precise repetition of the information delivered by the teacher;
- Discouragement of cooperative learning: teachers typically worked with the whole group, then compared children's work, praising some and reproaching others; and
- Children positioned as passive learners; free-thinking and classroom exploration discouraged.

The goal of our research was to understand what changes the introduction of integrated thematic units brought to Georgian preschools. The research made evident the important changes brought by the Step by Step Program in paving the way toward integrated teaching and learning in Georgian education. The Step by Step Program in Georgia, first introduced in 1998, pioneered the practical introduction of integrated teaching and learning approaches alongside other child-centered methods. According to teachers, the introduction of integrated thematic units has entirely changed the educational process in their classrooms, a view corroborated by the case study findings.

Education has always been of primary importance to Georgians. Traditionally, the family had ultimate supervision and authority over child development and education. Soviet education policy replaced this domestic family-centred approach with the superstructural notion of the "Soviet

family"; but despite 70 years of Soviet influence, elements of tradition prevail, and child development and education are still chiefly regarded as the family's responsibility. Today, despite economic difficulties and numerous problems associated with the transition from Soviet rule, Georgia continues its long tradition of high standards and innovation in education.

> "What is happening now is absolutely different. Children are so actively involved in their work that they learn a lot more now than when the education process was mostly 'information-based,' and they are not bored at all!"

Since the end of the 19th century, Georgian educators have recognized the advantages of integrating theoretical content and practical activities around one particular theme as an effective teaching method for preschool-age children. But because of Georgia's complex historical relationship with Russia, it was only recently that the first steps toward implementing an integrated approach in educational policy were finally taken: the introduction of the Step by Step Program in 1998, and the new National Preschool Program in 2000. While the latter instituted some of the practical elements of an interdisciplinary approach, these are so far fragmentary and differ in kind from the integrated teaching and learning practice in Step by Step classrooms. The successes and challenges of the contemporary Georgia experience provide an exemplary context for evaluating integrated curriculum practice in contrast with traditional approaches.

The Integrated Theme-Based Curriculum Approach

Integrated learning is one of the key components of the new National Preschool Program implemented in Georgian state preschools in 2000, which recommends the elimination of the traditional distinction between "play" and "learning process"—two concepts always strictly differentiated during Soviet times. In practice, however, the integrated teaching and learning component in the National Program serves mainly as a tool for assessing how children can apply knowledge acquired in one content area to another sphere. This is different from a holistic approach that encourages a many-sided study of an event or phenomenon. While the new National Program contains elements of integration, the process and goals still differ considerably from Step by Step philosophy, where the integrated thematic units introduced into classrooms address all aspects of child development as a whole rather than its fragmented components.

Thematic units integrate fragmented content areas, such as math, language, science, and social studies, allowing children to see the connections among them. Using this approach, the teacher can organize curriculum development around topics, problems, and children's interest areas. Children actively participate in the planning process with the teacher. The curriculum web, which teachers use to organize ideas around themes, evolves from children's interests and questions. Integrated thematic units in the classroom strengthen other essential program components: parent and community involvement; team building; individualized learning; observation; and ongoing progress-based assessment. Teacher training provided by the Step by Step Program has enabled the introduction of this integrated approach to

curriculum in preschools, and has sparked the beginning of broader educational reform.

Dodo Tavadze, a teacher at Preschool #1 in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, reflects on the differences in outcomes between the two approaches:

"In the 'old' program thematic teaching lasted for 20 to 25 minutes. All we did was deliver information about the topic to the whole group of children using visual aids from time to time. What is happening now is absolutely different. Children are so actively involved in their work that they learn a lot more now than when the education process was mostly 'information-based,' and they are not bored at all!"

During three months of intensive research, the case study team observed Step by Step classrooms at three preschools in order to evaluate the changes brought by the introduction of thematic units into classroom teaching. The study sites were selected for their diversity. Preschool #1, situated in a prestigious neighborhood in Tbilisi and attended by the children of relatively well-off families, was one of the first sites to operate according to the Step by Step Program. Preschool #17, lacking in resources but vibrant, is located in a multinational suburb of Tbilisi. Preschool #162 is in the small village of Okrokana, seven kilometers (a little more than four miles) from the capital, set in a beautiful natural landscape ravaged by pollution.

First Steps in Thematic Units

Preschool #1

Established more than 80 years ago, Preschool #1 was Georgia's first state preschool, and has long been regarded as the best in the country. Preschool #1 has a rich history both as a center for methodological innovation and as a research laboratory for educators and psychologists. In 1998, the school principal, Nelly Kepuladze, and her staff opened the doors to the Step by Step Program. Today, 245 children in 10 classrooms play, learn, and explore according to Step by Step methodology. Site Manager/Family Coordinator Mzevinar Mikadze remembers the first steps:

"Our first introductory training was conducted by American trainers. All I heard and saw was beyond my expectations. The impressions were unforgettable: the smiling faces of the trainers, their openness, the interesting and animated atmosphere. The attitude of the two trainers toward their work was amazing: they brought colored crayons, pieces of glass, thread, shells all the way over the ocean.

"The family involvement piece of the program seemed very important to me, and I was happy when I was assigned the responsibility. We will never forget our first parent-staff meeting, which I tried my best to organize. Parents were expecting something extraordinary and interesting to happen, and they were not mistaken. One of the surprises was a dessert table laid specially for them. Introducing the new program caused a lively discussion. The parents were so excited that none of us noticed until after they had left that nobody even touched the sweets!"

Thematic Unit: My Family

Site Manager/Family Coordinator Mzevinar Mikadze's story:

"Parent involvement is so important. They assist us in many ways. I remember one particular case where the family involvement piece of the program combined with the thematic teaching component helped me resolve a problem: Alexandre's parents were not as young as those of the other children. It was clear that the boy felt embarrassed and even unhappy when his father came to pick him up. 'Your grandfather is here!' the children said to Alexandre, not realizing that they were hurting him. The boy changed, became more reserved, rarely smiled, preferred to play alone. One day Teah, one of the girls in the classroom, ran in with a broad happy smile. 'I have a baby sister,' she said. 'Now we are five in the family!' 'We are only three!' 'We are four!' cried out the children. They were so excited that the teacher, Tamriko Chkuaseli, introduced a thematic unit: My Family. The unit title appeared on the information board for the parents, and family photos adorned the classroom wall.

"Together with the teachers, we planned a visit to Alexandre's family, where we were warmly welcomed. Besides being a wonderful host, Alexandre's father turned out to be a wonderful painter. He showed us his artwork and promised the children to visit the classroom and work with them in the art center. Alexandre's mother treated us to cakes. After the visit Alexandre's problem disappeared and he was especially happy when his father kept his promise and appeared in the classroom."

Thematic Unit: Tengo's Family Cow

Teacher Dodo Tavadze's story:

"Tengo's family has a country house in a village near Tbilisi, where his grandparents live. Tengo often told the other children about the cow his grandparents own. They were so intrigued that I decided to teach them more about this animal.

"Tengo's grandmother brought us milk from her cow and we made yogurt. I remember the impatience of the children during the four-hour wait for the yogurt to set, though meanwhile they were busy with other activities. When it was ready we put the jars in the refrigerator, and the next day the children tasted the yogurt with great pleasure.

"The following week we made butter from the cream Tengo's granny brought us in a firmly sealed jar. The whole classroom took part in shaking the jar to make the butter. Although the process was time- and labor-consuming, the children were very enthusiastic. The jar moved from one pair of hands to another until, finally, we noticed tiny yellowish pieces appear. Finally the butter was ready. Children watched with their cheeks flushed, their eyes wide open, when suddenly Mishiko asked: 'There is so much butter in the supermarkets. Do they make all this butter the same way as we did it?' I was pleased with the question, and willingly explained to all that there is special equipment for making the butter, which can make it much faster and easier. Mishiko was relieved.

"When the children are given an opportunity to explore what they are interested in, they can achieve amazing results."

"We enjoy working with children using this method. We also have a chance to be creative. When the children are given an opportunity to explore what they are interested in, they can achieve amazing results. We also learn from the observations and discoveries they make."

Preschool #17

Situated in the multinational Tbilisi suburb of Metromsheni, Preschool #17 was established 50 years ago for the children of metro construction workers. The school building is under-resourced and in bad need of repair, but the yard is beautiful, and every classroom has its own small lot where children work with their teachers to plant, water, and nurture flowers, plants, and vegetables.

Thematic Unit: Writing Poems

Parent Nana Metreveli's story:

"One day Elene came back from preschool and loudly recited a short poem she had written. I was surprised at the content, because it was so different from what I was used to hearing from my three older children when they were in preschool. The poem's theme was ecological problems. I talked to Elene, and explained for the first time that it was because of ecological problems that our family had moved to this area. The part of the city where we lived previously was very polluted. Now we own a private house with a small garden, and Elene often helps me look after the plants and flowers and clean the garden, but until that day, we had never talked about the environmental problems that personally affected our family.

"I believe that children benefit a lot when they get a chance to look at a problem or event from different perspectives and learn by practical involvement. The teachers have also changed, and this makes us parents closer to the preschool."

"After this, I became interested in everything happening at the preschool, and the methods teachers used. I visited the classroom and spent a couple of hours with the children, observing at the same time. The teachers welcomed me. Later, my older daughter helped the children make dolls and other toys from recycled materials. We also baked a cake, which made the children happy.

"I have four children. The other three also attended preschool, but the whole experience and atmosphere was so different. I was amazed how much the children learn with 'thematic teaching,' as the teachers call it. I believe that children benefit a lot when they get a chance to look at a problem or event from different perspectives and learn by practical involvement. The teachers have also changed, and this makes us parents closer to the preschool."

Preschool #162

Okrokana, meaning "golden field," is aptly named. The village overlooks Tbilisi from the top of the Mount Mtatsminda. The well-heeled have built summerhouses here, and the village is very lively in the summer. Yet despite its great natural beauty, the landscape is scarred by environmental pollution. Green mountain slopes adorned with colorful spring flowers nestle beside ravines filled with human garbage. It's not surprising that ecological issues have become so urgent.

Children at Preschool #162 in Okrokana send stories on the theme of ecological problems to their fellow students at Preschool #17 in Tbilisi. The two schools have been cooperating for four years on this joint thematic project: sharing experience, exchanging artwork, writing letters, and visiting each other's classrooms.

Despite the mounting pollution, the well-cared-for preschool yard looks beautiful on a sunny spring day. The children appear different from their city peers, with apple-rosy cheeks, suntanned faces, and carefree movements. The school's hard-working young principal, Mary Chkhenkeli, often joins the pupils in the yard.

Preschool #162 integrates ecological and regenerative themes into a range of curriculum activities. In one classroom teacher Shorena Chotiridze calls the five- and six-year-olds to the drama center to play "Flowers Wake Up." The children stand with their arms stretched out and their fingers folded. "The flowers are asleep at night,"

says the teacher, "but now the day is breaking and the flowers wake up!" The children slowly unfurl fingers like petals, and the flowers open: "One, two, three, four, five…." the children count. Then the children fold their fingers to signify night, counting backwards from five, and the flowers fall asleep once again.

In Dali Dabrundashvili's class, the children are tackling ecology and renewable resources. She explains how apparently used, useless materials, like metal and paper, can come back as new objects through recycling. The children particularly like the idea that useless paper can be recycled into colorful picture books.

Thematic Unit: Caring for Our Environment

Principal Mary Chkhenkeli's story:

"Our efforts to instill in children love and care toward the environment are showing promising results. Several months ago teachers and children carried out an experiment: they buried a piece of plastic, tea leaves, vegetable peels, and pieces of small branches into a large pot full of soil. When they dug out the soil recently, they discovered that everything except the plastic had been absorbed by the soil and disappeared. This helped the children understand that plastic, for instance, pollutes the environment for a long, long time.

"When they dug out the soil recently, they discovered that everything except the plastic had been absorbed by the soil and disappeared. This helped the children understand that plastic, for instance, pollutes the environment for a long, long time."

"Parents tell us that our efforts really make a difference. They confess that sometimes they really learn from their children's 'preschool stories,' which they bring back home. Time flies: these children will soon be adults. We hope that if we manage to instill care for the environment in them, they will contribute to keeping the world a clean and healthy place to live."

Reflection

Nelly Kepuladze, principal of Preschool #1, eloquently expresses what our case study research demonstrated, expressing the core differences between a traditional, fragmented approach and the introduction of integrated thematic units:

"I have been a principal since 1984. Many years of my professional experience were associated with the authoritarian approach. Deep in my heart I always suffered from the fact that the children were mostly 'forced' to learn against their interests and desires. That was why they were not motivated. When we opened the doors to the Step by Step Program, I was skeptical that established attitudes and stereotypes would change easily. But now we are all happy. The components of the integrated thematic approach bring such positive outcomes that I don't know of any preschool that would not be happy to join the Step by Step Program. Teachers from all over the different regions of Georgia visit our classrooms. Education system officials also express their interest and approval. Parents give information to their peers. Almost everybody knows about the Step by Step Program."

It is clear that thematic units provide an effective tool for achieving interdisciplinary integrated practice in the classroom and promoting child-centered education.

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Mariam Shonia, Marine Japaridze, and Mariam Goguadze, *Innovation in Preschool Education: Integrated Thematic Units in Georgia*.

Education Reform in Montenegro: A Photo Essay

Case Study Researchers: Milja Vujacic, MA, Program Coordinator and Master Teacher Trainer, Pedagogical Center of Montenegro, and Dusanka Popovic, Program Coordinator and Master Teacher Trainer, Pedagogical Center of Montenegro

"I especially like to read different interesting books, like Doctor Doolittle *and* Pippi Longstocking *and something about families and how babies are made. Knowledge of language helps us acquire knowledge of other subjects—in mathematics to read and understand the task, in nature study to read the text and write what is important, to know how to speak nicely. I like going to my school."*

—Katarina, a third-grade pupil in a Step by Step classroom at Boro Cetkovic Elementary School in Podgorica, Montenegro

Meet Class III-3

The 20 children in Class III-3 at Boro Cetkovic Elementary School in Podgorica, Montenegro's capital, are eager to show visitors around their cozy, colorful classroom. They go to school gladly because, as Monika explains, "Here we make friends." The walls are bright and inviting, adorned with student work, cheerful posters, and lists of classroom rules. Books are everywhere. The well-organized library, with its comfortable reading chair and soft pillows, includes chapter books, picture books, magazines, and original books written by the children themselves.

"I like writing stories from pictures, illustrating stories, reading books, and making greeting cards," says Monika.

"I like writing stories from pictures, writing compositions, reading, solving interesting tasks from worksheets, and daydreaming," says Vuk.

Their teacher, Dijana Gajovic, has been using Step by Step methods in her classroom for the last three years. "The greatest advantage of the Step by Step Program," she says, "is freedom, for both children and teacher." Since she introduced the new methods, this 10-year teaching veteran adds, "my children all like coming to school."

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A City at Many Crossroads

Podgorica, Montenegro's thriving capital, is located in the heart of the country in lush Zeta Valley, at the crossroads of the Ribnica and Moraca rivers and of highways leading in all directions, to both winter ski centers in the north

and sunny resorts on the Adriatic Sea. Home to about 200,000 residents—a mix of Montenegrins, Serbs, Albanians, Croatians, Muslims, and Roma people—it is by far Montenegro's largest city, a vibrant center of culture, industry, and media.

An ancient and beautiful city founded before the 11th century, Podgorica was bombed to the ground during World War II, and most of the old architecture was destroyed. The city today is modern, home to high-rise buildings shining with glass and steel, along with remnants of Turkish architecture from the old Ottoman Empire days and blocky gray Soviet-style structures erected after the war.

Montenegro itself has had a turbulent history. This mountainous and Mediterranean country—"the crossroad between Europe and Asia," according to its tourism office—is one of Europe's oldest states, changing its name many times as political situations changed. During the time of the Roman Empire, as the Kingdom of Zeta (meaning harvesters in the old Slavic languages), it became one of the first independent states in the Balkans. The name Crna Gora, or Montenegro—black mountain or black forest—was first used in the 13th century.

The 20th century was a difficult time for the small country. After centuries of upheaval, losing and gaining independence more than once, Montenegro was swallowed up by Serbia in 1916 and disappeared from the political map. After World War II it became one of six equal republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but Yugoslavia's violent collapse in the 1990s saw Montenegro once again yoked to Serbia as the only two nations in a new Yugoslavian Republic. In 2006 Montenegro declared its independence. The United Nations recognized Montenegro as its 192nd member country on July 27, 2006.

As social, economic, and political changes buffeted Montenegro, many of the country's leaders began to feel that their educational system was in need of change as well. In this age of innovation and globalization, education is one of the prime levers of development. Knowledge and flexibility are necessary resources in every modern society, the basis of competitiveness in a global, information-based economy. Montenegrins eager to build a democratic nation argued that one key step was educational reform and the establishment of a democratic educational system.

Everyone Has a Voice

The eager learners in Class III-3 may not have heard of democratic education—but they enjoy it every day. "Step by Step has helped me improve myself as a teacher," comments Dijana Gajovic. "And in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere, so different from a traditional classroom, everyone feels better and is motivated to write and read."

Traditional schooling in Montenegro was authoritarian—teacher-based rather than child-centered—and emphasized the acquisition of ready-made packets of knowledge. Children were tested and measured on how well they repeated back that knowledge, but innova-

tion and originality were discouraged. In the philosophy and methods of the Step by Step Program, educators like Gajovic found a model of democratic, child-centered, inclusive education and began remaking their classrooms.

A democratic educational system should:

- Promote learning opportunities that will enable all students to reach their full potential and take an active role in their society;
- Offer full and equal access to all students;
- Promote a positive self-image, self-esteem, and confidence in an atmosphere of equality and opportunity;
- Value the individual and appreciate individual differences; and
- Develop partnership and trust among teachers, students, parents, and the community.

The 20 pupils of III-3—8 girls and 12 boys, one with special needs—report that they have learned to work in groups, to listen when others talk, and to cooperate. "We don't interrupt," they say. "We speak when we are given the floor. Everyone has something to say."

Their teacher, Gajovic, agrees. Her Step by Step pupils, she says, express themselves much more fluently than children in a traditional classroom, both when speaking and in writing. Thematic planning—exploring a topic of interest to her pupils in many different ways—and interactive teaching methods enable children to be both independent and creative. An appreciation of diversity and lessons that recognize each child's individuality give the students confidence.

Boro Cetkovic Elementary School

Boro Cetkovic Elementary School in downtown Podgorica is housed in an old, dilapidated building in need of repair. It shares the space with the more traditional Milorad Musa Burzan Elementary School, with Boro Cetkovic classrooms only on the third floor. The younger Boro Cetkovic pupils, from first to fourth grade, attend classes in an old but partly reconstructed accessory building nearby.

Children go to school in two four-hour shifts, attending either morning or afternoon classes. Two sections share each classroom, as space is very tight. Classes are small, with no more than 18 pupils in each Boro Cetkovic first grade, compared with more

than 40 in a first-grade class at Milorad Musa Burzan.

There are plans to build a new building capable of housing the entire school, but in the meantime teachers have managed to

Thematic planning—exploring a topic of interest to her pupils in many different ways—and interactive teaching methods enable children to be both independent and creative.

make their classrooms pleasant and inviting.[1] It helps that 11 of the first-, second-, and third-grade classes are following the Step by Step Program, as these rooms have been furnished and organized in line with the program's philosophy and offer children an appealing environment in which to learn and play.

"It's Very Important for a Writer to Daydream"

One of the coziest spots of all in Class III-3—and the very heart of Gajovic's curriculum—is the Reading and Writing Center. The students agree that they enjoy coming here and say they have learned a lot.

"We love to read stories," they say.

"We read poetry and drama."

"We write both Cyrillic and Latin letters."

"It's very important for a writer to daydream."

In the Reading and Writing Center children can find books, workbooks, student work-in-progress, and an appealing variety of useful supplies: many types and sizes of paper, pencils, colored pencils, paper clips, glue, and more. Some may be busy illustrating a story, concentrating on characters or a pivotal scene, while others may pore over a scientific magazine.

Development of children's communication skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—is a central component of the Step by Step Program for elementary schools. While all schools teach reading and writing, Step by Step philosophy suggests that these skills can develop organically when children are offered stimulating written material in a comfortable environment. Class III-3 is rich in printed material of all kinds, from books and magazines to charts and messages on the walls.

Parents report happily that their children enjoy reading at home, and that they use language for a variety of purposes, from delivering a message to narrating an event to reading a story to a younger sister or brother. Some keep diaries, solve crossword puzzles, or play computer games. All can write and address a letter, and most correspond this way with friends or relatives.

Most children in Class III-3 read fluently and correctly. They easily answer questions about a text, identifying plots, characters,

In the Reading and Writing Center children can find books, workbooks, student work-in-progress, and an appealing variety of useful supplies: many types and sizes of paper, pencils, colored pencils, paper clips, glue, and more.

and settings. They read a variety of genres and understand how they differ. They eagerly borrow books from both the school and the classroom library, choosing both classics of children's literature and lively, exciting stories of all sorts.

The more opportunities children have to read and write, explains their teacher, the better readers and writers they become.

"We are happy because we read so many books," the children say.

Sitting in the Author's Chair

Every child in Class III-3 is an author. Indeed, an Author's Chair handsomely awaits young writers who want to introduce their original works of literature. All the children have written books this year; several have written two or three.

Every child in Class III-3 is an author. Indeed, an Author's Chair handsomely awaits young writers who want to introduce their original works of literature.

The books are attractive, often illustrated; some are printed on a computer while others are written painstakingly in their authors' very best handwriting.

Working on their books the young authors pass through all the stages a published writer experiences: they make a plan, discuss it with the teacher and friends, write a draft, show it around for editing, correct errors, and then produce a polished final copy (generally with pictures!). With the help of parents, Class III-3 has even produced a book, *Wings of Friendship*, highlighting the children's best work.

In addition to students' individual books, many group books are displayed around the classroom or in one of the two libraries. Some of these deal with common feelings or events, perhaps school, the theatre, or an excursion. Others focus on topics studied in class.

"We like to work together," the children say. "We are not jealous when our friends do well. We are happy about their success, and about our own."

"Of Course They Learn"

The children in Class III-3 are cheerful and busy, enthusiastic about their work. Their parents report that they have learned a lot at Boro Cetkovic and their teacher says their abilities have outstripped those of children in more traditional schools. But how can educators be sure that these reports are accurate? How is children's learning measured in a nontraditional classroom?

Test scores become merely one part of the teacher's evaluation of each child, along with portfolios, notebooks, homework, conversations, and ongoing student work.

Assessment in a Step by Step classroom isn't narrowly based on exams, although students are indeed tested throughout the year. Test scores become merely one part of the teacher's evaluation of each child, along with portfolios, notebooks, homework, conversations, and ongoing student work. This whole-child approach to assessment, teacher Dijana Gajovic notes, gives a fuller, more nuanced, and ultimately more accurate view of each child's abilities. And the good news, Gajovic adds, is that her Step by Step pupils are doing remarkably well by every measure.

A 2002 research study comparing the achievements of Step by Step third-graders with third-graders in traditional Montenegro schools supports Gajovic's point of view. Achievement was measured in math, science, and language (reading and writing in the children's native tongue). The study found:

- Step by Step students achieved better results in all academic subjects than children in traditional classrooms;
- Step by Step students were more successful at solving complex problems that demanded interdisciplinary understanding of more than one subject area;
- Step by Step students were more successful at defining broad concepts; and
- Step by Step students were more likely to recall material presented to them months earlier in the school year.

None of these results would surprise Dijana Gajovic.

"Come Visit Our School"

The students in Class III-3 are too busy having fun—and learning—to worry about research studies or educational reform. A few may be engaged in a lively conversation about a book, or puzzling out a math problem, or reading their work out loud.

"I like when we write with brainstorming, and solving puzzles," Dusan says. "I like reading stories and also when there is a game so we have to solve something."

"I like language classes," says Milica. "Knowledge of this subject helps me in writing a composition, similar to those in real books. To be able to read and write makes my life easier."

"I especially like when we act and work together in the drama section," says Monika. "We make friends, discuss, and our teacher shows us how to speak nicely and correctly. I also like it when we make a play for children in other classes."

"Come visit our school," they say eagerly. "We learn with our friends and share ideas."

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Milja Vujacic and Dusanka Popovic, *Reading and Writing in the Step by Step Curriculum in Montenegro: Grade Three*.

[1] Construction of a new school is now under way.

Reforming and Decentralizing Teacher Professional Development

The Step by Step approach to teacher training provides innovative strategies for preschool and primary school professional development. The Step by Step cycle begins by creating model classrooms in several public and private preschools and primary schools in the country. Core training is provided to a team of early childhood experts responsible for developing the country program. Expansion to additional classrooms is dependent on resources available in communities or from the Ministry of Education. The goal is to establish high-quality, self-sustaining programs that are officially accredited by the appropriate Ministry and are available to and affordable by all teachers, schools, and communities.

Exemplary Step by Step programs in schools are transitioned into training centers. The centers, which can be found in remote rural communities and central cities, provide cost-effective, comprehensive training through classroom observations, courses, ongoing supervision, and on-site mentoring. Many training centers are linked to teacher-training institutions and universities, where skilled teacher trainers influence teacher-preparation and retraining systems.

The cases from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, and Romania provide insights into the operation and management of Step by Step training centers and professional networks. Through observations, questionnaires, and interviews with teachers, trainers, and parents, the authors compare Step by Step training to previous methodologies. Responses highlight Step by Step's emphasis on active participation and the ways in which participants are encouraged to find answers to practical challenges. Many respondents commented on the respect shown by Step by Step to teachers, students, and families.

Training centers located within schools are an innovative and enthusiastically welcomed strategy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the training center works in partnerships to support an educational reform process focused on increasing access to high-quality teaching methods. Their efforts have fostered a spirit of collaboration across ethnic boundaries and strengthened cooperation among schools, ministries, and pedagogical institutes. In Lithuania, the training center created a team of professionals, encouraged self-training, and provided access to information and resources. Teachers designed and managed the training center, and found that a team approach made it much easier to spread and support the methodology. Focusing on process and outcomes, the case from Romania describes how Step by Step teachers learned how to implement the key concepts of individualization and parent involvement. In Kyrgyzstan the training center transformed the vision of teachers as they moved from authoritarian to child-centered classrooms.

We learn from Croatia that professional journals can be an effective vehicle for building a community of educators sharing innovative teaching practices; but also that limited resources make sustaining publication initiatives a challenge. We learn from Belarus that the relationship between an educational reform program and the Ministry of Education is crucial to the program's survival; and that the intricate dance of garnering legitimacy—as well as the independence necessary for innovation—requires the skill of an accomplished choreographer, even as the political rhythm might change.

All cases acknowledge the complexity of educational change at both institutional and individual levels. They illustrate the hidden and visible tensions between spontaneity and planning, between alternative and traditional pedagogy, and between teaching in the context of teacher training and teaching as daily classroom practice. Of major concern, noted specifically in the cases from Kyrgyzstan and Bosnia, are the sustainability of training centers and the measures that must be taken at all levels to ensure financial independence and security. The cases highlight several factors influencing long-term sustainability, including licensing, relationships to Ministries of Education, and the openness of communities to alternative methods of instruction. Reforms to encourage and reward professional development are critical. These case studies illustrate how Step by Step's training centers bring innovative teaching methods to a wide range of teachers. It is in the interest of all to secure legislation and policies to ensure that their efforts are sustained.

"Ecstatic to Try Something New": Professional Development of Teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Case Study Researchers: Radmila Rangelov-Jusovic, EdM, Director, Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step, and Elvira Ramcilovic, Pedagogue, Step by Step Macedonia

"My main motive for applying the child-centered approach was a strong desire to change. I had practiced the traditional approach in my classroom for six years. To me it seemed somehow boxed in, framed, without freedom and creativity, mine or the children's. When I got the chance to move into child-centered methodology, I was ecstatic. My main motive was for something new to happen."
—Amira Sehic, a teacher and Step by Step trainer at Suljo Cilic Elementary School in Jablanica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

"The first time I came in touch with this methodology was in the kindergarten next door. When I saw how the children worked, how free they were, how they used materials, and then the meeting area, everything was a revelation. The way children began each day by thinking, talking together, all of it excited me. I then started reading books to understand it and to learn what's at the center of it all. That was my first bite into Step by Step."
—Aida Cilic, also a teacher and trainer at Suljo Cilic Elementary School, who along with Sehic now organizes and conducts Step by Step training sessions for colleagues in schools around the country

Training Center Jablanica: A Snapshot

The bright, inviting classroom at Suljo Cilic Elementary School in Jablanica, a small, war-battered, mountain town in southeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, is immediately appealing, well stocked with books, blackboards, and flip charts and adorned with children's colorful artwork. The banner outside announces the school motto: We Learn for Life. On this rainy spring day, everyone gathers on the carpet in a happy circle. Amira Sehic and Aida Cilic, enthusiastic young teachers, welcome the group to Morning Meeting and lead their class in a warm-up activity called "My Birthday." As classmates share birthday information, the room explodes in laughter.

The scene might take place in a particularly delightful kindergarten classroom—but today's eager students are a little large for child-size seats. Some knees even creak as participants get up from the cozy rug. These students are themselves teachers, enrolled in a Step by Step workshop led by Sehic and Cilic at the Jablanica Training Center. The

teachers, from many different schools in the region, are learning how to introduce child-centered methodology in their classrooms.

For many teachers, Morning Meeting—a chance for children to share their thoughts—is a novel concept. They explode with questions. "How long does the Morning Meeting last?" "Is it possible to implement a child-centered methodology in a class with over 30 students?" "Does every day start with a meeting?" Sehic and Cilic, both Step by Step trainers and mentors, answer every question, offering rich examples from their own years of experience. The participating teachers are hungry for information and eager to share their own stories with colleagues. "So far I have participated in three workshops at Training Center Jablanica," comments Zvonko Dzidic, a veteran teacher from "the other side" of River Neretva in the politically divided city of Mostar. "They have helped me a lot, especially at the beginning when I felt I was just wandering. We got answers to many questions there."

"Something is happening inside our school. The Training Center is the core of our professional development and growth, a place where we can find answers."

At a later session of the workshop, Sehic and Cilic ask participants to design an ideal classroom environment, one that they would like to teach in, without financial or practical limits. The teachers come from a variety of urban and rural schools, some with inadequate space and supplies. In small rural schools several grades often share one classroom. Some schools are far from the teachers' homes, limiting their opportunities for networking with colleagues. "Knowing the poor conditions we are working in, I cannot allow myself to dream about an ideal classroom," one teacher comments. "All the time I expect someone to tell me, 'It is too expensive for us. Be more realistic!'"

The teachers begin the exercise cautiously, but as the day progresses their visions of space, equipment, and materials become more elaborate. Innovation and creativity soar; the atmosphere becomes buoyant. Everyone is surprised when one participant cries, "It is two o'clock already. So soon!" The workshop has run an hour over schedule. The teachers leave, still talking animatedly.

"Something is happening inside our school," says Jablanica School Pedagogue Meliha Alic. "The Training Center is the core of our professional development and growth, a place where we can find answers. At first a few teachers resisted. Not now. We are self-confident. Our feelings of privilege are growing. It is not like this at other schools. We have created a professional atmosphere around a common goal. This is something the previous professional development system, focused on control, could not do."

Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Step by Step toward Reform

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a highly multiethnic and multireligious country of about 3.9 million citizens, is home to three official languages—Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian—and two alphabets, Cyrillic and Latin. It is divided politically between two entities, the primarily Muslim and Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbian Republika Srpska. In the three and a half years between gaining independence in 1992 and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, the nation was the site of some of the worst warfare in recent European history. About 250,000 residents were killed and more than one million sought refuge or were forced from their homes, including hundreds of thousands of children. Virtually all children living in the small country witnessed killing and destruction.

After the war, economic disarray was rampant, with unemployment hovering around 40 percent and about 20 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Most school buildings were damaged or destroyed. Under these conditions, it was difficult to provide children with even a minimally adequate education. And even before the war, the educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina was far from meeting European standards—a key long-term goal, according to country officials.

The Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEI-Step by Step), established with the support of the Open Society Institute and now a member of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), was one of the first child-centered educational projects started after the war. Step by Step—established to promote democratic change in education and equal access to high-quality education for all children—entered the country's kin-

dergartens in 1996 and primary schools in 1998. In 2002, local authorities developed their own document on educational reform strategies, incorporating many of the ideas of Step by Step. Over the last seven years, more than 2,000 educators, administrators, and parents from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina have participated in special training programs designed by CEI-Step by Step for implementation of a child-centered methodology in more than 250 kindergartens, primary schools, and other educational institutions. Five kindergartens and one school were reconstructed or newly built, and some 500 preschool and school classrooms were

equipped with furniture, educational materials, and professional literature. As a result of the Center's initiatives, schools and kindergartens, in partnership with parents, have created a child-centered learning environment for more than 15,000 children.

Despite the Center's efforts, however—and despite Bosnia and Herzegovina's own commitment to educational reform—most of the country's elementary and secondary school teachers were woefully unprepared to use child-centered methods. Almost all needed additional training. Teachers were poorly educated and poorly paid, with few opportunities to acquire and practice new skills. Their participation in the development of school curricula was limited. Perhaps worst of all, teachers were isolated from one another and from parents and the wider community. The Ministry of Education and the Pedagogical Institute in Herzegovina-Neretva recognized the teachers' need for professional development, but were unable to provide sufficient training themselves.

In response to these problems, CEI-Step by Step partnered with the Open Society Foundation, Soros Foundation Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNICEF, and all the country's 13 Ministries of Information to start the Child-Friendly Schools Project: a program dedicated to creating a high-quality teacher-training system and an ongoing program of professional development. Through training centers, mentoring, and networking, the Child-Friendly Schools Project aims to raise the quality of teaching and learning for all Bosnia and Herzegovina's children.

"I believe that teachers have always been interested in innovation in teaching," comments Master Teacher Trainer and CEI-Step by Step Coordinator Sanja Handzar. "But conditions in schools badly affect teacher motivation for innovative teaching. Advancement in the profession is based on some general, fixed criteria that poorly take into consideration efforts of teachers to improve their teaching. Concerns for quality in general come from the outside and mostly amount to control. Schools are not professional communities developing from the inside. Often the school climate is very poor. Few schools have improvement plans based on needs. Child-Friendly Schools is trying to overcome these problems. This is why we put a lot of effort into creating a system that supports a teacher attempting to improve his or her teaching, a system of professional exchange, cooperation, and teamwork."

Teachers Welcome Innovation

Certainly Amira Sehic, the first—and for some time, the only—Step by Step teacher at Suljo Cilic Elementary School, was eager to embrace innovative teaching methods after six years in the classroom. "Simply put, year in and year out, everything seemed to repeat itself, as if carbon copied," she says now. "I could not show what I could do, and neither could my children. I was ecstatic to try something new."

Sehic's enthusiasm, and that of her colleague Aida Cilic, helped spread Step by Step ideas throughout their school. Today nine primary school teachers have adopted child-centered methodology and three subject-matter teachers are introducing the approach to higher grades. The Suljo Cilic School now houses the Jablanica Training Center, one of a network of 14 Step by Step training centers operating across Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Before the training centers were formed, formal training took place only at the Pedagogical Institute,"

explains Pedagogical Institute Director Sabaha Bijedic. "Experience in the field has shown that it is much better to have training conducted within a school, as at Jablanica. There the participants see mentor classrooms and ask relevant questions. It is important that the teachers feel that the Training Center belongs to them."

Sehic and Cilic are two of the 40 Step by Step trainers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, chosen from more than 1,500 trained teachers throughout the country. In order to become trainers the two women completed more than 150 hours of intensive training themselves and passed a demanding certification process. The Jablanica Training Center serves more than 40 primary schools in the local area, offering seminars, workshops, lectures, and group discussions. Teachers flock to its doors. "I am delighted to hear from all those teachers who come for seminars and visits, learning how satisfied they are with everything they have seen and heard," says Suljo Cilic Principal Resid Subera. "The doors of this Training Center and this school are open to all those interested in Step by Step and all innovation."

"Experience in the field has shown that it is much better to have training conducted within a school, as at Jablanica. There the participants see mentor classrooms and ask relevant questions."

Both Sehic and Cilic say that the Center, and Step by Step, have changed their lives. Encouraged by the response to her trainings, and by the changes she helped spark in many classrooms, Sehic decided to continue her education at the University of Sarajevo, hoping to influence the quality of her country's educational system even more. Cilic, a mother of three, even feels that the skills she learned through Step by Step—critical thinking, self-confidence, active listening, the ability to appreciate each child as an individual—have made her a better wife and mother. And both say that the ties they have forged with other teachers are invaluable. "I am happiest when I see that teachers are motivated and seriously interested in what I'm doing," Cilic comments. "I am glad to share my experience with my colleagues, as well as to hear theirs. Together we can make something better."

Working Together: A Mentor's Support

When Aida Cilic says "together," the word seems to resonate, like a musical note. For the work she, Amira Sehic, and their colleagues are doing doesn't stop at the Training Center's doors. All trainees are assigned more experienced teachers as mentors, and both mentors and trainees report that their relationship is key to Step by Step's success. "Having a mentor makes me feel safe," one teacher says. "It is particularly important not to be left alone." Support from more experienced teachers, many trainees report, is needed to sustain the transformation begun at the Training Center.

"A mentor is very important, especially at the beginning," explains Zvonko Dzidic, who has been teaching for 25 years but refers to himself as a "beginning teacher." He urged his mentor, Sehic—20 years younger—to visit his classroom more often. "Without a mentor, it is much harder to introduce the Step by Step methods to a class," he says. "Constructive feedback is most important for a beginning teacher. I also appreciate comments and suggestions from other colleagues."

As mentors, Sehic and Cilic report, they begin work with new protégés with direct or telephone communication, then visit the teacher's classroom to observe both teaching and the organization of the learning environment. Next the teacher receives basic Step by Step training either at Training Center Jablanica or the Center for Educational Initiatives. After training, the protégé visits the mentor's classroom. "I believe that people have been helped by being present in my class, by listening and observing, by having a chance to see the reality inside a Step by Step classroom," says Cilic. "Everything they see they find useful and practical. After class, we have a meeting to talk about any matters of interest to the new teachers. I try to coach them so they don't make the same mistakes I made at the beginning. I try to share my positive experience. According to them, it helps a lot."

Intensive communication continues, either with return visits or by telephone. More visits would be welcome, but the lack of funds for travel and an insufficient number of trained mentors means that much communication must take place by phone. Sehic alone has mentored 41 protégés. "One of the difficulties in my work as a mentor is

that teachers expect a mentor to solve all the problems, even the technical difficulties they encounter," she says. "A second difficulty is our inability to visit our protégés often, primarily because we lack the time. One of the challenges is the distance between towns and schools, making it impossible for us to meet often."

Despite the enthusiasm of both new teachers and their mentors, challenges arise. All participants are overworked and underpaid, with little free time for training or mentoring. Many schools struggle to provide even basic resources. Communication

with teachers can be a challenge, Cilic says. "What I do not like is teachers expecting me to tell them what is good and what is not. It is unpleasant to point out errors. I try to point out what could be improved rather than characterizing it as a mistake." Some trainee teachers lack motivation. "The biggest problem I have had," comments Sehic, "was when teachers were not motivated for their own development, when everything they do is done just because the principal said so."

Even unmotivated teachers, however, may embrace innovation if their circumstances change. "Teacher motivation varies," explains Marko Nedic, Deputy Minister of Education in Posavina Canton. "A small percentage of teachers are completely prepared and motivated for their professional development. The main reason for poor motivation is financial. They receive the same salary for high- and low-quality work. Teachers are seldom ready to sacrifice their free time for professional development. The existing system for professional development and advancement of teachers is rigid. It does not allow for development based on quality of work and knowledge."

Some teachers want to create a child-centered classroom, but find it difficult to break away from their old methods. "It is important to understand that the teachers, like children, are different," comments Sehic. "An individual approach is necessary. Sometimes protégés just copy their mentors' work plan and classroom environment, without creativity—but given cooperation, this can be changed in time. Mostly they do what they do because they feel insecure and are afraid of making mistakes."

Despite the challenges, all agree that the mentoring process is invaluable, and is rewarding to both mentors and trainees. "These visits are beneficial to me because I can see myself in what they do and get feedback on how I am teaching in my own classroom," says Cilic. "I question myself and my mentees at the same time."

And Cilic, now an experienced mentor, remembers her own days as a teacher new to Step by Step. She and her mentor—Step by Step Executive Director Radmila Rangelov-Jusovic—corresponded for months about the best ways of teaching math. In heartfelt letters Cilic reported her struggles with one pupil who was unable to understand how to calculate with numbers greater than 10: days and weeks spent working with manipulatives, practicing with worksheets, reading and rereading the professional literature. "I taught all of that," Cilic wrote, "but something was wrong." Her mentor responded with advice and support. And finally the new approach clicked; Cilic reached her bewildered pupil. "I began to understand better how hard it can be for a child to pass from concrete experience to symbols," Cilic reported to her mentor. "I almost felt my own brain struggle to make the connection. Now my girl teaches others in the class who need help."

A Wider Community: Partnerships and Teamwork

Most Step by Step teachers—from new trainees to mentors to experienced master teachers and trainers—agree that interaction among teachers is crucial to the success of Step by Step in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. The training itself is not enough, they say. The mentor-protégé relationship is invaluable—but also not enough. As Cilic comments, "Almost all teachers continue to communicate and work cooperatively after the training. This makes them stronger and helps them move forward. Now a growing number of teachers are following this methodology. They are forming teams and planning and solving problems together."

Within an individual school, teamwork is fundamental to the success of any innovation in teaching. Master Teacher Meliha Alic, the Suljo Cilic pedagogue, comments, "I try to organize cooperative teaching in our school. Most of my colleagues are not used to teamwork, but it is fundamental to Step by Step. I encourage teachers. I talk about their work."

While teamwork takes place within individual schools, networking transcends local boundaries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina—a nation divided into ethnically homogeneous cantons and still struggling with ethnic hostilities and mistrust—the networking sparked by Step by Step has been striking. "Teachers from different schools and cantons are working together," says CEI-Step by Step Coordinator Sanja Handzar. "It's a big deal, seeing teachers from schools in Jajce come to Zenica or Jablanica or Mostar. Many have to commu-

While teamwork takes place within individual schools, networking transcends local boundaries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the networking sparked by Step by Step has been striking.

nicate by telephone, because of the physical distance but also because of the political divisions in our country. What these teachers are doing, many said was impossible."

Until recently communication and cooperation among schools from different cantons simply didn't exist, a casualty of both geographical separation and postwar ethnic intolerance. But Training Center Jablanica prides itself on its cooperation with schools from almost all cantons. Amira Sehic comments, "Teachers from Zenica, Trebinje, Medugorje, Orasje, Bileca, Konjic, Mostar, Tuzla, and Jajce have visited or contacted us. We think it is a great success. Our Training Center has been visited by teachers from abroad—from Montenegro, Denmark, and Sweden. Some of the meetings after the formal observations have lasted for hours."

Step by Step has built bridges not only from canton to canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but even to Republika Srpska, the separate Serbian political entity. "We had one situation," Aida Cilic remembers, "where teachers in Trebinje and Bileca, in Republika Srpska, needed help. Both sets of teachers decided to find the will to begin communication. They came to our school first to see our first-grade teaching. With political and national barriers high, all of us at the school tried to make them feel at ease. They came afraid, but also with great desire to see how we worked. Toward the end of their visit, a conversation ensued. They told us how safe and pleasant they felt at our school. It pleased us very much."

Later, Cilic adds, she and other Step by Step teachers attended a seminar with participants from around the country. "I was overjoyed when a teacher from Republika Srpska stood in front of everyone and said how good they felt in Jablanica, where Moslem teachers work."

Moving Forward

"I believe we have done a lot," comments Sabaha Bijedic of the Pedagogical Institute, "but of course it is never enough." New teachers, Step by Step trainers, and Ministry officials all use the same word: "More." More partnerships—with schools, the Ministry, the Faculty of Pedagogy, nongovernmental organizations—more networking, more mentors, more resources, more time, more money. Their vision of what is possible keeps expanding—and in the meantime, they describe the Jablanica Training Center as the heart of their project, their home. "It is our aim to have the Training Center the main meeting point for all teachers and others actively involved in quality improvement and professional development in education in our country," says Step by Step Coordinator Sanja Handzar.

"Everyone wants to visit Jablanica," Handzar adds. "Once a small mountainous settlement famous for a World War II battle, it is becoming renowned for the quality of the teaching and a friendly school team from which everyone wants to learn. Good voices carry far!"

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Radmila Rangelov-Jusovic and Elvira Ramcilovic, *Professional Development through Networking and Partnership in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

"No Two Hares Looked Alike": Quality Teacher Training in Kyrgyzstan

Case Study Researchers: Alima Abdyvasiyeva, Deputy Principal, School #16, Osh; Anara Tentimisheva, Senior Instructor, Arabayev Institute of Pedagogics and Psychology; and Nurbek Teleshaliyev, EdM, Consultant

"My kids love me. Their parents are grateful to me. My colleagues value me. It would appear that everything is fine, but alas, there are problems facing not only our school but also other schools in the south of Kyrgyzstan where I go as a Step by Step trainer. Still, I am persuaded and am trying to persuade others that the sense of life is in an endless conquering of the unknown, in an eternal aspiration to learn more."

—Yelizaveta Vladimirovna Bubenova, Step by Step teacher and trainer at School #16, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

When Yelizaveta Vladimirovna Bubenova, an experienced and dynamic teacher, first entered a Step by Step classroom she was not impressed. In fact, she recalls now, she was horrified. "I have to confess that my heart was crying," she says. The vibrant, colorful room in School #16, located in the ancient city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan's southern capital, seemed noisy, disorderly, and confusing. "Frankly speaking, my eyes popped from my sockets when I saw children—during the lesson!—go and sprawl out on the sofa to have some rest," Bubenova says. "It seemed to me in these classrooms there was perpetual noise. 'Where's the discipline, the order, the clear sequence, the beginning and end, the teacher's authority?' I lamented."

The curriculum seemed irrational. "When I first saw Step by Step classrooms, believe my sincerity, it was absolutely beyond my understanding why children are facing each other," Bubenova says. "Why instead of a sensible lesson—say, of Russian language—with a check of homework, vocabulary dictation, penmanship, an explanation of new content, a new homework assignment, I am witnessing a lesson fragmented into something called centers?"

The classroom itself seemed chaotic. "Why turn the classroom into a public thoroughfare by inviting parents, grandparents, and siblings to come to visit nearly every day?" Bubenova thought. "Strangers in the classroom distract children, or, even worse, make them relax and behave as if they were at home."

Today—five years later—Yelizaveta Vladimirovna Bubenova herself teaches in such a classroom, blooming and buzzing with eager, engaged children. To her own surprise, she has even become a Step by Step trainer, teaching the child-centered methods that once shocked her to other teachers. "After the training I learned to formulate my thoughts and express

them," she says now. "The workshop developed my ability to be self-sufficient. In the past people did everything instead of me, they were responsible for me, they spoke on my behalf. Now I know I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

The Training Center at School #16

School #16—with children bursting out of classrooms and a long corridor displaying student drawings and paintings alongside the work of great artists—is one of 11 Step by Step training centers throughout Kyrgyzstan. Created in 1997 by the Center of Educational Initiatives (CEI), the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan, and the Open Society Institute, the regional training centers disseminate Step by Step methodology and materials to as many schools and teachers as possible, currently offering 15 to 20 seminars a year. "The goal is to make the Step by Step Program accessible and to demonstrate to traditional educators

"The workshop developed my ability to be self-sufficient. In the past people did everything instead of me, they were responsible for me, they spoke on my behalf. Now I know I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

the existence of alternative programs," explains Gulnar Satarovna Sultanaliyeva, director of the Center of Educational Initiatives Step by Step in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital. "We want the program to be accessible not only in the training center, but also in all the regions. If the CEI was engaged in these activities alone, we would not be able to tackle our country's problems. Child-centered education is for all our children."

According to Sultanaliyeva, School #16 is an ideal training center, with its excellent teachers, its accessible location near a Step by Step kindergarten and the Regional Teacher Retraining Institute, and its involved families. Yet the decision to house a training center in an ongoing school is unusual in Kyrgyzstan and School #16 Principal Lyudmila Vasilyevna Klykova recalls her surprise when CEI officials informed her that the school had been selected. "We had been unaware that we would be able to become a training center," she comments. "A commission visited our school and decided to set up a center and use us as a model."

Today the center—launched in 1998—is home to four trainers, including Yelizaveta Vladimirovna Bubenova. The actual, physical Training Center is just one tiny padlocked room, packed with equipment provided by the CEI: computers, a printer, a television, a tape recorder, a photocopier, and an extensive collection of educational literature. Trainings and workshops are conducted in the school's auditorium, but the heart of the experience, trainers say, is located in this one tiny room. Teachers call the Training Center "a spring," says trainer Alima Abdyvasiyeva, the school's deputy principal, "because here thoughts and ideas

sparkle like welling water."

The classrooms of School #16 seem to explode with children. Because of the school's popularity, a building designed for 960 students now serves 1,776. Even the restrooms have been remodeled into classrooms. The school houses 25 primary classes—two taught in Uzbek, six in Kyrgyz, and the rest in Russian—but employs only 18 teachers. Parents in the community fight to get their children into School #16, says principal Klykova, especially into the Russian-language classes. "They are getting to us at our homes even at night requesting that we accept their children to our school," she says.

A New Approach to Training

When Yelizaveta Vladimirovna Bubenova transferred to School #16 in 2002, after more than a decade teaching in traditional schools, she immediately decided that she couldn't possibly stay. "At the time I was very skeptical about innovations of any kind," she explains. "I thought it was an easy emptiness, something secondary, a narrow-mindedness called 'interactive practices.' I was seriously persuaded that a traditional system of education has no alternative." She handed in her resignation to Alima Abdyvasiyeva, but the deputy principal urged her to stay just a few more days for the upcoming Step by Step training. "I decided to attend the training because teaching runs in my blood," Bubenova says. "Also, the deputy principal's words kept ringing in my ears: 'Okay, so what will you do at home? In public you will be able to realize your potential, to demonstrate your capacity.'"

Bubenova had attended in-service teacher-training courses before at Osh Teacher Retraining Institute and had not been impressed. She remembers dry, interminable lectures and no discussion. "Sitting at desks arranged in rows one after another were teachers like me, who had been most likely obliged to attend the course," she recalls. "I thought that our lecturer resembled the audience, as if he also had been forcibly made to read lectures to us. He read us a lecture, we made our notes, and there was no discussion of the content. The time was up and everybody left. During the 10 days of these courses it is sometimes difficult to learn the names of teachers sitting next to you. The entire atmosphere is permeated with the despondency of the participants."

With this experience in mind, Bubenova approached the Step by Step training at School #16 with trepidation—but from the moment she entered the school assembly hall nothing seemed familiar. "The first thing that caught my eye was the desks arranged around the room," she says. "There were flowers on the tables. Participants, five to a table, were sitting facing each other. There was no dais for the lecturer, and I could not understand where the lecturers would be standing. The environment was conducive for communication and conversation from the very start."

Not only did the trainers treat participants as peers, Bubenova says; they expected participants to come up with ideas themselves. "Questions of the type 'What would you recommend in this case?'

always told me that I had to think and rack my brains," she comments. "It is remarkable to find the best answer for yourself from among the variants of answers proposed by the group. The main difference between the Step by Step training and other trainings is the fact that you are not given any ready-made materials, or ready-made answers either."

Even in this accepting atmosphere, Bubenova says, she weighed her words: "I was anxious not to blurt out something that would make everyone think that I am a blockhead." And she frequently disagreed with other workshop participants. "I was the only source of negative moments in the training," she says now. "My thinking was stereotyped, and I thought that I had to say only things correct and necessary." But the trainers, particularly CEI director Gulnar Satarovna Sultanaliyeva, gradually encouraged Bubenova to loosen up. "What struck me in the play aspects," she remembers, "was the fact that Gulnar Satarovna, who is not a young person, made me and my school principal practically crawl on the floor. This was stuck in my mind because nobody had done this to me before. This helped me in my future work with the students."

A Different Frame of Mind

Trainings at School #16 vary considerably, from substantial multi-day seminars to one-day sessions after the regular school day is done. In all cases, says principal Lyudmila Vasilyevna Klykova, the trainings are based on a careful needs assessment of the client. Educational institutions wishing to participate in Step by Step trainings must submit written proposals specifying their goals and proposed topics and providing background information on the institution and its teachers. Trainings may be conducted in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Russian.

Trainers target the workshop or workshops to their clients. For instance, Klykova explains, "for trainees at the Regional Teacher Retraining Institute, we might organize an awareness seminar in the form of a presentation. For students from Osh State University, we demonstrate work in the activity centers, an age-appropriate approach. For teachers from other schools in the city, we teach all five modules of Step by Step content, strategies, and techniques,

spending three days on each."

An ideal client institution, Klykova adds, "should be looking for innovations, trying to get rid of monotonous routine. We try to work directly with the administrator of the educational institution, because unless he or she is interested in implementing the program, the teachers won't be able to do anything." Some schools approach the Training Center not because they want to change their methods, she says, but because they hope to benefit from some of the assistance the center receives from the CEI.

The abbreviated one-day sessions, deputy principal Alima Abdyvasiyeva explains, occur mainly because participants lack both time and funds. Often the participants are teachers at city schools who must fit the trainings in around their jobs and family responsibilities. Longer sessions—two-day to five-day field workshops—are offered as part of the PEAKS program, or Participation, Education, and Knowledge Strengthening program, funded by USAID and implemented by the Academy for Educational Development, in collaboration with the Open Society Institute, Save the Children, and Abt Associates. Planning for these workshops takes two weeks and incorporates suggestions by participants in previous trainings. "One can't come to a training unprepared," comments

Abdyvasiyeva. "Teachers see everything!"

Even at Step by Step trainings, some participants remain passive and unengaged. "Some participants come and keep looking at their watch," says Klykova. "They are looking forward to leaving. Not everyone is willing to learn something new."

In the most successful trainings, participants learn through play—just as children learn in a Step by Step classroom. "When play is used some people believe it is done because the participants have nothing to do," explains Abdyvasiyeva, "while really the aim of the play is to teach teachers to do it with children."

After a training, says Klykova, "teachers are in a different frame of mind. They are no longer afraid to try, to experiment, to be creative. You can come into a classroom and everything there has been made in a new way."

Learning by Doing

Certainly Yelizaveta Vladimirovna Bubenova was taken aback when the leader of her training, CEI director Sultanaliyeva, gave the teachers an art project to work on. Pleasantly surprised by the relaxed, interactive atmosphere of her first Step by Step training but still skeptical, Bubenova hardly knew how to begin.

"One of the first topics at the training was individualization of teaching," she recounts, "but we thought we already used individualization: we would make a struggling child stay behind after the lessons and provide extra teaching for him or her, using flash cards or recapitulating the content of the lesson. Gulnar Satarovna showed us another aspect of individualization by giving us the example of a hare. In the initial phase of the project we were asked to make a hare using templates, after which we discussed our works together. During the second phase we were asked to make our individual hare the way we see it—to make our favorite one. We were free to choose our own materials and make our own hares."

At this point, Bubenova says, the teachers were almost paralyzed with indecision. How could they make a hare without a template? "It was a complete surprise for us and we sat there looking at one another," she recalls now. "We were unable to start working because we were confused. Gulnar Satarovna came to the rescue and said that we could make any hare we wanted. All of them would be accepted and no critical remarks would be made. After a little more thinking we set down to work. The process turned out quite interesting. We worked the way our children would have worked. We hardly noticed that the time given for this work was already up. But the most interesting thing was waiting for us later when we began to hand in our work. It was evident that no two hares looked alike."

After a training, "teachers are in a different frame of mind. They are no longer afraid to try, to experiment, to be creative. You can come into a classroom and everything there has been made in a new way."

For Bubenova, this realization—a herd of wonderfully nonconformist hares—was the pivotal moment of the training. "It was then that the ice was broken," she says. "I realized at that moment that internally I had been afraid of anything new and tried to keep myself in cotton wool. So I decided to give it a try."

Challenges

CEI director Sultanaliyeva and principal Klykova wish every teacher in Kyrgyzstan could have a transformative

experience like Bubenova's. But resources and energy are limited. Preparation for trainings requires a great deal of time and effort from teachers who already have their hands full doing their everyday teaching, and most of whom also take care of homes and children. Many can only conduct trainings during vacations. Trainers are not paid and tend to laugh when the question of salary is raised; indeed, they often must use their own money to buy supplies for the trainings. Only the PEAKS workshops, financed by USAID, pay the trainers for their work.

"We do this work because we deem it our duty," says Klykova. "Once we had received this knowledge we had to disseminate it."

If trainings are conducted during the school day, substitute teachers must be found to take the trainers' classes, "but this is sometimes impossible because the substitute teachers themselves have two classes to teach," says Abdyvasiyeva. All the trainers agree that they need more preparation time, but Abdyvasiyeva asks, "At the expense of what?" Trainers also feel that they need more training themselves, particularly in the area of adult education. They ask for more opportunities for professional development, but at the moment, Abdyvasiyeva explains, the best way for trainers to develop professionally "is through the field workshops they conduct themselves."

Turnover at the Training Center is high, and at the moment four trainers, including Bubenova, bear the brunt of the work, down from seven. The exodus of teachers from School #16 is similar to the situation throughout Kyrgyzstan. "There are not enough teachers," says Abdyvasiyeva. "Sometimes the CEI asks us to send three teachers for a training and we send only one, which leads to misunderstandings." Sultanaliyeva adds, "We are suffering because of the turnover of our staff."

The conditions the trainers find in schools throughout Kyrgyzstan can be daunting. "There are small classroom facilities, old school buildings, too many students per class (up to 46 in a classroom)," says Bubenova. "Children often sit with their backs to the teacher and the blackboard, syllabi are not good, it is difficult to involve teachers, and salaries are low. If the work were paid, it would be a good incentive. There are teachers who abandon classrooms like this because they have to work at a full stretch there."

Everyone involved with the center is overextended. Ideally, says Abdyvasiyeva, "there should be a person responsible for the activities of the Training Center—a coordinator who would only be responsible for the work of the center and for the trainers. I happen to be a deputy principal, a coordinator, and a teacher. As a teacher, I have to give my lessons; as a trainer, to prepare for the workshop; as deputy principal, to visit classrooms, prepare the timetable, supervise the teaching process, meet the demands of the municipal educational authority; as a coordinator, to work and to submit reports to PEAKS. It's so difficult to cope with everything. I can't be everywhere at once. I have to work without leave."

The Training Center would function more efficiently, Abdyvasiyeva adds, if trainers' teaching loads could be reduced from two classes to one. "It is impossible to have two classes and also conduct trainings," she says. But finances are a struggle: "They have to teach two classes because life makes them do it, since the minimum monthly salary is so low." The trainings themselves are generally provided for free, although the CEI has offered paid trainings upon request.

"We have done this work on a voluntary basis, considering it our duty. People would come to us from a small town and say that they would like to learn about the program."

But as CEI director Sultanaliyeva notes, ordinary teachers can never afford the fee. "Of course, the charge is too high for the teachers," she comments. "We charge 100 soms a day per participant, and in principle this is below the cost. The amount should be higher. One has to bear in mind that the monthly salary of primary teachers is only 600 soms" [just under $15].

"It's a very painful issue," says School #16 principal Klykova. "It's unlikely that teachers will pay us for trainings. We have not discussed it in our school yet, nor have we thought about sustainable development. We have done this work on a voluntary basis, considering it our duty. People would come to us from a small town and say that they would like to learn about the program. We deemed it our duty to conduct a workshop for them."

Some trainers suggest that the CEI should run Kyrgyzstan's training centers in a more centralized manner, but Sultanaliyeva vehemently disagrees. "How long can we lead them by the hand?" she asks. "The idea of the program lies in family involvement. This is a matter for parent associations in every school. Do something if you want to live; if you don't want to do anything, you will merely exist."

Rewards

For Bubenova the Step by Step training was an exhilarating experience—but the struggle to implement the new methods in her classroom was only beginning. "When the time came to integrate Step by Step in my practice, it resembled the situation when you are dropped into water and the people around you are watching to see whether you will swim or drown," she says.

Step by Step methods are demanding—too demanding for many already overstressed teachers. Even today, Bubenova says, she sometimes falls back on the older techniques. "At some stage I realized that preparation of a lesson according to the Step by Step standards would take oodles of my time, which was lacking as it was," she comments. "In my mind I became indignant and started struggling with myself. It would be great if I could at least teach children to read, write, and speak Russian. Why exert myself and offer them Step by Step? Needless to say, I combine traditional lessons with Step by Step, because sometimes I lack both time and strength."

But when she finds the time, Bubenova says, the results can be remarkable. She still remembers one of the first lessons she prepared as a Step by Step teacher. "I came into my classroom after the Step by Step training and I remember that the lesson topic was Water," she recalls. "I had rummaged through so much literature! I even made my husband help me draw cards, and my son also wrote something. I brought heaps of literature from home to school. When I had given the lesson I asked myself a question: 'My God, what are the children learning? I have to satisfy the demands of the Ministry that require that a student be able to read 25 words a minute and know the multiplication tables. And those sprints from one center to another—say something here, explain something there. What am I doing?'"

But Bubenova persisted. "I tried this lesson for the second time and it was better organized," she says. "The third time, this lesson was remarkable."

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Alima Abdyvasiyeva, Anara Tentimisheva, and Nurbek Teleshaliyev, *Do Training Centers in Kyrgyzstan Have a Future?*

"Who Said that We Can't Change the World?": Step by Step at the Vilnius Training Center in Lithuania

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"In the summer of 1996 American trainers started preparing 10 Lithuanian primary-grade teachers to apply Step by Step methods. I enjoyed the experience, and acquired more self-confidence. I had many joyful revelations, and learned to value my work differently. I thought that if I managed to recreate the feeling I got from the workshop in my classroom, I would be the luckiest person in the world. In autumn 1996 I started applying the knowledge in my work. The classrooms of all the pioneers were as busy as railway stations—everybody wanted to see how we were doing it! Back then, I got accustomed to my classroom being observed. I learned how to explain what I do to other teachers; therefore, when in 1998 the Open Society Fund Lithuania decided to open a Step by Step training center in our school, I was ready to take the challenge to lead it."

—Aldona Barisauskiene, primary-grade teacher, methodologist, and now coordinator of the Step by Step Training Center in J. Basanavicius Secondary School, Vilnius, Lithuania

Background

The Step by Step Program was introduced in Lithuania in 1994 by the Soros Foundation Lithuania and the Open Society Institute in 16 preschool classrooms across the country. In 1996, Step by Step expanded its activities to include reform of teacher education, introducing programs in three pedagogical universities, including Vilnius. In 1998, the Step by Step Center for Innovative Education (CIE) at the J. Basanavicius Secondary School in Vilnius became one of nine new Step by Step training centers, with professional development as one of its chief goals. The Training Center has played a pioneering and dynamic role in the practical dissemination of Step by Step methodology across the region, making it an important representative site for our case study. The goal of our research was to analyze the impact of teacher professional development on teachers, children, and families. The study also examined teachers' feelings, assessments, and experiences of the center. Document analysis, interviews, and questionnaires were used to complete the case study.

J. Basanavicius Secondary School is a large school with, currently, 1,494 pupils and 120 teaching staff. There are 18 primary classes, 16 of which apply Step by Step methods. In total, there are 462 pupils in primary grades, 823 enrolled in Grades 5 to 10, and 209 in Grades 11 and 12. A separate block in the school is allocated for primary grades

to ensure a safe environment for young children. The key school governing body is the school council, comprised in equal parts of parents, teachers, and children. The school also has an active pupils' parliament.

Center for Innovative Education (CIE)

The Center for Innovative Education runs nine training centers, evenly distributed across the country, so they can be conveniently accessed by teachers in all regions who want to gain professional-development experience. The professional-development programs, encompassing 76 topics, are approved by the Education and Science Ministry. CIE is authorized to certify participants, making it an official member of the professional-development process in Lithuania's national education policy.

The core activities of the Training Center in the J. Basanavicius Secondary School (as well as in the other eight CIE training centers) are:

- **Workshops for primary-grade teachers, subject teachers, parents, students, and university teachers.** Between 1996 and 2004, 104 workshops were organized at the J. Basanavicius Secondary School Training Center involving 3,120 teachers.
- **Public class lessons that can be observed by any members of the community**. More than 2,000 teaching staff from different institutions have visited the training center and observed Step by Step lessons at the school, among them university teachers, students, Vilnius secondary school teachers, and teachers from other towns. There have been 450 foreign visitors from other countries including the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Russia, Finland, Moldova, Armenia, Albania, and Macedonia.
- **Visitor days.** More than 700 individuals attended the annual Visitor Days between 1998 and 2004.
- **Conferences.** The Training Center arranges an annual conference, providing Step by Step practitioners with the opportunity to share their experience and knowledge.
- **Hands-on training of university and college students.** Following the introduction of Step by Step methodology in teacher education, it became necessary to provide the students of Vilnius Pedagogical University and Vilnius Pedagogical College with practical experience of Step by Step implementation in the classroom. In the first six years, 63 student teachers were trained at J. Basanavicius Secondary School.

Rebecca Juras, one of the numerous visitors, describes the combination of practical assistance, professional development, and inspiration many have acquired from participating in the center's activities:

"I am a parent of a first- and a second-grader and I recently attended a seminar at the CIE Training Center on communication and cooperative learning. I regularly participate in conferences and other educational opportunities in the field of inclusion and special education, and the philosophy of Step by Step is familiar to me; however, it is rare to find organizers as true to their commitment to active learning as those at the session presented by CIE. From the moment we walked into the room, we were swept from our seats by our instructors and engaged in a morning greeting exercise. The team of instructors managed to maintain the friendly atmosphere and lively momentum throughout the entire weekend. As we moved from one activity to another, we stopped briefly for reflection and analysis, but transitioned quickly enough that we were not drawn off course. I have recommended the seminars to friends of mine working as educators as well as to social workers and counselors. I think that we all left the training

with at least 10 new ideas to incorporate into our work with groups of children."

Teacher Perspectives

When the Training Center came to the J. Basanavicius Secondary School eight years ago, teachers could only imagine what the impact might be. Both primary-grade

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teachers and teacher-trainers—who are representatives of the Step by Step Training Center as well as being regular teachers—shared their expectations:

"Of some things we were absolutely sure: a team would be formed, and it would be so much easier to spread the Step by Step ideas in our own school and beyond. We were almost sure that our school would become more attractive to the parents of our present and would-be students, and that it would develop into the center for promoting these ideas and methods in Vilnius. We expected to become the beginners of developing and spreading this methodology in Lithuania. We realized how responsible it might become, for ourselves and for other educators. We realized that we would be setting the standard."

Which of these expectations came true?

"We did become a team sharing the same ideas and our positive experience. We became much more successful in promoting the Step by Step ideas outside our own school and in our school. It is too hard to determine if the school had acquired its own unique image. Yet it is obvious already that our school became so much more well-known, and if it has added some to its unique image it is because of the strong group of teachers and the successful implementation of the new methodology."

In order to have an effective training center, the teachers and principal agreed that it is vital for the administration to support the teachers and to create a team atmosphere. Teacher-trainers and primary teachers were emphatic about the importance of having a Step by Step team, noting that a team approach made it much easier to spread and support the methodology. They knew they were setting the standard for education, and were proud to work hard. However, not all of the teachers adopted the Step by Step methods and everything took longer than expected. If they could do it again, the teachers would hire a full-time employee to run the Training Center.

"It would probably be necessary to hire a full-time employee of this center who would only be involved in the activities of it. When the center has visitors from other schools, the immediate work of our teachers commonly gets neglected. The operation of our center is successful in general, yet if we had somebody employed in it full time, it could be even more productive."

Sometimes, circumstances change and the unexpected or unwanted happens. Did teachers think that Step by Step practice would be maintained if the Training Center had to close?

"We do not think that in several years the ideas of the Step by Step practice would die back; we know that the main initiators of it would not leave our school. Yet the teachers would become tired of defending their ideas without any support, and our primary grades would be less attractive to parents. It is possible that the number of schoolchildren in primary grades would decrease."

Teachers and staff agreed that working in a school with a Step by Step training center brought tremendous advantages. *"We teachers can test the ideas of the center in our work on a daily basis. Thus the Step by Step ideas become embodied into real life."* They stressed that they felt they belonged to a team and could count on methodological support and standard-setting. Teachers who visited from other schools provided an opportunity to self-assess their work from different viewpoints, and the visits of parents to the center increased the personal responsibility of teachers.

Yet teachers from other schools who were trained at the center faced significant obstacles, including skeptical administrators and colleagues; a fear of introducing radical changes; a fear of parents' reactions to new methods; and the absence of a supportive team of colleagues.

We asked teacher-trainers to identify the

difficulties encountered in training teachers from other schools that do not have a Step by Step training center.

"Some do face some threats. We fear that other teachers will ignore this initiative, that, having met the resistance, they would simply choose to work in their old way. We also frequently fear that these teachers might not be supported by their administration, and will revert to applying only the knowledge they had before."

Subject teachers commented that they enjoy working with pupils from the Step by Step Program, and are increasingly familiar with it. In their view, the key advantages and benefits of the program are:

"It fosters and encourages students' creativeness, independence, and sense of group, and involves parents."

"The system is tailored to look for some potential in every child."

"It encourages communication and cooperation; it fosters a friendly attitude toward others."

"Knowledge and information get more closely integrated into the development of the individual's inner world."

"The children are active in the classroom, brave, and possess self-confidence. They are not afraid to ask questions, and they are not afraid to stand up in front of the class and present and defend their own opinions."

"They like working for results, not just a grade."

Asked to reflect on the potential weaknesses of Step by Step methodology, subject teachers commented that some pupils were insufficiently adapted to working on their own, sometimes lacking in boundaries, over-reliant on being helped by the teachers, and used to being praised regardless of the quality of their work.

Despite these criticisms, however, most subject teachers agreed that elements of the Step by Step methodology could be adopted and adapted to secondary-level teaching practice.

The case study demonstrated the positive impact of the Training Center upon other schools in Vilnius. It became evident that Step by Step methodology is becoming widely accepted throughout Lithuania's educational system—and indeed, is central to the process of educational reform.

Parent Perspectives

We wanted to find out about parents' experiences in Step by Step classrooms and their attitudes toward the long-term impact of Step by Step methodology on children's education. We also wanted to know how child development in Step by Step classes differs from that in primary grades of other schools. To do this, we focused on the responses of parents from the first grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade. The contrasting responses across these grades were revealing.

Parents of first- and fourth-graders

Parents said that Step by Step was the main reason they chose to send their children to the school, that all their core

expectations had been met, and that they would make the same decision again. Most parents felt that the Step by Step school paid more careful and thoughtful attention to child development than other schools, and that the class environment had a different, better, more exciting quality. They particularly valued Step by Step's emphasis on the individual nature of every child's progress.

They told us:

"The child feels free."

"The teachers are competent professionals, trained in good, effective teaching techniques."

"We like the positive relationships and mutual respect between our children and the teachers."

"The environment is safe, and the children feel comfortable."

"The children are active in the classroom, brave, and possess self-confidence. They are not afraid to ask questions, and they are not afraid to stand up in front of the class and present and defend their own opinions."

"The classroom and school environment are democratic, and use interesting teaching techniques."

"Children learn easily."

"Our child became more independent, able to generalize in her thinking, acquired a sense of responsibility, and attended school willingly."

Parents of fifth-graders

Transition to fifth grade, which includes more traditional teaching approaches and subject teachers, was flagged as a difficult area. The subject teachers' difficulty with applying Step by Step methods, along with the higher independence needs of Step by Step children in this environment, came up frequently in the discussions with both parents and subject teachers of fifth-grade students.

"Schooling is conducted in the traditional manner. Teachers apply dictatorial methods, and there is no dialogue with the pupils."

"Group work is over; quite serious individual work has started."

"In primary grades, there was more emphasis on child development. Now the focus is on presenting information, and insufficient attention is dedicated to personality development."

"There are fewer game-type activities, and more focus on serious assimilation of information."

"The fifth grade is dominated by individual, and not group, work. They do not work nor answer questions in groups. In the fifth grade they are assessed for their individual knowledge, not for teamwork."

"Some problems that had been successfully handled by the primary-grade teacher have resurfaced."

Despite these concerns, most parents were enthusiastic about Step by Step methodology and would welcome its expansion into more classrooms throughout Lithuania.

Reflections

The Training Center provides teachers with the resources and a support system to effectively implement the Step by Step Program. These include:

- A team of professionals who share the same philosophy;
- Consistent support of other teachers and professionals;
- A safe atmosphere and a natural setting for self-training as well as continuous access to professional development; and
- The enrichment of ideas and consistent implementation and verification of the Step by Step philosophy in everyday practice.

As Step by Step embodies the most vital requirements of educational rethinking in Lithuania, it has become a reliable support for national education reform. In a sense, it even predicts the direction of change. As soon as the community of educators demands a workshop on any pressing topic, Step by Step lecturers are ready and qualified to offer a seminar. During a seminar for preschool teachers, a representative of the Ministry of Education and Science good-humoredly observed: "We develop laws and write strategies, and the advocates of the Step by Step methodology and the lecturers of the Center for Innovative Education will tell you how to implement them in reality."

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Antanas Valantinas, Regina Sabaliauskiene, and Regina Rimkiene, *Network of Step by Step Training Centers: Ongoing Professional Development and the Impact after Training in Lithuania*.

"Every Puzzle Piece Is Unique": Teacher Training in Romania

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"Step by Step children learn not because they fear the teachers, but because the teachers are well trained. Teachers who know how to stimulate children are better than those who know how to give bad marks. The teachers trained by Step by Step will know better how to work with children. We have a great deal to win."

—Mihai Albota, former General Inspector, Tulcea County School Inspectorate, Romania

"Without educational pluralism, no democracy can exist."

—Viorel Nicolescu, President, Center for Educational and Professional Development (CEPD) Step by Step, Romania

With the Smart Bunnies

The Smart Bunnies room in Kindergarten #3 in Tulcea, Romania, is comfortable and cheerful, with children's colorful artwork adorning the walls and welcoming lace curtains framing the high windows. Children work busily at activity centers, building with blocks, drawing, pouring out cups of sand and water, slicing bread. A teacher leads one small group of children on an imaginary tour of Tulcea, passing the monument and the harbor, gateway to the Danube Delta. One small boy, Tudor, wears a driver's cap. His classmate, Radu, is trying to invent a steering wheel. The children study photos they took on an actual class trip around town, matching large and tiny versions of the same scenes. They remember seeing the big stage in the Civic Square, where performers sing and dance. Perhaps they too are dancers! Perhaps the classroom can be a stage! Children and teachers get up and dance the *geamparaua* and the *hora*, traditional Romanian melodies. Some boys seem shy or embarrassed at first, but soon throw themselves into the dance.

Around the outskirts of the room, visitors stand quietly watching. A few take notes. "These large blocks give children a quick sense of accomplishment," one visitor says. Another studies a child's drawing displayed on the easel, wondering what it represents. "What matters is the context and the process," says Jeni Batiste, a pioneer Step by Step teacher. "The children are active and engaged, that's what we want to see."

"Training Keeps Us Alert"

The 21 visitors watching the Smart Bunnies' impromptu dance are themselves preschool teachers, but today their task in the brightly furnished classroom is to learn. Kindergarten #3 in Tulcea is an official Model Training Site of the Center for Educational and Professional Development (CEPD) Step by Step and the visiting teachers are hoping to use Step by Step methods with their own pupils. Jeni Batiste, Eliza

Caramilea, and Maria Cirstoiu are veteran Step by Step trainers who—in addition to their own work as preschool teachers—devote many hours to training their colleagues from other schools in the philosophy and methods of Step by Step.

"The training is good for us," comments Batiste. "Our training sessions are good for the teachers, but also for ourselves. Training keeps us alert."

Already embarked on their second three-day training module, the visiting teachers are familiar with Step by Step concepts and techniques, but often find the amount of work required daunting, and the lessons difficult to apply. "I very much like the child-centered focus of Step by Step," one teacher says, "but planning is very difficult. How do we plan a lesson that takes into account all children's needs?"

Batiste, a nine-year veteran of Step by Step, agrees that planning effective lessons—organized but flexible, responsive to the needs of many different learners—is a key task for both teachers and the trainers themselves. "The trainees find Step by Step planning very difficult," she says. "They come with traditional methods and can't understand how to adapt them. They find they can't use their present methods to conceptualize the teacher's role in child-centered activity." After completing their two training modules teachers must be able to create a child-centered lesson plan that follows both Step by Step Pedagogical Standards and the formal requirements of the National Curriculum. Trainers follow up with monitoring visits, observing and mentoring teachers at their home schools.

Theoretical training is important, Batiste notes, but isn't sufficient; direct classroom experience with children is essential for every trainee. Or as one young trainee comments at the end of a demanding day of practice teaching: "Today I learned that half my dissertation for my first teaching degree was wrong."

"It would be easier if you only had to take ideas from books," Batiste says, "but these ideas have to be studied experientially. The trainees need time and more experience in Step by Step classrooms. Sharing ideas with their colleagues and mentors, asking questions and expressing doubts—characteristics of reflective practice—are the best ways of improving personal teaching."

The Engine of Reform

In many countries, of course, teachers are eager to embrace new and innovative teaching methods, but the work feels particularly urgent in Romania, where education reform has been seen as a key to integration into the European community—and where teacher training is seen as the engine of education reform. "Alternative methods of teaching give oxygen to the system," comments Prof. Ioan Neacsu, an official of the Ministry of Education and Research.

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After the Romanian Revolution of 1989 and the bloody overthrow of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, enormous economic and social changes took place. During the 21 years of Ceausescu's reign Romania had declined from a moderately prosperous country to one on the edge of starvation. Even after the revolution, conditions remained poor, with unemployment high, life expectancy low, and infant mortality high by European

standards. Although Romania had been the first country of Central/Eastern Europe to have official relations with the European community, it was only twelfth in line to join the European Union, and the poorest of the 12. There was widespread agreement that full integration within the EU—which finally took place in 2007—depended in part on educational reform. In 1991 education officially became a national priority.

A new philosophy of teaching and learning—more child-centered, flexible, and individualized than the old Soviet-style model—began appearing in Romanian policy documents during the 1990s, and in the rhetoric of many educators as well. But implementing these new ideas and policies remained a challenge. Most teachers were trained in a traditional model: an authoritarian teacher, standardization of the process of education, ranking of children, attention to uniform outcomes rather than individual

discovery. "We have many very good teachers who do their jobs very well," says Mihai Albota, former General Inspector for the Tulcea County School Inspectorate. "But our training strategy was bad. It is difficult to train adults who have already learned other methods. Perhaps the greatest problem for education is the educators."

The Step by Step Program entered Romania in 1994 and was recognized as an official alternative to the public educational system the following year. From the beginning, Step by Step was linked to twin ideas: educational alternatives and teacher training. By 2004 some 26,000 Romanian children were learning in Step by Step classrooms and Kindergarten #3 was one of five Preschool Model Training Sites supported by CEPD Step by Step. Another seven Core Training Teams worked in primary schools throughout the country. Among the many services provided by CEPD, teacher training was the most important and was delivered at all levels: day nurseries, preschools, primary schools, principals, school inspectors, babysitters, and parents.

"When we started with training we had few expectations," recalls CEPD Executive Director Carmen Lica. "We hardly knew what Step by Step was. After 10 years, it has become more than any of us imagined. We hardly had a plan—it was an adventure. We all grew together, all the people involved, the teachers, the parents."

A Model Kindergarten

A serious-looking woman in a chic black suit stands at the door welcoming visitors to the Smart Bunnies room. When trainer Jeni Batiste asks everyone to introduce themselves with an adjective starting with the initial letter of their names, the woman first says "agitated," meaning excited, but then changes her mind. "I am quite ambitious," she says. "This characterizes me most of the time."

By 2004 some 26,000 Romanian children were learning in Step by Step classrooms and Kindergarten #3 was one of five Preschool Model Training Sites supported by CEPD Step by Step.

The woman in the black suit is Ana Pantea, principal of Kindergarten #3, and indeed, the effects of her ambition can be seen throughout the building. Before the entrance of Step by Step, Kindergarten #3 Tulcea was much like other kindergartens in the public education system, despite its reputation for high achievement. The school's future mentor and partner, CEPD Step by Step in Bucharest, Romania's capital, was much like other Step by Step centers as well. The striking success of the collaboration can be attributed at least in part to Pantea's inspired leadership. "There is ambition in this kindergarten too," she says, "and good and fair competition among my colleagues. All the teachers have ambition."

Kindergarten #3 operated in an antiquated school building built in the early

years of the 20th century. In 1994, faced with unemployment and a declining birth rate, it had only 70 children. Pantea remembers her shock when she first saw the building. She had studied Step by Step principles and knew that it was important for children to learn in an appropriate physical environment. "In my heart I had an image of the program and of what we should do," she says. "All the things I had imagined were completely different from what I found I could do here. Here there was nothing, not even water or a toilet."

Step by Step provided money to refurbish two classrooms, but Pantea felt it was unfair to have two beautiful gleaming rooms while the others had neither finished floors nor functional windows. She began lobbying for help from every quarter. "Everybody thought we were asking for money," she says, "but that wasn't all. Anything could help, anything was useful: roof materials, wall and floor tiles, 15 meters of cable. Within three days everything was done. I told myself I would crawl to Bucharest if I needed to. I wanted that program that bad. How could they possibly reject us? It was my dream."

In addition to Pantea's strong leadership, Kindergarten #3 has had other advantages, most notably a highly involved group of parents and the strong support of former General Inspector Mihai Albota and the County Inspectorate. Parents and other community sponsors helped renovate the building, built lavatories, parqueted the floors, and built a handsome loft in each classroom for small children's naps. "Without the sponsorships we could not have transformed a building that looked like a horror movie into a large, beautiful, and welcoming kindergarten," Pantea says.

When Pantea calculated food prices and decided that the school needed a car in order to shop for better quality food for the children, she remembers, "One of the parents gave me one of those 'you must be crazy' looks. I asked if he considered my plan foolish. He admitted he did, but later he was the first to congratulate me. We were able to improve the quality of meals, because wholesale food store prices are very different from those you find in normal stores. Now the parents always ask their children, 'What did you have for lunch today?'"

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Most of all, Pantea was determined to hire only excellent teachers committed to the Step by Step philosophy. Albota, the General Inspector, supported her. "In the first place, she knew how to choose her people, to create the team. If you know how to choose people, you succeed. There were some who did not fit in, so they had to go. What you see is her idea and her sweat. She is the leader."

Pantea herself, with 32 years of experience as a teacher and 14 as principal, speaks often of the importance of teamwork. "I've tried to build up the team. Almost all my colleagues can take over some of the work very well. If I have a problem, I explain it and it is solved. I know I could leave this kindergarten for a month and the work would go on."

From the earliest years of Step by Step in Tulcea, comments Albota, "parents volunteered to bring their children here. Now they all want to get them in. They drive their children here from all over the city. You should see the cars lined up. The parents understand Step by Step. It does not stuff them with tons of information. We teach the children to search for themselves."

A Puzzle with Many Pieces

It is the end of a long day of training, the experiential learning by doing that is the heart of the process, and both trainers and trainees are tired. A group of children in the literacy center have been learning English words with trainee Mirela and teacher/trainer Marinela Peiciu, but now the lesson is over. All the children but Teo have left.

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Teo chooses to stay, talking enthusiastically of dinosaurs, his latest passion. Finally Mirela asks a bit desperately, "Won't you go to another center too?" She turns to Peiciu and murmurs, "He's driving me crazy with these dinosaurs."

"Yes," Peiciu agrees, "this is Teo's new hobby. He used to be interested in sailboats. His dream was to become a captain, although he knew that these days there aren't many sailing boats. That's why I have painted a sailboat on this cloth on the wall." She points to a cloth displaying colorful paintings of a boat, a plane, and a train. "And that's why I've bought him so many different books about boats." No doubt books about dinosaurs would soon appear in the kindergarten library.

A key Step by Step principle, and a focus of the training, is individualization. Each child comes to school from a particular family, with a particular personality and temperament, with individual interests and styles of learning. Each child is different, but capable of learning and entitled to equal access to a quality education. "Our principle is individualization," says trainer Jeni Batiste.

Not only is each child unique; so is each trainee, and each Step by Step classroom. "We try to make the teachers understand that each set of plans is different from one preschool teacher to another, from one group to another," Batiste adds, "but when we offer examples, there is a tendency of teachers just to copy. When we publish examples in magazines, they are copied word for word. It can't go on like that!"

When individuals are respected, everyone's voice has value; each child, and each teacher too, has something to contribute. "Step by Step was a child-centered approach appearing directly in schools, not going through many levels of bureaucratic decision," says CEPD Executive Director Carmen Lica. "It was something designed for teachers, for children, and for parents. I think one of the most important characteristics was that Step by Step teachers were supposed to contribute their own experience in adapting Step by Step to the national requirements."

Albota adds: "Step by Step kids are allowed to think by themselves, to work with the team, in order to discover their skills and whether they are responsible for their own actions. They are not afraid of inspection. Before, they were shaking, with their hands behind their backs. You should not raise children like that. You should give them some space."

Pantea asks the trainees to think about jigsaw puzzles. Usually a child solves a puzzle more quickly than an adult, she notes—and in order to construct a puzzle, it is necessary to see the entire picture. "Think of the class as a puzzle," she suggests.

"Each piece is different. Each piece is an individual child. What do you have to do in order to work with the puzzle? You have to observe, to think hard about every person in the room. Just as every piece is different, so is every child unique."

A Desk or a Dollhouse?

Training is a painful process for some participants. At one session, trainees are asked to draw their "roles" for the day—teacher, assistant teacher, parent, observer—from small slips of paper tucked into a hat. Diana, a young preschool teacher, is upset when she draws the role of teacher, and protests loudly. "But why me?" she asks. "I shouldn't have taken that ticket. I don't have the experience." She angrily rejects all suggestions, remaining sulky and on the verge of tears. Eventually another trainee volunteers to take on the teacher's role. "Maybe it would have been better if we had assigned roles in advance," Batiste comments later. "The training is very demanding. Diana felt upset. The responsibility seemed too great."

Trainers complain that there is never enough time for either training or mentoring. "With time so short, the training itself needs very careful planning," Batiste says. "The standard topics have to be presented. Other topics in which the trainees are interested get short shrift." Training sessions sometimes seem overly formal and didactic—surprising, considering Step by Step's philosophy—with little encouragement for teachers to be coauthors of Step by Step, drawing on their own aspirations and experience. Budget constraints and limited human resources make the mentoring process less effective than teachers and trainers would like it to be. Some new trainee teachers feel vulnerable, eager for more support through regular classroom visits by either trainers or CEPD staff members.

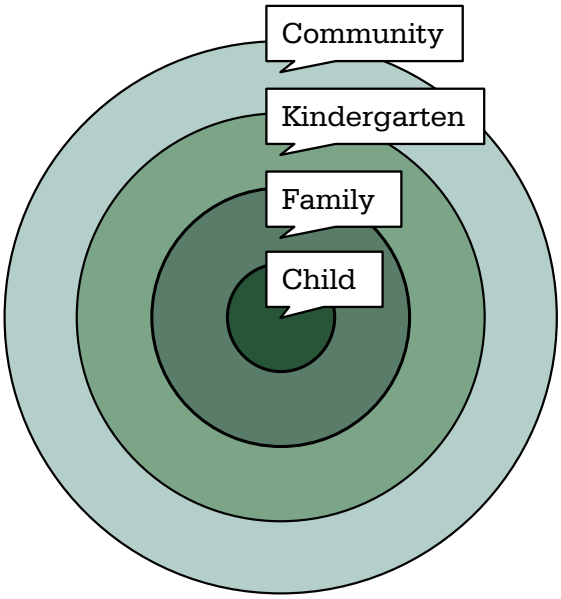
The success of Step by Step in Romania has sparked criticism from more traditional teachers who both resent and envy the children's performance outcomes. "Other kindergarten teachers say that all our children are from wealthy homes, but it is not true," comments Pantea. "Our children come from all social classes. Their success is indeed something different. It is the fruit of our work."

When trainees themselves rank Step by Step's most "forceful ideas," they list "child-centered activity," "respect for the child," "parent involvement," and "teacher dialogue."

More and more confident in their achievements, and surrounded by an increasing number of Step by Step-affiliated teachers in Tulcea County who share their vision of child-centeredness, Kindergarten #3 teachers have gradually given up the idea of assisting their colleagues in traditional education. A similar situation has occurred in other counties. Elena Mihai and Carmen Anghelescu of the CEPD note the dangers of this isolation. "The gap between 'traditional' and 'alternative' could deepen," they say—"which would be detrimental to education in general."

Despite these difficulties, Step by Step

continues to thrive. When trainees themselves rank Step by Step's most "forceful ideas," they list "child-centered activity," "respect for the child," "parent involvement," and "teacher dialogue." Parent involvement in Step by Step classrooms is high. "I never thought that parents would be so interested in what really happens in a school," comments Silvia Craciun, Inspector for Preschool Education for the Tulcea District. "But parents participate when they know their opinion really matters." Pantea represents the relationships among child, family, school, and community as a network of concentric circles, complete within themselves yet necessary to one another.



And even where resources are limited, imagination runs free. When trainer Marinela Peiciu visits Kindergarten #41 in Galati to observe two of her trainees, Nela Mogos and Rodica Tireavu, she finds that the furniture is inaccessible, too high for the children. The Galati kindergartens have not been permitted to buy more appropriate furniture. Nevertheless, Peiciu reports, "We found clever solutions. In one classroom, a teacher's desk was transformed into a dollhouse."

The Danube Delta: A Metaphor for Alternatives

On a sun-radiant Sunday afternoon at the end of the second training module, exhausted trainers enjoy a cruise on the Danube Delta, one of the richest ecosystems on earth. From Tulcea, the Danube flows 80 kilometers (about 50 miles) before reaching the Black Sea. "The Danube Delta is the mother of Europe's youngest land," comments Albota. "It leads to the sea; predictable and unpredictable at the same time. It gives you countless options: channels and meanders, spontaneity and control. All these make up the Delta we are sailing on."

The river splits in two, then into three, branches—the Chilia, the Sulina, and the Sfantu Gheorghe—to create a unique and somehow exotic landscape. The water spreads into some 120 tributaries and rambles through a widening riverbed. Black Sea waves repel the sediments of old Danubius brought from far away, depositing this rich earth at the mouth of the river, a realm of reed and refuge for many rare species of bird, fish, and fowl. The refuge suffers, victimized by careless and destructive human intervention—but the refuge also continues to thrive. Surrounded by Romanians, Bulgarians, and Ukrainians, the Danube is both a bridge between lands and a gateway to the world.

A month after the cruise, the National Commission on Educational Alternatives holds Romania's first conference devoted exclusively to the topic of educational pluralism. Step by Step is well represented, and is described by many participants as the most popular educational alternative across Romania. Educators speak movingly of choice as the foundation of democracy, even shouting, "I choose, therefore I exist."

State Secretary for Pre-University Education Minister Irinel Chiran returns for a moment to the river. "A river delta communicates with the sea," she says, "and so do educational alternatives. Alternatives are a loyal competition to traditional education. They all go toward the same destination: a high-quality education, to the children's benefit and the benefit of the whole system."

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Catalina Ulrich, Ioana Herseni, and Luciana Terente, *Teacher Staff Development at the Tulcea Model Training Site in Romania*, published in *Multiple Case Study Analysis,* by Robert Stake (Guilford Publications, 2005). The authors gratefully acknowledge the expert mentorship provided by Dr. Stake in guiding the research process.

Step by Step Journals in Croatia

Case Study Researchers: Boris Jokic, BSc, Assistant Researcher, Institute for Social Research, and Zrinka Ristic Dedic, BSc, Assistant Researcher, Institute for Social Research

OUR FRIEND MISHKO

I decided to bring my "friend" Mishko to the first day of school. Mishko is actually a soft toy with messed-up hair and a long red nose, somewhat like Pinocchio. The role I first had in mind for him was to create a joyful atmosphere in the classroom and alleviate the fear that usually arises in children when they are faced with a new environment, a new situation, and an experience that they are not familiar with.

Once everyone was in the classroom the children and I sat in a circle on the floor, with the parents around us. I introduced Mishko as my friend, who is slightly shy but eager to meet each of them and their parents. The introductions started and Mishko moved from child to child. Everyone had a turn, and there was not a child who did not say at least a sentence about himself/herself and his or her mom or dad. The first contact was thus established in a simple way that children were familiar with, and as I predicted, soon enough Mishko played an important role in helping the children adjust to their new environment.

Mishko slowly became a real classroom pet, our mascot and a participant in all important classroom events. Every weekend, he goes home with one of the children where they spend time together. He has his own folder to which the children make contributions inspired by his visit to their household (drawings, pictures, essays). In his folder, Mishko now keeps records by each and every child on how he spent his exciting weekends. Writing, and thus contributing to Mishko's record file, has become a joyful activity for my first-graders, one that they see the purpose of.

Through such an approach creativity and conversation are encouraged and a child's vocabulary is expanded. Parents and children contribute together to the reports on the weekend activities in their home. These reports are a fruitful source of reading and speaking exercises, but also valuable because of the pride and self-esteem they spark in every child in the classroom.

From *Dijete, Skola, Obitelj (Child, School, Family)*
Written by Vesna Bedekovic, teacher, Petar Preradovic Primary School, Pitomaca, Croatia

Creating a Professional Community through Publishing

Sonja Ivic, a first-grade teacher at the Vladimir Gortan Elementary School in Rijeka, teaches in one of Croatia's rare Step by Step classrooms. Rijeka is an old, progressive seaside town, Croatia's major port, a cultural center in the northern Adriatic region. Vladimir Gortan Elementary School serves as a methodological center for pedagogy connected with the University of Rijeka. Even here, however—and despite tremendous interest from parents—only three of the school's 11 classrooms follow Step by Step methods. Parents choose this school because of Step by Step, says principal Josip Sikic, and he would love to offer these classes to all pupils, but there are simply not enough teachers available who are educated in the Step by Step methodology. Those who are—like Sonja Ivic, and her colleague in second grade, Anastazija Balas—must build their community beyond the school's walls, often turning to educational journals like *Dijete, Skola, Obitelj (Child, School, Family),* where Ivic read the story of Vesna Bedekovic's friend Mishko and wondered if she should introduce a similar friend in her first-grade classroom.

Step by Step's two journals provide support, fresh ideas, and a sense of community for educators committed to the principles of child-centered education, and are a rich source of material even for teachers not yet exposed to Step by Step.

A key activity of Korak po Korak, Croatian Step by Step, is publishing. In addition to books—the Step by Step Book

Series was established in 1998 in cooperation with local experts from the University of Zagreb—Step by Step publishes two journals, *Child, School, Family* (where teachers read the story of Mishko) and *Dijete, Vrtic, Obitelj (Child, Kindergarten, Family)*. *Child, Kindergarten, Family*, published four times a year, focuses on themes of interest to preschool teachers, presenting Step by Step theory but also giving examples from everyday Croatian classrooms. *Child, School, Family*, published three times a year, highlights themes of interest to elementary school teachers, focusing on implementation of the Step by Step Program in Grades 1–4. The mission of both journals is to aid Step by Step educators in their work and promote the program to a wider audience.

While both journals publish theoretical discussions of Step by Step principles, their strength—and their appeal to readers—lies in the articles by regular Step by Step teachers about real-life classroom experiences.

Implementation of the Step by Step Program in Croatia faces many challenges. The Croatian educational system is somewhat rigid—all programs must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sports—and educators face constraints of both space (two teachers frequently share classrooms) and curriculum (required curricula often don't leave room to explore pupils' interests). There are no schools in Croatia that exclusively follow the Step by Step Program. There are, however, many Step by Step classrooms scattered throughout the country—particularly in preschool programs—and hundreds of teachers who have completed initial training in designing child-centered educational programs and creating child-centered classrooms. While not all of the teachers who complete training use Step by Step principles in their practice, many do and others would like to. Step by Step's two journals provide support, fresh ideas, and a sense of community for educators committed to the principles of child-centered education, and are a rich source of material even for teachers not yet exposed to Step by Step.

Josip Sikic, the Vladimir Gortan principal, is an enthusiastic subscriber to *Child, School, Family*, but says that the two copies of each issue that his school receives are not nearly enough. And at Bacun kindergarten, in a residential area on the northern outskirts of Zagreb, preschool educator Sanja Kobescak reports that copies of *Child, Kindergarten, Family* fly off the shelves. "Two copies are not sufficient," she says, as educators never know when they will need to consult the journal.

Because of working conditions at Bacun—shared space, dilapidated building, and strict management—Kobescak is unable to implement the full Step by Step Program,

Teachers report that the journals are a key source of material on curriculum and pedagogy, especially valuable for thinking about the next day's class and organizing content.

but she is committed to its principles and an eager reader of the journal. She is also a private subscriber—rare in Croatia, where the price of an issue, 42.7 kuna or about $7, is considered very high. "We're desperate for good educational materials here," Kobescak says. Neither Ivic nor Balas, the Vladimir Gortan teachers, subscribes to the journals on her own, but both read them eagerly in the school library or the principal's office, and both have themselves contributed articles.

The History of the Journals

Child, Kindergarten, Family began publishing in 1995 and immediately became well known among preschool educators, playing a vital role in establishing the Step by Step Program in Croatian kindergartens. *Child, School, Family* was launched officially in 1998, but the precursor *Bulletin for Teachers (Bilten za Ucitelje)* was distributed in 1997, the year Step by Step entered Croatian elementary schools. Both journals are intensely practical in their focus. While both publish theoretical discussions of Step by Step principles, their strength—and their appeal to readers—lies in the articles by regular Step by Step teachers about real-life classroom experiences. Even articles about scientific theory, such as "How Does the Brain Learn?" (the theme of the third issue of *Child, School, Family*), include practical suggestions and useful advice for teachers. This blend of theory and practice, of educational experts and local teachers, gives the journals their special flavor, making them accessible and interesting to readers.

Each issue is likely to be organized around a main theme—"The Child-Centered Classroom," for instance, or "Emotional Intelligence"—accompanied by a variety of related practical articles written by primary school teachers who endorse Step by Step. The journals also include regular columns (such as "The Educator's Diary" in *Child, Kindergarten, Family*), articles about child-centered teaching practices in other countries and cultures, translations of scientific texts relevant to the current theme, and articles about school-parent cooperation. The

writing style is almost always simple, straightforward, vivid, and personal. While the journals are intended for educational scholars, teachers, and parents, generally parent interest—as readers or writers—is minimal. Teachers would welcome more parent participation, both in the journals and in their classrooms. "I don't have enough time to properly introduce the philosophy and ideas behind the Step by Step Program," Ivic comments. "The journal can help me explain the details."

The journal editors—school program manager Sanja Brajkovic and preschool program manager Helena Buric—work out of the Step by Step office in Zagreb. Both editors say they particularly value the scientific articles, but most teachers who read the journals disagree. Teachers like Ivic and Balas report that the most interesting and useful articles describe teachers' personal experiences and everyday teaching techniques or solutions to problems. "It's very helpful to compare my experience teaching to someone else's," Ivic says. "It gives me new ideas, and I think it makes me a better teacher." Ivic's colleague Anastazija Balas agrees, but adds, "The scientific parts are also good, in a way that you don't need to reinvent the wheel." Kobescak, the preschool educator at Bacun kindergarten, says the personal experiences are her favorite sections of the journals. She also stresses the importance of pictures, noting that classroom layout is very important in Step by Step methodology. Where the editors might stress theory, the teachers want to read about practice. Both editors say they are aware of this discrepancy and plan to follow the teachers' wishes—but also worry that descriptive accounts of classroom experiences are likely to become repetitive.

Class preparation is very demanding, particularly in Step by Step classrooms. Teachers report that the journals are a key source of material on curriculum and pedagogy, especially valuable for thinking about the next day's class and organizing content. Ideas discussed in journal articles may be copied wholesale or adapted to individual needs and resources. Some teachers say that they consult the journals more frequently than any formal curriculum because the contents of the journals are more diverse, more imaginative, and more practical. Even past issues, Balas points out, can contain valuable solutions to current problems. And communication doesn't feel one-sided, Ivic notes, "because the authors are all real teachers." Teachers also welcome articles on the sensitive topic of teacher-parent interaction and enjoy comparing their experiences with those of educators in other parts of the world. Teachers say they particularly value:

- Receiving feedback or being encouraged to reflect on their own work;
- Being confronted with other teachers' practices;
- Learning new approaches and being motivated to try them out; and
- Publishing in the journals themselves, thus increasing their professional visibility and self-esteem.

Whatever their financial struggles, Child, Kindergarten, Family *and* Child, School, Family *offer Croatian teachers something many find priceless: a community of child-centered educators who believe that every child can think and learn and that every voice should be heard.*

Sustainability

Despite the enthusiasm of educators, the journals' future is not assured. Although subscription prices are too high for ordinary Croatian readers, they are not high enough to cover printing costs. Originally it was hoped that the journals would be profitable, providing a source of funds to help support local Step by Step efforts, but according to Nives Milinovic, country director of the Step by Step office in Zagreb, in fact the local organization

loses money with each issue. The key problem is that the subscription base is too low. "Not enough work has been done to raise the number of subscribers," Milinovic says. The circulation goal has always been 1,000 copies, but neither journal has ever had more than 600 subscribers. Few institutions subscribe to more than one copy and teachers say that the cost of an individual subscription is too high. In the beginning the journals were funded both by subscriptions and by the Open Society Institute, but now they are independent and are hoping to become self-sustaining. The obvious solution is to broaden the subscription base, but as Milinovic remarks, "That's easier said than done." Another approach is to sell more advertising, but both editors, Sanja Brajkovic and Helena Buric, feel strongly that the proportion of ads should be kept as low as possible. Currently ads take up one or two pages at the end of each issue.

While *Child, Kindergarten, Family* is widely recognized among preschool and kindergarten educators throughout Croatia and has a fairly stable subscription base—currently around 550—*Child, School, Family* is less successful. The competition in this market is stiff, with several other journals targeting the same market, elementary school educators and parents. Large publishing houses even distribute free journals and bulletins, hoping to then sell textbooks and educational materials to the same readers. And both journals were affected by serious financial problems in 2003: although issues of the journals were prepared, no money was available for printing and subscribers never received their copies. Milinovic, who assumed her post well after this setback, says that Croatian Step by Step is still struggling to regain subscribers' trust.

Moving Forward

Journal readers, contributors, and the editors themselves offer suggestions for improvement, including:

- Improve quality by developing consistent criteria for accepting articles. Currently almost all submitted articles are published.
- Improve graphic design. Both editors feel that the design is not attractive and could be livelier and more colorful.
- Improve quality of photographs. Many are blurred and unappealing. Educators particularly value photos of classrooms and other workspaces as sources of information and inspiration.
- Devote a section of the journals to children with special needs. Inclusion is an important aspect of the Step by Step Program, one many people are unaware of. The journals can serve as a significant resource in this area—and this focus can help differentiate Step by Step from other educational programs.
- Target parents as contributors and readers. Not only would this approach expand the potential audience; teachers say it would be very interesting to them and to the parents to read about children's classroom experiences from the parents' point of view.

Whatever their financial struggles, *Child, Kindergarten, Family* and *Child, School, Family* offer Croatian teachers something many find priceless: a community of child-centered educators who believe that every child can think and learn and that every voice should be heard. Vesna Bedekovic of Pitomaca, the teacher who charmed her small pupils with her cuddly, disheveled friend Mishko, and her distant colleague Sonja Ivic, eagerly reading about Mishko in her own school in Rijeka, may never have met in person—but their minds have met, and together those minds can slowly change their world.

Teachers report that the journals are a key source of material on curriculum and pedagogy, especially valuable for thinking about the next day's class and organizing content.

A STORY FROM ZAGREB

We live in a time of disturbed social relations between people. There is an increase in interpersonal distrust, disaffection, disinterest, denigration, exploitation, violence. Of course, no teacher wants these negative social phenomena in his/her classroom. We desire cooperation, interpersonal respect, tolerance, resolution of conflicts through argumentation. However, our pupils and their parents are immersed in the given environment and it is only to be expected that it has had an influence on them, too. So, how can we make our classroom, a small world inside the big one, a home for tolerance, cooperation, and empathy? The answer is: through multiple activities that affirm such positive social phenomena. These activities take place in the classroom on a daily basis, and are repeated outside the classroom, with the parents.

There are a variety of activities that involve parents and contribute to cooperation, tolerance, and parental engagement, such as:

1. Classroom festivities;
2. Field trips involving children, parents, and teachers;
3. Parent workshops;
4. Cooperation on classroom decoration.

Here we shall describe the possible options for classroom festivities. The purpose of a classroom festivity is to display the pupils' achievements and creative abilities, but also—and why not?—to highlight parental achievements, abilities, and cooperation. In the part of the festivity where children perform, it is good to present to the parents as varied a repertoire as possible, to include perhaps—in addition to recitations, songs, acting, and dance—an acrobatics performance, magic tricks, communal dancing, or solo recitals.

It is very interesting to see parents in the performing role, and it is very useful to them to gain the experience of public performance and everything that accompanies it (stage-fright, excitement). Of course, public exposure is uncomfortable to many people, so it is possible that some parents may refuse to participate, upsetting their children. Because of this, we pick an act, such as choir singing, that will not force any single parent into the spotlight.

Understanding the benefits of this idea, the parents of my class agreed to perform a number of acts at our end-of-school party. Accompanied on accordion by a father of one of the pupils, the parents sang a couple of popular songs. One of the mothers then read a poem, one of her own, about the children in the class and their teacher. Such parental acts require rehearsals, which give the parents an opportunity to get to know each other and socialize and can be combined with parent-pupil field trips.

Is it at all necessary to stress how much such communal engagement of pupils, parents, and teachers contributes to a better social climate in the classroom, strengthens our bonds, and enhances the joy of socialization?

From *Dijete, Skola, Obitelj (Child, School, Family)*
Written by Kresimir Calic, teacher, Marija Juric Zagorka Primary School, Zagreb

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Boris Jokic and Zrinka Ristic Dedic, *Evaluation of Step by Step Journals in Croatia*.

Inside, Outside, or On the Border? Negotiating the Relationship between Step by Step and the Ministry of Education System in Belarus

Case Study Researchers: Steffen Saifer, EdD, Educational Consultant, USA, and Iryna Lapitskya, Project Director, Belarusian Parents' and Teachers' League Step by Step, Belarus

This case study addresses the research question: *Is national education reform best implemented and sustained within the system, outside of it, or some other way?*

The subject of this case is the Belarusian Parents' and Teachers' League, Step by Step. Researchers used documents (decrees, memos, articles, and letters), observations, and interviews as their primary tools. Interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2004 with Step by Step Program staff, teachers, and parents as well as administrators and Ministry officials.

Background and Context

In all countries in which Step by Step operates, the Ministry of Education—the formal state system of schools and programs—is its most critical "partner." The Ministry of Education typically controls all aspects of the education system in the country. Relationships between Step by Step programs and Ministries of Education range from close partnerships to separate fiefdoms with little communication or acknowledgement. Most Step by Step programs, however, operate somewhere in the middle and are continuously negotiating the relationship. Even if the relationship is apparently stable, the situation could potentially change quickly with the turnover of just one key Ministry staff person. And, as there are a large number of people involved with Ministry programs—from regional authorities to classroom teachers—there are always both allies and detractors within the system. This is especially true when the reform represents a dramatic departure from traditional education.

This issue of the relationship between Step by Step programs and Ministries of Education can be characterized by the concept of *location*—working inside or outside the system, "on the border," or some other way. Although location is only one dimension of reform, it is a critical one because Step by Step is countrywide in scale. All educational reform programs must reside somewhere on the location continuum and usually change locations over time, either by volition or necessity. In addition, *how* a program operates in any of these locations varies. It may be possible to work inside the system but maintain the role of a change agent, or to function far outside the system and still have a significant impact on it.

Location has a strong affective component to it. Step by Step staff can *feel* very distant from the Ministry and its programs and personnel yet have many cooperative agreements and practices in place, or have

no formal relations with the Ministry but enjoy strong, positive relationships with many officials.

This case study explores the dynamics involved in negotiating location in one country. The success, and even the very survival, of the Step by Step Program in Belarus, as in many other countries, has depended on expertly negotiating its location in relation to the Ministry's system.

On the Border: Step by Step in Belarus

The metaphor of location provided staff of the Belarusian Step by Step Program with a clear way to analyze their relationship with the Ministry. They viewed themselves as operating primarily from the border and as having done so since the beginning of the project in 1994. Still, they report, there have been times over the past 10 years when they have been more "inside" or more "outside." Sometimes the shift was strategic, sometimes serendipitous, and sometimes necessitated by circumstances.

When the staff of the Belarusian Step by Step Program sought to implement a new initiative on the inclusion of children with disabilities, they went first to the Ministry for support, assistance, and access. However, when they received an unenthusiastic response they went to various regional, district, and city entities where they found some supporters interested in the ideas and the training. In places where there was no district support, they enlisted principals and teachers who were excited about the initiative. In this way they made "forays" from the border to the inside system in creative and responsive ways. The initiative continues strongly to this day—there are many schools throughout Belarus where children with disabilities are fully included in classrooms. Had Step by Step been more inside, staffers may not have been able to go around top management. Had it been too far outside, they may not have had adequate access to local schools.

The View from the Ministry

A former high-ranking Ministry of Education official, Mr. G., who worked extensively with the Step by Step Program in its earlier years, characterizes the location of the program as outside, but having the support of the state. "You can't work without state support," he comments. He believes that Step by Step is now moving too far to the outside and would better assure its future by accepting a secondary role and working to obtain the support of the Ministry and its various entities.

Another former Ministry of Education official, Dr. L., who also has a long history with Step by Step, says, "Some periods of time were friendly, some were neutral, some were hard. It was not through the fault of the program. Administrators are generally not interested in deep theoretical issues but in ensuring that things are working well. By sidestepping the theoretical issues and focusing on methods, Step by Step was able to find acceptance." Of particular importance, Dr. L. notes, was the ability of Step by Step Director Iryna Lapitskya—who successfully maintained a nonthreatening balance of personal and businesslike relationships—to establish mutual goals with the Ministry. Step by Step staff negotiated the inside/outside dynamic by working on the border: focusing on methods to avoid conflict over content, finding points of collaboration, and keeping relationships friendly but professional.

Fortunately the Step by Step Program is a reform system focused not on content, but on methods, and came with significant financial resources. It was able to assist with some issues of concern to Ministry officials, as well as to regional and local school staff, while also meeting its own goals. The primary issue of mutual concern was better alignment of teaching methods with the social changes taking place, but there were other issues. These included making kindergartens places where children were happy to attend (and where parents were happy to send their children), improving adult/child ratios (achieved largely through family involvement and collaborations with colleges, youth groups, and other organizations), and improving the physical environment.

"A reform program should teach people to fish, not feed them fish, and continue to develop better fishing rods," comments Dr. L. This maxim has clear implications for the issue of location: it is crucial to work both inside and outside in a methodical way. The border may be the ideal place to do this. Moving at times to the outside allows the distance necessary to see problems clearly so the right improvements to the "fishing rod" can be made. Being on the inside is necessary to help the fishers use the new

Middle school students in Minsk—all of whom started in Step by Step as kindergartners—show their facility with active learning methods.
Photo by Steffen Saifer 2004

"rod," to see if it is effective, and to plan further improvements.

The View from the Field

As teachers and principals operate very much within the system, they provide an important perspective on the issue of Step by Step's location. The three educators interviewed all work daily within the system while also working with Step by Step. They describe three distinct views of location.

Ms. H., a principal in a mid-sized industrial city who is active both in Step by Step and in national and regional educational activities, views herself as living in both places at the same time. She is fully engaged in the work of the system *and* the work of Step by Step. However, her description of the day-to-day integration of Step by Step in her school sounded like a compromise. The school provides the option of traditional classes, but uses some Step by Step methods in these classes and some traditional methods in Step by Step classes. Although this principal feels "bicultural"—comfortable and facile in both places—such an approach may dilute program implementation.

Ms. N. is a teacher in a Step by Step primary program who views Step by Step as being on the outside: a separate, independent, but very small "state." "When we 'Steppers' meet, we feel we are citizens of this state and we serve it," she says. She views Step by Step as existing above the state system because she believes that it provides a higher quality education for children, which for her is the "main thing." Ms. N. strongly believes that it is advantageous to be as separate as possible from the state system, but recognizes that some support and acceptance from the state is necessary. She feels that the best way to gain this acceptance is for the program to be strong and united, a force to be reckoned with, not a collaborator. Illustrating this point of view, she explains what happened in her former school after a supportive assistant principal left.

"Some of the parents suggested changing schools, together with the whole class, as there was a newly opened school in the neighborhood. It was a shock; I was prepared to leave the school myself but not together with the children. The parents insisted, and I and a parent went to this neighboring school to discuss the matter. The principal was greatly confused, but did not refuse and told us to come back at the end of the summer. Finally he agreed to accept the whole class. The school had their own regulations and traditions but no Step by Step teachers. But they had strong primary school teachers and a very good parent committee. Our class easily joined this school.

But in the old school there was a very good Step by Step environment with activity centers, furniture, and learning resources and we all missed it. The parents decided to arrange the same environment and we managed to do this; even the colors were the same. However, there was a conflict with the school administration because the posters that we put on the walls were going to spoil the walls. I explained that we couldn't do without them and the administration got interested as to why and attended our lessons to find out. As a result, a process developed for me to train five teachers in Step by Step."

Clearly there is a strong correlation

between views of location and actions. Compromising and negotiating are "border" actions; finding a new place to continue to work is an outsider action.

The third representative from the field, Dr. R., is a faculty member of a teacher-retraining institute. His view is that the program works on the border and that this is the ideal place to be. "It is very dangerous to stay both completely outside or completely inside," he says. "It is just here that double standards crop up." However, like Ms. N., he views this border as being *above* rather than adjacent to the state system. "Only this position gives the freedom to shift from outside to inside and vice versa," he explains. Dr. R. expressed admiration at the ability of Step by Step to negotiate a place "above" over many years. "They have mastered the situation from inside, but have a strategy of their own; they are not subordinate to the state system," he comments. "They are mobile and flexible and amaze me with their ability to speak in the language of the state, but to say what they think."

The "journal within a journal" is itself a good metaphor for location. It is a way to be inside, while still being separate and distinct.

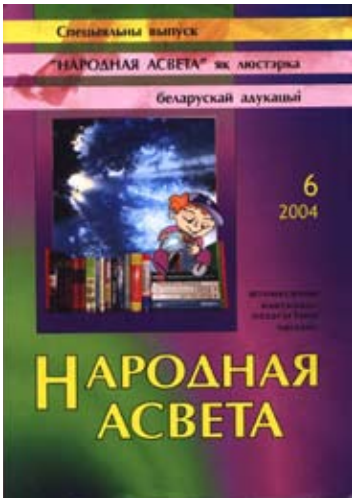
These perspectives on location appear to be related to the different roles of the speakers. A principal must meet the needs and demands of many stakeholders and is a visible representative of the system. Teachers feel compelled to take a strong stand on behalf of the approach they believe in and use daily. A teacher trainer is not directly engaged in the system and is charged with encouraging growth and change; thus, like the Step by Step leadership, the trainer views operating on the border as advantageous.

A Place on the Outside: Step by Step Becomes a Nongovernmental Organization

In 1998, the Step by Step Program made a strong move to the outside by establishing itself as a nongovernmental organization (NGO). This was encouraged and supported by the Open Society Institute (OSI). From OSI's perspective the move was helpful in sustaining Step by Step and in establishing institutions of civil society. From the analytical perspective of this study, however, it can also be viewed as a strategy to establish a location on the outside. After six years of having NGO status, the Step by Step Program staff still view themselves as functioning primarily on the border, but moving more to the outside.

The emerging strength of the program and its ability to work with the Ministry on a more equal basis can be seen in a recent event: the publication of a Step by Step journal within *Public Education*, the major Belarusian journal of elementary education published by the Ministry of Education for the Minsk Region, the capital and largest city. Journals have long had an important role in education in Belarus, being the primary means of disseminating new information and creating a sense of shared practice. In 2003, Step by Step negotiated an agreement with the Regional Ministry, the first formal agreement in many years with any Ministry entity, to publish its journal within the Ministry's journal. In each issue of *Public Education*, Step by Step now has a substantial section devoted to its program. The first issue focused on standards and the new teacher certification process based on these standards. Subsequent issues will explore each standard separately. Although the standards and the certification process were developed collaboratively by the nearly 30 countries of the International Step by Step Association, they were interpreted and presented in a completely Belarusian context by the country's Step by Step director, Iryna Lapitskaya. This strategy was a way to keep from being perceived as *too* far outside by the Ministry.

The "journal within a journal" is itself a good metaphor for location. It is a way to be inside, while still being separate and distinct. Lapitskaya was surprised when, for the first time in Step by Step's 10-year histo-



This issue of *Public Education* included 70 pages devoted to Step by Step.

ry, she received an award from the Ministry of Education to recognize her agency's contribution to the journal.

Findings and Reflections

The Belarusian Step by Step staff see themselves as having operated on the border from the beginning of the program but feel they are now moving to the outside. As evidence they point to the establishment of the program as an NGO and their journal within the Ministry of Education's journal. Teachers, parents, and Step by Step staff use such terms as "Steppers" or "Stepniks" to refer to themselves. These terms indicate their sense of being part of a distinct, unique group and their desire to embrace an outsider identity. Most interviewees viewed moving to the outside as a positive direction, as long as Step by Step maintained strong relationships with teachers and other staff in the field and collaborations with the Ministry. Few viewed moving fully from the border as a realistic option now or in the foreseeable future.

It may be possible to work inside the system but maintain the role of a change agent, or to function far outside the system and still have a significant impact on it.

Yet working on the border is very challenging. One staff member describes her constant fear of writing the wrong word in a memo to a Ministry official, a word that might result in a canceled training session or severed relations with a school. On the border, the timing and content of every decision and every communication must be carefully considered. This staff member's description of being on the border included both positive and negative adjectives—*caution, limited freedom, creativity, maneuvering, long-term change*—while adjectives for inside were only negative and adjectives for outside only positive. Although she recognized that being on the border might be necessary, she did not see it as anywhere near ideal.

While most interviewees visualized the border as a line between two adjacent "territories," a number of others saw it as suspended in space separating "above" from "below." This image conveys three qualities: being better and more progressive; being able to see the insiders more clearly, from a sharper perspective; and being "unbound"—having greater freedom than insiders.

Areas for Further Research

A survey of a substantial number of teachers, principals, regional administrators, parents, and others in several programs would shed light on the important question of whether roles determine views about location. Another area for further research is to understand the pattern of location over time. Is there a typical or ideal pattern and time frame? What factors influence the pattern and timing and how do they operate? Is there an optimal amount of time a program should work on the border or other location? How do other aspects of the work of reforming education interact with or relate to location? Is location as important to successful reform as the clarity and power of the ideas being promoted?

Conclusion

The issue of location provides a helpful way to analyze the work of large-scale educational reform programs such as Step by Step. Even if there is little that program staff can do to control its location, it is important to *know* the location—where it has been and where it may be going—as location is critical to the program's impact and sustainability.

The best or ideal location appears to be a matter of timing and context. It is not ideal to be on the outside, without the respect and trust of those on the inside. It is not ideal to be on the inside if one is forced to compromise unduly or is indistinguishable from other insiders. Nor is it ideal to be on the border if one is torn painfully in opposite directions or paralyzed by fear of stepping over that line.

The Step by Step Program in Belarus provides one example of the dynamics of location. Building the program has been a challenging process requiring great effort and care: life on the border is difficult, even if it can be effective. It has also been a successful process: the program is thriving and continues to grow.

Case study researcher Steffen Saifer, EdD, prepared this article based on the full-length manuscript *Inside, Outside, or On the Border? Negotiating the Relationship between Step by Step and the Ministry of Education System in Belarus over 10 Years.*

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: Step by Step Policy and Practice

Philosophy and Values

The case studies from Latvia, Mongolia, and Ukraine offer a glimpse into Step by Step's response to families of children with disabilities, and to their teachers. Through observation of Step by Step classes in these countries, the authors document how the child- and family-centered Step by Step methodology meets the individual learning needs of these children.

An important indicator of a vibrant democracy is the extent to which people with disabilities participate actively in society. Children with disabilities must have access to high-quality, appropriate education. In Latvia, Mongolia, and Ukraine, as well as in many other countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, policies in the past promoted segregation of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities were often hidden from the public at home, deprived of an appropriate education and the opportunity to grow up with their peers, or placed in orphanages or specialized boarding schools, further isolated from their communities and their families. Moreover, prevailing public opinion and education policy created a large cadre of specialized professional caregivers invested in separate education for children with disabilities. Such inequities are only slowly being acknowledged.

Against this background, Step by Step promotes inclusive education, a system in which children with disabilities attend their local schools and learn in classrooms alongside their peers. The following activities are supported to achieve this objective:

- Ongoing training and mentoring for educators to support implementation of inclusive classrooms in preschools and primary schools;
- Integration of special educational services (for example, physical, occupational, and speech therapies) into education settings in the regular school system;
- Development of new courses and curriculum in systems that train and retrain teachers;
- Development of services, training, and information to support families of children with disabilities and strengthen their role as advocates for their children;
- Awareness-raising and antibias trainings to promote acceptance of children with disabilities;
- Dissemination of best practices for children with different types of disabilities;
- Development of fiscal and administrative procedures to sustain programs; and
- Development of advocacy and community-awareness programs to affect policy.

Taking a Closer Look at Inclusion

The case study from Latvia presents the experiences of two families with children with special needs. Qualitative methods, including observations, photos, video materials, interviews, and questionnaires, document the experience of being included in a Step by Step classroom. This case also underscores parents' need for concrete information, expected outcomes, and support.

The case study from Mongolia poses questions regarding the infusion of inclusive education within a preschool education college. How has inclusive education been infused into the existing course? What was the impact on faculty and students? Can reform of teacher-training systems precede implementation of model programs? What aspects need improvement?

Ukraine tells the story of one child diagnosed with autism and his parents. Observations and interviews provide insights into teacher training, parent advocacy, the role of NGOs, development of new education policies, and relationships with institutions and the media.

These cases highlight the complex challenges inherent in the training of classroom teachers. There is demand for ongoing professional development, supportive educational material, and opportunities to share experiences. The need to reform policy and legislation in order to meet the tremendous demand for services is a common theme throughout the cases. Creating responsive and developmentally appropriate services for parents as their children move from preschool to primary school is a complex and rarely acknowledged requirement of educational reform. These cases powerfully illustrate what can and must be done.

Special Children in Latvia: Parents' Roles in the Education of Children with Special Needs

Case Study Researchers: Elfrida Krastina, Professor, Daugavpils University; Zenija Berzina, MA, Director, Center for Education Initiatives; Daiga Zake, MA, Program Manager, Center for Education Initiatives; and Sandra Kraukle, MA, Trainer, Center for Education Initiatives, Latvia

"The first step is made: we know the problem and have started to think about how to help our children. We have understood that there is no need to be ashamed and isolated. We have to provide our children with possibility—the hope that they will learn among their peers and live their lives of full value."
—Parent of a child with special needs after participating in a Step by Step Parent Education Program in Latvia

Victoria

The preschool children in the warm, cheerful classroom are learning about textures, passing around beans, shells, stones, bits of carpet, and cotton wool. "Oh, soft!" one boy exclaims. "Smooth and sharp," observes a tiny girl. When they pass the objects to Victoria she sits quietly, but her eyes are wide. She watches solemnly. When the children hand her a big stuffed dinosaur with letters and numbers attached to its back, she looks a bit surprised. A few moments later, she smiles.

Victoria is seven years old. For the first six months of her life, she was fed through a tube because she was unable to swallow. She still needs to be fed at mealtime. At nine months she smiled at her parents for the first time. She is unable to walk, but can grasp objects from her wheelchair tray and play with them. She can hold a crayon or paintbrush and draw with the help of an adult. When she entered a Step by Step preschool—Zvaninsh in the city of Jekabpils—at the age of five, she didn't speak at all. By her second year of inclusion, she had learned to say "Mummy," "Daddy," and "Granny." She loves coming to school. The preschool nurse comments, "At the beginning, Victoria was apathetic; she did not respond to others. Now she is more outgoing and open. She feels happy in the company of other children. Her eyes are sparkling now."

To Victoria's parents, those sparkling eyes are worth more than diamonds. When newborn Victoria, their first child, was diagnosed with cerebral paralysis as a result of birth trauma, doctors in Latvia's capital city, Riga, weren't sure that the baby would ever sit up, speak, or respond to human contact. Certainly there was little hope that Victoria would ever attend school. But Victoria's parents—and her very involved grandmother—were determined that this child would live as full a life as possible. And Latvia's Step by Step Program, with its commitment both to inclusion and to parent education, made it possible for the family to realize its dream.

In Latvia, children with special needs have traditionally been isolated in educational institutions far from home.... And the "education" offered in these schools was often more medical than intellectual or social.

"When I took Victoria outside for walks I noticed that she liked other children," says her mother, Alla, who has devoted herself to the full-time care of Victoria and her typically developing younger sister Anastasia, now three. "She always followed children with her eyes, and it seemed that she was trying to find a friend. I thought it would be a good idea if she could visit a kindergarten even a couple of hours a week, but I was afraid all schools would turn her away. When I asked the director of the Step by Step preschool if this could be possible at all, she offered me even more than I had hoped: Victoria was allowed not only to visit the school from time

to time but also to become a student. I was so happy and surprised! Of course, I accepted the offer right away."

Before enrolling Victoria in the Step by Step school, she adds, she sometimes felt ashamed of her child and isolated from her community. "Some people have the attitude, 'Why should we help such children if the society will never get any benefit from them?'" she explains. "They say it is much more reasonable to give the money to our 'normal' children. But in this classroom everybody is welcoming and understands us."

The Education of Children with Special Needs in Latvia

In Latvia, children with special needs have traditionally been isolated in educational institutions far from home. They were often housed in these schools for weeks or months, separated from their families and their communities. Because of these arrangements, it was very difficult for parents to be involved in the education and development of their children. Parents themselves had no opportunity to become educated about how best to help their children. And the "education" offered in these

schools was often more medical than intellectual or social, with attention paid not to the child's strengths and needs, but to the "defect." Persistent isolation not only had a negative impact on the children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, but affected their relationships in their local communities. Instead of the easy acceptance that comes with familiarity, communities viewed these children from afar, sometimes with suspicion and fear.

Even today, most Latvian children with special needs are isolated from the community. The inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream schools began in 1999, but only when initiated by innovative schools and teachers. The 1997 Law on Special Education mandates that people with disabilities receive a basic general education and training in social and professional skills, but focuses mainly on practical skills. Most children with special needs—defined as those with physical and mental disabilities, severe illnesses, some learning disabilities, and some behavioral and social problems—attend one of the country's 63 special schools or are placed in one of the more recently opened special classrooms within mainstream schools. Although classrooms for children with special needs bring these children closer to their families, they do not resolve the problem of labeling or stimulate genuine inclusion into the community. About two-thirds of the children attending special schools come from low-income families who cannot afford medical treatment and frequently are unable to buy suitable clothing or food. In addition, in rural areas the lack of public transportation from home to school deepens the problems of these families. Latvia's increased unemployment and severe economic problems over the last 15 years have made it even more difficult for poor and rural families to provide appropriate care for their children with special needs.

The Step by Step Program, first implemented in Latvia in 1997 by the Soros Foundation–Latvia and continued by the Center for Education Initiatives since 2001, introduced a radically new and innovative model of education for children with special needs, the model that makes Victoria's eyes sparkle. Step by Step's fundamental commitment to child-centered education was transformative in the Latvian context, particularly for children with special needs. Two of its principles are key: (1) the importance of parent, family, and community involvement in children's education, and (2) the participation of children with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

Since 1997, 120 preschools and 70 primary schools have joined the Step by Step Program. From the very beginning, parents were invited along with teachers to participate in Step by Step trainings, where they learned about the importance of child-centered, individualized education. This was shocking to some, as the traditional Latvian point of view, reinforced in Soviet times, was that whatever takes place in schools is outside of parents' competence; parents were neither expected nor permitted to intervene.

Step by Step invited parents into both the conversation and the classroom, initiating a stunningly new model of parent-school cooperation. In 2003 the Center for Education Initiatives began offering a special Parent Education Program specifically for parents of children with special needs. More than 300 parents have participated in the Parent Education Program as of June 2004.

"At the seminar I understood the stereotypes and prejudices that exist in our society," one parent comments. "But I also understood that we are able to cope with them if only we want to and know how to—that is most important."

"I understood that inclusive education is our main task in the nearest future," another parent says. "Not only children and their families, but also all of society, will benefit from it."

Peter*

Like Victoria, 10-year-old Peter attends a Step by Step school. He is a bright boy, fluent in both Latvian and Russian, with a congenital physical limitation: his right palm is missing all five fingers. He began preschool at the age of two and has finished second grade at a Step by Step primary school, always in inclusive classrooms. All 18 teachers at Peter's school have completed Step by Step training. "I am very thankful to the director of the preschool that she did not refuse to accept Peter when he was a toddler and that she recommended the Step by Step Program," his father, Robert, says. "I was fully convinced that he had to be among children."

A naturally right-handed person, Peter finds writing difficult, though he has learned to do it with his left hand. Reading came slowly, but he now enjoys reading encyclopedias. In mathematics he has always been very strong. His teacher notes that Peter thinks mathematically, so she tries to create activities for him based around this interest. Step by Step's child-centered, individualized approach to education has been of great benefit to Peter, his father says. Choice, one of the characteristics of the Step by Step classroom, helped him develop compensation strategies as he worked with a variety of materials and allowed him to accentuate his strengths. "The Step by Step class is very suitable for Peter because Step by Step offers choice," Peter's father comments. "It is very difficult to force my son to do what he does not want to do."

Peter's parents appreciate the ongoing feedback they get from teachers, so different from the experiences of their friends and relatives with children at traditional Latvian schools. "I find it very helpful to have the regular learning achievement reports and dynamic development charts," Peter's father says. "In such a way we can learn a lot about our child. That is very helpful. We get information, and then we know the area we have to pay more attention to. We know also how to help."

Parents of children with special needs come together regularly to exchange experience, offer encouragement and assistance to each other, and plan for the future.

Parent Involvement in Step by Step

The Step by Step Program recognizes that parents are their children's first and most important teachers. According to Step by Step philosophy, parents have both the right to choose the most appropriate educational program for their children and the concomitant responsibility to contribute as much as they can to their children's education and development. Thus it's not surprising that both Victoria and Peter have highly involved parents who sought out the best possible educational environments for their children and became active partners with their teachers.

"The openness of Victoria's mother and her trust of us has been of great help," says the nurse at Zvaninsh, Victoria's preschool, a city school serving 290 children, three with significant special needs. "I highly appreciate her enthusiasm, energy, and motivation to work with her child."

"When Peter started to learn in the first grade his parents tried to plan their personal life so they could devote extra time to his learning, especially to reading and writing, where he struggled," reports Peter's teacher. "They participated in class activities and sometimes watched the learning process so they could learn how to help."

At first, the parents stayed in class for

* Peter's name was changed for confidentiality.

hours, perhaps afraid their children would be helpless without them. Peter needed help with basic tasks like dressing; Victoria didn't even speak. Separation was difficult—for the parents.

"At the beginning Victoria's mother stayed with her in the classroom," a teacher recalls. "Gradually Victoria gained interest in other children and started to follow them attentively. Children were full of love and willing to help her. Gradually Victoria's mother became engaged in activity centers with other children. She helped to prepare teaching materials for the activities. When Victoria got used to the other children, her mother no longer stayed in the classroom all day."

Peter's teacher tells a similar story. "Peter's parents showed a constant interest about their son's successes and failures," she says. "His mother participated often in different activities in the activity centers. At the beginning she tried to do everything for him. Then she realized that the process of getting involved and attempting to be self-confident was more important for Peter than the actual result he could reach. When Peter started to feel comfortable in the classroom his mother started to work in the family business. The parents were convinced that their son needed the company of peers and started to trust the teachers and the school."

In order to help more families become as involved as Victoria's and Peter's, the Step by Step Parent Education Program supports Parent Support Centers in all participating cities. Parents of children with special needs come together regularly to exchange experience, offer encouragement and assistance to each other, and plan for the future. "I hope it will be easier to solve problems concerning inclusion in the future," says one Parent Support Center participant. "Parents will be better advocates for their children after this project."

Family Support

Taking care of a child with special needs can be overwhelming for families, whatever their level of commitment or their resources. When Peter was born his mother wept in fear and shame, keeping him away from other children. He frequently fell ill, but doctors disagreed about what treatment was best. Victoria spent every other month in the hospital during her first year of life.

Victoria's family lives in a regional center, with a population of about 27,000. There are about 15 schools in the area, plus three university branches and several art and music schools. About 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) from the city are two schools for children with special needs. Neither of Victoria's parents has a regular paid job as their lives are focused around their children. The family lives with Victoria's grandparents, who provide financial and emotional support.

Peter's family lives in a small town. There are two secondary schools and one preschool in the area, and a school for children with special needs 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) from town. Peter's parents have a small private business, but worry about future medical costs.

Although the state provides some financial support to families with children with disabilities, it comes nowhere near the real costs of their care. And dealing with the bureaucracy creates its own stress. Every year, for instance, Peter is required to go before the State Pedagogical Medical Commission in order to prove that he still has a disability. "It's absurd!" his father explodes. "Do they think that his fingers could grow in a fortnight?"

Training in Inclusion

The Step by Step Program's trainings brought parents together with teachers, educational administrators, and social workers, all committed to inclusion and to parent-school partnerships. In many cases, it was the first time these different constituencies had collaborated, or even spoken to one another. Not all teachers were open to Step by Step's approach, of course—at Victoria's preschool the former teacher assistant refused to work in an inclusive classroom—but those who made the leap are enthusiastic about the results.

"We strongly believe that inclusive school curriculum can be adapted to the needs of all children by setting the proper individual aims," comments one educator after completing a Step by Step training.

"Much depends on teachers' will to change their traditional work, on the positive attitude of society, and on the initiative of parents—so what we need is teamwork."

When Victoria entered her school only some of its classrooms worked with Step by Step, but now all 12 classrooms are affiliated with the program. All teachers, administrators, and the school nurse regularly attend Step by Step training seminars and workshops. Teachers who work with children with special needs are required to complete the training module Creating an Inclusive Step by Step Classroom. At Peter's preschool, all teachers had attended Step by Step trainings. At his primary school, where the Step by Step Program was introduced in 1998, half the classes in each grade now implement the program.

"Much depends on teachers' will to change their traditional work, on the positive attitude of society, and on the initiative of parents—so what we need is teamwork."

"I liked that the aims of the training were clearly defined from the very beginning: to change the attitude toward children with special needs," says a teacher. "It is good that we had a team from my school that participated at the training. Now we can promote this kind of attitude and thinking, and what is most important—the inclusion in our school—and share our experience with others."

Teachers are eager for the pedagogical tools and methods they need to work with children with special needs. Several of Victoria's teachers comment that they would appreciate more knowledge of how to work with a child with significant learning difficulties. "I seek the answers in my heart," one teacher says, "but I'd like to have some scientifically approved tools, which I know could give better results. But I don't know what they are."

Teachers recognize that inclusion is a long-term process: "We have to remember that inclusion is a creative and not an easy process, and it will give proper results in time."

But despite the difficulties, they are enthusiastic about the possibilities. "Children can't be neglected or discriminated against by excluding them from school or by sending them to a special school because they have a physical disorder or learning difficulties," one educator comments. "The social meaning of inclusion is that all children obtain an education, which helps them create a relationship with the surrounding society and prepares them for life."

Turning Boulders into Pebbles

Amid all this enthusiasm, the move toward inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education is slow. The process has begun in Latvia, but it will take time and legislative as well as financial support from the government. Many obstacles remain. Some communities are intolerant and even hostile toward people with special needs and their families. Some parents of children with special needs lack knowledge and confidence about what kind of education they can demand. Some teachers are unwilling to teach in inclusive classrooms or don't have the necessary training. Many schools lack such basic resources as accessible classroom furniture and learning materials.

Sometimes obstacles loom like boulders, but when educators look at children like Peter and Victoria they suddenly skip and roll away, mere pebbles in a long but hopeful road. When he started school, Peter had difficulty making friends. Now, his teacher says, he is often a leader. "He is full of energy and sociable," she says, "and much more patient in his relationships with other children. Peter is honest and not afraid to acknowledge his mistakes. His communication skills are strong." Victoria, who didn't speak at all, now proudly says her age—seven!—and understands both Latvian and Russian. Whenever anyone mentions her beloved Granny, she smiles. She likes listening to music and moves her body in delight to the sounds.

"I have come to the conclusion that it is not right to keep such children at home," says Victoria's grandmother. "They have to be taken out in the society. Society should get used to it that not all people are the same, that there are different people who need support and help. People will never think about another person's pain until they see it. None of us is protected from suffering and trouble."

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Elfrida Krastina, Daiga Zake, Zenija Berzina, and Sandra Kraukle, *Educating Children with Special Needs: Parent Involvement in Latvia*.

Dream for a Better Future: Inclusive Education in Mongolia

Case Study Researchers: Dari Jigjidsuren, MA, Step by Step Consultant, United Nations Population Fund, and Narantuya Sodnompil, BA, Faculty, Shinjeech-21 College, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

"Now I understand that children with special needs exist, that they should be educated and their dream for a better future needs to be built up. I know they should be respected and we should work together."
—A student at the Preschool Education College in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Educating Children with Special Needs

The Preschool Education College in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city, has been training teachers since 1964. It is currently the only institution in Mongolia educating the country's preschool teachers. Yet despite increased demand for educators trained to work with children with special needs, until the Mongolian Foundation for Open Society launched its Inclusive Education Project in 2002, the college did not train specialists in this area.

"To be frank, even the terminology we used before was different," comments one Preschool Education College faculty member. "We used the words 'handicapped' and 'disabled.' But now we use the term 'special needs' to talk about children with various difficulties. Both teachers and students try to avoid the old attitude."

In the past, Mongolian children with special needs were educated in segregated settings, or not at all. Children with disabilities were so severely stigmatized that many parents chose to hide them away at home. Professional special educators were "defectologists" trained in the Soviet Union. It was not considered possible—or desirable—to include children with special needs in general education classrooms.

As one Preschool Education College (PEC) teacher explains, she used to assume that students with special needs were outside her range of both expertise and interest—excluded from both her classroom and her consciousness. She now views them as part of the larger student population with whom she has to work. "Before I didn't pay much attention to children with learning difficulties," she says. "I thought that it was a specialist's job to work with them. But now when I meet such children I try to talk to and understand them."

The Inclusive Education Project

By the time the Inclusive Education Project came to Ulaanbaatar, there was a growing realization in Mongolian society of the importance of inclusive education. After the collapse of the centrally planned economy, many special schools previously funded by the state had to close. The country experienced a steep increase in the number of children with special needs not receiving adequate educational services and was coping with the demands of parents who were determined to ensure that their children had the same rights accorded to typically developing children, particularly the right to an appropriate education. International documents—such as the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All and publications of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA)—presented a vision of inclusive education as one basis of civil society. ISSA promotes the principle that children with special needs are part of civil society and

"We used the words 'handicapped' and 'disabled.' But now we use the term 'special needs' to talk about children with various difficulties."

have the right to contribute to the development of that society.

Mongolia has a population of 2.5 million, the majority of whom are under 25 years of age. Preschool-age children make up more than 20 percent of the population. Many people lead nomadic lives and depend upon herding for their livelihood, moving several times a year. The population—comprised of about 30 different ethnic groups—is widely dispersed, with slightly less than half living in sparsely populated rural areas and the rest in three major cities, Erdenet, Darkhan, and Ulaanbaatar. In the 1990s, when Mongolia underwent the transition from a centrally planned economy to a free-market economy, the GNP per capita fell from $1,600 to $463. About 36 percent of the population is considered poor. According to J. Myagmar, an official of the Ministry of Science, Technology, Education, and Culture (MOSTEC), Mongolia's new openness to the idea of inclusive education reflects the country's desperate need for a more flexible and responsive education system able to adjust to changing political, social, and cultural realities.

C. Purev-Ochir, an officer at the Inclusive Education Unit located within the Ministry, but founded by Save the Children–UK (SC-UK), notes the Unit's three goals:

- Improving the quality of inclusive education services;
- Creating enabling learning environments for all children; and
- Building an understanding throughout Mongolian society that children with special needs learn best in general education classroom settings.

The Mongolian Foundation for Open Society (MFOS) was established in 1996 as an autonomous nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonreligious organization dedicated to initiating and supporting Open Society activities in Mongolia. The Step by Step Program, which operates under the auspices of MFOS, began in Mongolia in 1998. By 2004, Step by Step methodology was reaching more than 8,600 children in 267 classrooms and 53 kindergartens. A key area of Step by Step activity has been its effort to institutionalize its methodology into pre-service teacher education, most notably in partnership with the Preschool Education College (PEC). In 2000—in the wake of a National Program for Preschool Strengthening report urging improved quality of and increased access to preschool education—the college approached MFOS with a request to support school reforms. The funding came with a recommendation that part of the grant be spent on developing and teaching an inclusive education course—and with a pledge that Step by Step would assist PEC in this process. By December 2003, when Mongolia adopted its National Program on Inclusive Education, Step by Step mentors had been

working on inclusion with college faculty for several years. Step by Step provided trainings, workshops, and educational materials on inclusive education and helped PEC faculty revise their curricula. In 2003–2004 a new course, Inclusive Education, was introduced for all third- and fourth-year preschool education students.

"Before my fellow students and I didn't know that children with special needs also include children of vulnerable groups in our society and children whose native language is not Mongolian. Now we know that."

At the time of this case study, the Inclusive Education course was only in its first year and no students had yet graduated. But both students and faculty report that they now view inclusion much more positively, as a goal rather than an obstacle. "I think all the teachers have changed," one faculty member comments. "We no longer are shocked or amazed about children with special needs."

Changing Attitudes of Preschool Education College Students

Students at the college are enthusiastic about the new curriculum and are eager to gain the skills and knowledge that will enable them to work with children with

special needs. "Kindergarten teachers who graduated from the college in the past and many rural teachers do not know how to approach children with special needs and their parents, but we will know," one student says. Indeed, students hope that their new skills will help them convince wary parents, afraid their children with special needs will be shunned, to send the children to school in the first place. "Parents tend to keep children with special needs at home," a student explains. "As a result of learning the inclusion concepts, we will be able to convince parents to send their children into kindergarten."

In the past many student teachers refused to accept children with special needs into their classes, feeling both inadequate and afraid. Now students say they feel more confident of their ability to ensure the social participation of all children. "We have recently had teaching practicum," one student reports. "Because we already started learning some theory we were not surprised to see children with special needs; we approached them and tried to communicate. We believe that through learning more in our courses our knowledge and skills will improve."

Many Preschool Education College students now believe that children with special needs learn most effectively when they can socialize with their peers in inclusive classrooms. "Inclusive education means educating children with special needs together with other children based on their needs and interests," one student explains. Some are even working to develop strategies to encourage this sort of socialization. "A colleague of mine has a book on sign language," a student comments. "Now I am thinking about learning sign language to teach my children. It is important to teach sign language to normally developing children, because if only the child with special needs knows that language how will he communicate with others? Children will not tease him once they understand his language."

Students have also learned to define "special needs" much more broadly, moving beyond the limits of defectology to more complex social and cultural analysis. "Before my fellow students and I didn't know that children with special needs also include children of vulnerable groups in our society and children whose native language is not Mongolian," one student explains. "Now we know that."

Studying inclusive education as part of their curriculum has given PEC students the confidence to work with children with a variety of needs and to use individual education plans and differentiated instruction as members of a team. They believe that they are well equipped to use strategies that engage

children in learning. "During our practicum," one student says, "we noticed that sometimes teachers ignored one child in the class. Then that child sits in the same corner all day through and doesn't participate in activities. But after learning about inclusion, we will know more about dealing with this kind of child."

Faculty members agree that student reaction to inclusive education has been very positive. "By the time they graduate the

students might not have mastered perfect teaching skills and methods," one instructor comments, "but at least they will have understood that children with special needs deserve to be educated and raised along with their peers. I think this is our new curriculum's greatest impact."

Challenges Ahead

Despite the enthusiasm of students and faculty, the road toward inclusion remains rocky, like much of Mongolia's terrain. As Adiya Narmandakh, the country's Step by Step Program director, noted, "Inclusive education is a new topic for Mongolia, which still has a very segregated educational system." Faculty and students both lack practical experience in working with children with special needs. Some parents are unwilling or afraid to enroll their children with special needs in preschools. Educational support materials and assistive devices are difficult to obtain. A number of specialists—the former defectologists—still work throughout the country and need to be retrained, but the large dispersed population makes retraining time-consuming and costly.

Some PEC faculty members are uncomfortable teaching inclusive education as they have little hands-on experience and have never themselves worked with children with special needs. While familiar with the theory, they lack practical knowledge, including examples of effective teaching strategies. "We only teach our students about how we should work in theory," one faculty member comments. "About the practice we are not sure. If someone brings a child with special needs into the room I will be very nervous because I have never had direct interaction with such a child."

The teaching of inclusion has also been difficult for faculty because of their lack of practical experience with diagnostics and assessments, and because few teaching materials, visual aids, and other educational resources are available in Mongolian. Many faculty members believe there is a need for a stronger link between their courses and the Inclusive Education course. They urge the Inclusive Education teacher to work with them more closely and to share her knowledge with her colleagues. "This course has to be compulsory," one faculty member comments. "I think it is not enough to take this course for just two semesters."

Students, too, lack the opportunity to put theory into practice. Some have no time to work with children at all; others complete their practice teaching in kindergartens with no children with learning or physical differences. With no chance to practice their recently acquired skills, some students fear they will be unable to identify and diagnose children with special needs. "I simply feel afraid of working with children with special needs," a student admits. Another student, an experienced teacher, comments, "I am now prepared to teach a few children with mild disabilities, not children with severe disabilities. I can deal with children with mild visual or hearing impairment or mild speech defects who can pronounce some syllables."

"Before I didn't pay much attention to children with learning difficulties. But now when I meet such children I try to talk to and understand them."

Students feel a need for more training in both theory and practice. They have requested an expanded Inclusive Education course, with an increased number of practicum hours. "I think that the Inclusive Education course needs to have more hours," one student explains. "We study theory and methodology, but we do not know how to incorporate them into practice. Working

with children is very different from theory; therefore, I think it is important to increase practice hours." In a heartfelt plea for more practical support, this student adds, "Also we need to know about equipment—for instance, how to operate a wheelchair. We lack handouts!"

Students and faculty both note the importance of incorporating inclusive education concepts into all PEC classes rather than isolating them into only the one specialized course. At the moment, little integration occurs, perhaps because faculty members still feel unqualified to teach inclusion.

S. Tserennadmid, the officer in charge of preschool education at the Ministry of Science, Technology, Education, and Culture, points out key challenges along the road toward inclusion, including:

- Professionals' continued inability to reliably diagnose children with special needs;
- Parents' reluctance to enroll children with severe disabilities in kindergartens;
- Teachers' and other children's lack of acceptance toward these children when they are enrolled; and
- A perceived need to provide incentives to kindergarten teachers whose workload significantly increases when children with special needs enter their classrooms.

The officer notes that the 2003 National Program on Inclusive Education—with its emphasis on improving preschool quality, extending access, and increasing enrollments by addressing the varied needs of children and parents—should help Mongolia deal with these challenges.

Reflection

At the time of this case study, the Preschool Education College students were the first in all of Mongolia to study inclusive education as part of their course work. Inclusive education models did not yet exist in Mongolia. Most children with special needs were educated in segregated classrooms or hidden away at home. The Inclusive Education Project sparked striking changes in faculty and student attitudes toward children with special needs—but behavioral changes had not yet followed.

Since the case study was completed the college has selected pilot sites for the students' practice teaching that include special kindergartens serving children with special needs. New interactive teaching methods, influenced by Step by Step methodology, are now widely used by faculty. A Supportive Technology Resource Center has been established with support from MFOS and Save the Children–UK. The Center, equipped with assistive technology, will serve not only PEC students and faculty but also children with special needs and their parents. Families will receive professional support and counseling—extremely important, because early identification of and support for disabilities is more effective and less expensive than late diagnosis.

Much more needs to be done, of course. While MFOS has provided the college with some literature—the Step by Step Program supported the translation and publication of two manuals on inclusive education—there is a pressing need for more. The college urgently needs user-friendly training packages for students and parents of children with special needs. And while Step by Step has provided two specialists on inclusive education, many defectologists educated prior to the transition still work in special schools, schools of education, and colleges. "These teachers were trained to work exclusively with children with disabilities," comments Purev-Ochir, the Inclusive Education Unit official. "They need to be retrained to learn more about inclusive principles."

The concepts of inclusive education must be embedded throughout the entire Preschool Education College curriculum and students and faculty must have opportunities to work directly with children with special needs. Perhaps the Step by Step approach—the selection of model classrooms, provision of training and support, and establishment of regional training centers with certified trainers—can be applied to the implementation of inclusive education in Mongolia.

Step by step, the road from segregation to inclusion may be long. But the Mongolian journey has begun.

"Before I might have turned my back on a child with special needs," comments one Preschool Education College student. "Now I will open my heart."

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Dari Jigjidsuren and Narantuya Sodnompil, *Inclusive Education at the Preschool Education College in Mongolia*.

Inkluzia: *Inclusive Education in Ukraine*

Case Study Researchers: Svitlana Efimova, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology and Pedagogy, Lviv Oblast Scientific-Methodological Institute of Education, and Natalia Sofiy, Director, Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation

"I take him as a regular person with whom I have a common language—a language I understand completely. However, I also understand that Liubchyk has to become more adapted to life in the future. I think that together we will be able to solve all problems."

—Romanna, mother of Liubchyk, a child with special needs attending the Maliuk School in Lviv, Ukraine

"The philosophy of our program is that all children who can be involved in a regular classroom experience should be given the chance."

— Oksana Havryliuk, Liubchyk's teacher

Meeting Liubchyk*

When Liubchyk enters the bustling first-grade classroom in the Maliuk School, Halyna Stepanova, the teaching assistant, greets him cheerfully. "Halyna, at seven!" he replies (a somewhat mysterious comment that seems to refer to the time she leaves work). They look through some photographs and he comments, "Halyna, lunch twelve," pointing to the clock. "Yes, lunch is at twelve," she answers. The other children are practicing their numbers, working in two teams. "Liubchyk, you could join either team," the teacher, Oksana Havryliuk, says, but the quiet eight-year-old with the big gray eyes refuses. He watches steadily as the children call out answers. Then he touches Marianna, the social worker assigned to him, with a finger, says "Lunch," and leaves the room to check the day's menu.

"The philosophy of our program is that all children who can be involved in general education classroom experience should be given the chance."

When Liubchyk returns, two friendly girls invite him to play, but he hides his face behind Marianna. Havryliuk, known as Ms. Oksana, asks him to finish writing letters in his notebook, but he refuses. During the reading lesson he plays with a chain, first putting blue and yellow links together, then pulling them apart and placing them in a basket. At lunch he sits carefully in his favorite spot, a corner of the long table near the lunchroom entrance. Yet during the afternoon music lesson, when the children listen to contrasting musical passages and draw their reactions, Liubchyk draws vigorously, enthusiastically. He appears to hear neither the teacher nor the music, but in fact his drawing is carefully executed. On the right side—the sad picture, he explains—is the sun, nearly hidden by clouds from which

rain is falling. On the left side, responding to a cheerful melody, is a brightly colored car driving at high speed. Liubchyk proudly prints his name and the date in careful block letters.

"If an activity makes a child happy to go to school every morning, this is a breakthrough," says Havryliuk, who also works as a trainer for the Ukrainian Step by Step Program.

Liubchyk's Special Needs

When Liubchyk's parents first realized that something was wrong with

*The names of Liubchyk and the other children, as well as of Liubchyk's mother, were changed.

their beautiful, expressive, deeply cherished two-year-old son they were devastated, his mother, Romanna, says. Liubchyk is their first, and long-awaited, child. All seemed well for the first two years, and then suddenly, the toddler stopped communicating. "For a long time, we couldn't comprehend why it occurred or what we should do," Romanna explains. "The doctors gave us contradictory information. Some said they saw no problem; others said the child was extremely ill and nothing would help. My husband and I made a decision: If there were even one chance, we would fight for it. We didn't close up, to be left alone facing our problem. We started looking for support from around the world—one way or another!"

Romanna describes Liubchyk as autistic, with both serious delays and striking talents. "Liubchyk is a very interesting child," she says. "He has unique skills. For example, when he was only two and a half, I showed him puzzles containing 15 pieces in a frame. He saw the way I was piecing them together and immediately put it together—but in a different way. He would take a piece and place it in a certain spot that later proved to be its exact place. At the age of five, Liubchyk started telling time by the position of the hands of the clock. He had other skills oriented to space. He is amused when people lose their bearings. Once his grandmother and I went to the wrong bus. He showed us where we really should go and laughed. When later we sat in the kitchen, we said, 'Do you remember, son, how we almost got on the wrong bus?' He only laughed. He also likes mechanical things, especially trains. Thanks to them, he learned to count. Liubchyk keeps a keen eye for things related to time. He counts everything and gets agitated about days until holidays, hours until feeding the animals, the times I am supposed to take my medicine."

The greatest challenge, Romanna adds, was finding an appropriate school for her unusual son. The Ukrainian Psychological-Medical-Pedagogic Consultations (PMPC) office recommended educating the boy at home. A specialized kindergarten for children with speech problems turned him away, saying he was "not one of theirs," Romanna says. "Then we remembered that extraordinary school, Maliuk. The director signed us right in." Liubchyk began attending preschool at the Maliuk School when he was four, joining an inclusive class of children his age. He was anxious at first, but now goes off to school in high spirits. "We can thank the atmosphere of this place," his grandmother says gratefully.

Inclusion in Step by Step

The Maliuk Kindergarten–Primary School in Lviv, one of Ukraine's finest schools, has been working with the Step by Step Program since 1994. In 1996 it became one of the first Ukrainian schools to include children with special needs in its classrooms. In the past, most children with special needs had been enrolled in segregated schools or boarding facilities known as internats, isolated from their communities and even from their families. The Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation (USSF), committed to providing all children with equal access to a quality education, found willing partners in the educators at Maliuk. In 2001, the school became part of a seven-year national experiment, Social Adaptation and Integration of Children with Special Needs into Regular Classrooms, organized by USSF and the Institute of Special Pedagogy of Ukraine and supported by the Ministry of Education and Science. Maliuk School currently serves 205 pupils from the age of two through Grade 4, including eight children with special needs.

"We are proud of our achievements," says Julia Kavun, USSF training coordinator. "Eight children—six of whom under former conditions would have been assigned to a special educational institution—attend

Maliuk. They are learning in accordance with the program of the general education school, modified to suit their learning abilities. The parents take an active part in the inclusion process. One mother told us, 'When our child was born, we felt that she was loved only by the family. Now our daughter enjoys an active social life, learning and eagerly anticipating her future.'"

Romanna describes Liubchyk as autistic, with both serious delays and striking talents. "Liubchyk is a very interesting child," she says. "He has unique skills."

Adds Natalia Pastushenko, vice director of the Lviv Oblast Scientific-Methodological Institute of Education: "This practice, inclusion, has two advantages. First, all children learn to be tolerant, even to appreciate the importance of their neighbors. Second, children with special needs get a greater sense of themselves as people."

Indeed, Liubchyk has his own particular friends, Anychka and Katrusia. These girls possess qualities that may not have blossomed in a classroom without Liubchyk, a readiness to help and a sense of responsibility toward others. And in a nearby third-grade classroom at Maliuk, Natalia, a girl with cerebral palsy, is something of a star. The children consider it a special privilege to be the one chosen to help Natalia climb the stairs.

Liubchyk's Teacher and Parents

At first, Havryliuk, Liubchyk's teacher, found it difficult to imagine working with him in an inclusive first-grade classroom. An experienced Step by Step teacher, Havryliuk had been teaching at the Maliuk School since 1998. She had participated in many training seminars organized by the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation and was herself a trainer in the Step by Step Program. She was cofounder of the nongovernmental organization Lad, which assists families in the protection of children's rights, and chair of the widely recognized group Ukraine 11, a branch of the Ukrainian Amnesty International Association. Nevertheless, Havryliuk had only recently begun working with children with special needs and was apprehensive about welcoming Liubchyk.

What about all her other first-graders? she wondered, thinking, "The problems of one child cannot be solved by generating problems for other children." Perhaps Liubchyk really would be happier in a special school. Perhaps she would find him difficult to control.

At their first meeting, both Havryliuk and Liubchyk's parents were uncomfortable. Havryliuk felt that Romanna, Liubchyk's mother, was pushing the boy to perform, perhaps beyond his abilities. Romanna felt that the teacher didn't appreciate her son's skills. But as they worked together, trust developed. Havryliuk became one of Liubchyk's strongest supporters, and Romanna became a parent leader at the Maliuk School. Both women are enthusiastic advocates of inclusive education.

"In time," says Havryliuk, "the ice of mistrust melted. First, thank God, I started seeing the child with different eyes. I understood his parents' worries and concerns, their earnest desire to see Liubchyk attending this very class. And they understood my insistence on protecting the academic conditions of the other children and my striving to create a friendly atmosphere for Liubchyk's interaction with others."

Partly because of Liubchyk's progress, Havryliuk now conducts training seminars for parents of children with special needs, teachers working with them, and representatives of NGOs. She tells other teachers, "Just like every teacher, I had my notions of how to organize education for children with special needs placed in a general education classroom. But when I was faced with the problem myself, it proved much more difficult. When we meet a child like that, we understand that he or she needs help, but we don't know much about how to help. Then, when we see that child achieving something with our help, we start having feelings that this is even more valuable than giving knowledge to other children."

Thinking perhaps of Liubchyk, so carefully and proudly printing his name, or of Natalia, surrounded by children eager to be her friend, Havryliuk adds, "The neglect of children with disabilities will always echo back. But it is not the fear of punishment that compels us! I simply remember this: Inclusion is an idea implemented by people. The philosophy of our program is that all children who can be involved in the general education classroom experience should be given the chance. I have become deeply convinced that only when we work directly

with a specific child, and not merely through his or her diagnosis, can conclusions as to the potential benefit of enrollment in a general education school be drawn."

Treatment of Children with Disabilities

When Step by Step began its work in Ukraine, even the language was resistant. Ukrainian simply didn't have a word for "inclusion" in the context of education. The term *inkluzia*—now quite common—was simply transliterated from the English. Ukrainian educators sometimes spoke of integration, the melding of dissimilar people, but never of genuine inclusion: the melding of dissimilar people in ways that ensure the sharing of benefits. Both the concept and the word itself were foreign.

During the Soviet period, children with special needs did not attend general education schools anywhere in Ukraine. Parents were pressured to send their children diagnosed as "defective" to the specialized boarding schools known as internats. A physical therapist describes her visit to one of these internats: "Children with cerebral palsy were severely disabled, all lying in one big crib. You'd have four or five children lying together, just lying there. There was no nurturing." Parents who refused to place their child in an internat often felt they were sentencing him or her to home imprisonment. Many felt such shame that they kept their children hidden. Whether hidden at home or hidden in an internat, children with special needs were isolated from society.

Children who remained at home through the preschool years were evaluated at age six by the Psychological-Medical-Pedagogic Consultations (PMPC) office. This first diagnosis determined where the child would be educated, and the decision of the PMPC was usually final. One mother describes the process: "They take my child. I'm confused, and the child, what can you say? Besides, he gets scared. They ask him this question: 'What is the weather today?' It's sunny outside, the sun is bright—but very cold. Yarik says, 'Cold.' And they go, 'Oh, Yarik, how could it be cold? Look, the sun is shining, the sky is clear,' and he says, 'It's cold.' And this takes exactly two minutes. That's it. 'Mom, we are setting up the specialized school for you. Your child'—they said 'retard' or something like that—'go outside and wait for the documents.' That is the whole conversation."

In the past, most children with special needs had been enrolled in segregated schools or boarding facilities known as internats, isolated from their communities and even from their families.

In the last decade, however, Ukraine has

been moving rapidly toward inkluzia. In the more than 10 years that have passed since Ukraine chose to transform itself into an independent democratic society, a series of important policy changes have swept through the educational system. Even the PMPC now supports inclusion, collaborating with the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation and helping families place their children

The parents take an active part in the inclusion process. One mother told us, "When our child was born, we felt that she was loved only by the family. Now our daughter enjoys an active social life, learning and eagerly anticipating her future."

in inclusive schools. The 2001 initiative on inclusion—the "experiment" Liubchyk enjoys—was approved by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science. Vice Minister Victor Ogneviuk, who signed the document authorizing the experiment, is an outspoken advocate of inclusive education.

"In my mind it is absolutely wrong when, using specialized boarding schools or other institutions, we create reservations for children, preventing them from seeing life in all of its forms, manifestations, and complexities," he says. "And this is true not only for children with disabilities. The healthy children have to see that within human society, alongside the healthy ones with able minds, hands, and legs, live children who require their help and compassion. Understanding this problem should become a motivating factor for us."

Challenges to Implementation

The promise of inclusive education is compelling. Every child is special. Every child is skilled. Every child is capable of learning. Education is available to everyone, to children with gifts of every kind. Inclusion is a philosophy, a new model of education, and a human value.

In practice, however, inclusion is not always easy to implement. Some parents of children with special needs fear that they will be shunned in an inclusive classroom, and some parents of typical children fear that the slower pace of the pupils with special needs will hamper their own child's education. Even today, with both the Ministry of Education and Science and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences advocating a more humanistic system of inclusive education—partly in order to smooth Ukraine's integration into the European community—many Ukrainian educators believe that children with special needs learn better in segregated settings. Inclusion is not yet widely considered a serious alternative to special education.

As Victor Ogneviuk, the vice minister, explains, "In the past people with deficiencies were to be considered inferior. Today we must understand that we have to resist this ill mentality. In the past the problem was unknown to most of the population, hidden away. That is the reason why today, when a child who requires specialized help enters a general education class, some parents raise questions: 'How come? Why is a child requiring special help studying with my child?' The community has stereotypes that have to be challenged."

The key problems, Ogneviuk notes, are lack of funds and lack of qualified teachers. "Today it is not uncommon for these individuals to join classes in general education schools," he says. "However, we have yet to complete a tall order: preparing teaching and mentoring personnel, equipping learning facilities. All the schools were built in such a way that it is impossible for a child with a disability or special need to enter them without the help of others." Many schools are inaccessible and many classrooms lack equipment and teaching assistants. Even typical children in general education schools benefit greatly from the presence of teaching assistants, he comments. "The idea is wonderful. Unfortunately, financial difficulties stop it from being implemented. Possibly one day this dream will come true."

Vyatcheslav Zasenko, deputy director of the Institute of Special Pedagogy, believes that inclusive and segregated classrooms are both necessary and can coexist. "Inclusive

education can only exist in combination with specialized education," he says, "opening up opportunities for children with special needs and satisfying their constitutional right of equal access to quality education." Many of the specialist teachers, he adds—trained in a separatist model of education—believe that "the mainstream schools are not capable of providing a correctional program for the children with special needs."

Ogneviuk agrees that the quality of teaching is key. "Today, the most important issue is preparation of a new generation of teachers capable of helping children with special needs," he says. "Without well-prepared teachers and mentors, our talk is in vain."

Even if some segregated schools for children with special needs must remain active, he adds, "It is our preference to have children with special needs attend the general education schools, giving them the opportunity to experience the life of the society."

Liubchyk's mother Romanna has her own point of view. "We deeply hope that with time everything will be all right," she says.

Seeing with New Eyes

The first-graders in Ms. Oksana's classroom sit in a circle around their teacher and discuss the fairytale *Thumbelina*. Liubchyk sits with his back to the other children, laying out geometrical shapes. "Children, let us spread our circle out a bit wider to include Liubchyk, shall we?" Ms. Oksana suggests.

Then Ms. Oksana asks, "What did Thumbelina call the mole?"

"The blind," Hanusia replies.

"Is that what we call someone who cannot see?" the teacher asks.

"He didn't like the sun," the children chorus. "He used to say that the birds were fools." "He only counted on his wealth." Halyna Stepanova, the teaching assistant, asks Liubchyk to say the names of the children answering questions. He turns around whenever he hears an answer and accurately says each name.

"Perhaps he was shallow-minded and refused to acknowledge and understand things because he couldn't see them," Ms. Oksana comments. "However, he can't be blamed for how well he can see. All living creatures have their purpose, and the moles play their important role as well."

Later each child is asked to color a scene from the fairytale and place them in the order the scenes appear in the story. The children work in groups. Liubchyk chooses a picture to color, but refuses to join a group. He is not pressed to do so. "What is this bird?" Stepanova asks, looking at Liubchyk's picture. "A swallow," he replies, spreading his arms into wings.

"Today, the most important issue is preparation of a new generation of teachers capable of helping children with special needs. Without well-prepared teachers and mentors, our talk is in vain."

When the coloring is completed, the children gather and place their scenes in order. "Liubchyk, come here, we are missing your picture," says his friend Anychka. Liubchyk gives her the neatly colored swallow, but refuses to join the group.

"Children, you have done a very good job today," says Ms. Oksana. "Let us take each other by the hand and sing our favorite song." Liubchyk holds Stepanova by one hand and Anychka by the other. The children sing enthusiastically.

Liubchyk puts his head on Stepanova's shoulder. "Lunchtime," he says, pointing at the clock.

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Svitlana Efimova and Natalia Sofiy, *Inclusive Education: Influencing Children, Teachers, Parents, and State Policies in Ukraine*.

Reaching Children Outside of Preschools

One of the major challenges facing educators and policymakers around the world is the provision of quality services to the greatest number of children and families possible. Where formal preschools reach only a small percentage of children, flexible and creative alternative models are in great demand. Step by Step is reaching out to children and families without access to quality preschool programs. The development of community learning centers that address the learning needs of both parents and children is a high priority. Working in collaboration with a range of existing childcare providers and systems, Step by Step is developing a variety of home-based early education program materials and parenting-education initiatives. The goal of these efforts is to provide parents with the knowledge and skills to create more effective home-learning environments. Five case studies from Albania, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, and Slovakia illustrate the tremendous possibilities of these exciting innovations.

Step by Step Armenia developed a home-based nine-month school-readiness curriculum in order to respond to the growing number of children arriving at primary school without the necessary early-learning skills. While the materials were designed to increase children's math and literacy skills, the authors reported a range of unexpected positive benefits to parents, families, and communities. All participants requested additional learning materials and requested that the program be expanded to include younger and older children. Recognizing the critical importance of the first three years of life for later development, Albania has integrated a parenting-education program into an existing creche serving families characterized by multiple social problems and chronic unemployment. Through interviews with parents, and observation of caregiver-child interactions, the long-term impact of Step by Step training on the creche and its staff was investigated. The authors explored ways to reach out to a greater number of families with young children.

The goal of these efforts is to provide parents with the knowledge and skills to create more effective home-learning environments.

The case from Kazakhstan explores how one kindergarten, led by a dynamic director and using the problem-solving skills embodied in Step by Step methods, managed to survive despite dire economic circumstances. Crucial strategies included parent participation in the teaching and learning process, closer communication between the kindergarten and the community, and an expansion of the role of community members as active stakeholders in the resolution of issues both specific to the preschool and important to the wider community. The case also offers a moving account of how the kindergarten created a family resource center serving the community's most at-risk families.

In Macedonia, the authors describe a Children's Creative Center—a museum that provides informal learning opportunities for children and their families. With their emphasis on learning through play, Step by Step methods have greatly influenced the design of activities. Through focus groups and interviews, the case examines the impact of the center on children's development and explores new directions to strengthen and enhance its programs.

The case study from Slovakia documents strides toward improving the educational opportunities of Roma children through the implementation of community center-based and home-based early childhood programs, attempts to integrate Roma children in the state-run preschool, initiatives to promote high academic achievement of Roma in the special school, and activities for parents and the wider community.

This set of case studies highlights the potential for alternative strategies to complement child-centered, center-based programs. The authors also point out the shortcomings of these initiatives, including program sustainability, resistance of firmly entrenched traditional models, the difficulties of creating appropriate content, and the struggle to encourage the involvement of fathers and other family members. Despite these challenges, the cases clearly illustrate the crucial importance of these alternative programs to their communities.

AHA! So Children Learn in Creches! Step by Step in an Albanian Creche

Case Study Researchers: Gerda Sula, MEd, Executive Director, Qendra Hap pas Hapi—Step by Step Center, Albania, and Milika Dhamo, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology and Education, University of Tirana

"All efforts in reshaping the creche into a child-centered approach have been focused on giving the message that young children grow better when they have the chance to develop secure attachments to significant adults in their lives. What we are asking from the caregivers is to move beyond the classical caregiver's role of nutrition and health care towards the more complex role of educators."

—Rebeka Pali, Step by Step representative

Background

The Albanian term for creche is *cerdhe*, meaning nest—aptly describing the place that provides safety, food, and nurture to infants while encouraging their growth and independence. Before Albania's political transition from totalitarianism to democracy, which began in 1990, the Ministry of Health administered institutional day care. Creches were responsible only for the health and basic care of preschool infants from birth to age three, and caregivers lacked early childhood education skills and training.

The introduction of Step by Step child-centered methodology in Albanian creches has played an important role in re-visioning education for the very youngest learners.

Today, creches are under the jurisdiction of local governments and health and care departments. Child-centered education reform is an essential part of the process of democratization, yet the Ministry of Education is not involved, nor planning to become involved, in the creche system. In this context, the introduction of Step by Step child-centered methodology in Albanian creches has played an important role in re-visioning education for the very youngest learners.

In 1999, Step by Step and UNICEF joined forces to launch a one-year project to create model creches in the cities of Tirana and Shkodra as part of a collaborative initiative to develop a creche network in Albania. During 1999–2000, staff at the Kombinat creche received extensive training and technical assistance in Step by Step methodology as well as furniture and materials to create a child-centered learning environment. The case study of Kombinat creche was conducted from March to May 2004, three years after the completion of the training and technical assistance provided by Step by Step, to evaluate how much Step by Step methodology is still present in its practice.

Kombinat Creche

Tirana, the heterogeneous capital of Albania, has a population of about 485,000, with 29 creches. Of the 331 caregivers who work in them, most are general secondary graduates, while some are nurses. They work in shifts, with an average ratio of one caregiver to six or seven children. The day care system serves only 10 percent of infants in Tirana; the rest are cared for at home, usually by grandmothers or other family members while mothers work.

Situated on the southwest edge of Tirana, Kombinat is a fast-growing informal settlement of some 52,000 people (14,000 families) living in an area of 6.5 square kilometers (about 4 square miles) in conditions of acute economic and social privation and urban underdevelopment. Some 3,000 families occupy state property, such as abandoned factories, offices, and buildings that once were schools and kindergartens. These buildings are gradually being privatized and

renovated, but 6,000 families remain squatters, without irrigation, water, electricity, or drainage. Kombinat has deep social problems, and despite a threefold population increase, has fewer schools, kindergartens, and creches than before 1990. For preschoolers, there are four kindergartens, and only one creche.

Before and After

Kombinat creche before the implementation of Step by Step:

"The first time I visited the creche, I was shocked: it was a huge building in which only three rooms were functional—full of iron beds, and just a small space with a wood stove, a big crib, and an adult-sized table. The children were either in beds or in the crib, because the caregivers were worried that the stove might burn them—and they were right. The caregiver took the children one by one to feed on her lap. She would smile and speak with a loving voice, hurrying the child to finish fast so that she could feed the next. The children were still using diapers because it was too cold to toilet-train them. The caregivers said they would potty-train them in spring, when it got warmer and children could stay longer in the bathroom. I remember the sounds of baby cries, caregivers' randomly released deep sighs, and heavily dragging slippers on the uncarpeted floor."

—Aurora Bushati, UNICEF Education Project Officer

Kombinat creche after the implementation of Step by Step:

"The locked gate opens onto a wonderful sunlit garden with birds singing among the dark green branches of the pine trees, blooming flowers, grass, and a very well-equipped playground. A nicely tiled path winds through the bushes to the creche building, from which comes the sound of folk music. Inside, there are shelves with toys, books, comfortable chairs for children, and halls smelling of baby powder and filled with drawings—some by the caregivers, and some by children. On the Parents' Information Bulletin are leaflets regarding child rearing and the menu of the day."

—Gerda Sula and Milika Dhamo, March 2004

Research Questions and Methodology

Our study of the Kombinat creche, which serves 120 children, investigated the implementation of Step by Step's child-centered methodology and how it encouraged the values of democratic citizenship and the development of civil society. Using methodological techniques of observation (14 days, approximately three to four hours per day), recording, and interviews with project participants, we posed the following questions:

- Is it possible to create new teaching behavior in caregivers, whose education is not field-related, through a one-year project? Which behaviors change, which do not, and why?
- How self-sustaining is the Step by Step methodology?
- How can a project adapt to a newly settled community with a fragile, emergent sense of citizenship and civic belonging?
- Does the Step by Step creche develop children to their full potential?
- Are families empowered to participate more actively in the life of the creche, and in the overall growth of the child?
- Do children of marginalized groups benefit from the program? Specifically, what about children from low-income families (the majority in Kombinat), Roma children, and children with special needs?
- What is the impact of this model creche on other creches in the city of Tirana? Is knowledge and experience being shared, and, if so, how?

How Step by Step Was Implemented in the Kombinat Creche

"We were aware of the fact that the caregivers didn't have an education back-

ground; the zero-to-three institutions were created with the purpose of caring for the children while the parents were at work. The program encouraged caregivers to find out about individual children under their care, and to help their healthy and secure development. We collaborated with UNICEF in designing child-appropriate environments, and then UNICEF reconstructed the creche in Kombinat from the beginning. We worked with the caregivers to create warm, inviting learning environments, without leaving aside traditional cleanliness and safety. The methodology reinforced the need to establish a relationship of love, trust, and respect between the caregiver and the child."

—Rebeka Pali, Step by Step representative

At the outset of the program, caregivers received information and advice from early childhood development experts in key areas: how to support infants' and toddlers' emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical development; how to recognize and respond to each child's temperament and interests; how to create a safe, healthy, and stimulating environment; and how to work with families and other professionals to ensure a quality program.

Caregivers and specialists undertook an intensive five-day basic training course and three-day advanced training, supplemented by research literature and professional materials. Six of the 20 Kombinat creche caregivers were trained in the Step by Step Program in 1999. They in turn trained their remaining 14 colleagues. The trainings, which caregivers evaluated as very successful, provided practical skills and information on:

- Creating a child-centered program for infants and toddlers linking caregivers with families.
- Creating a safe and healthy environment using materials that promote learning through play and exploration.
- Understanding the developmental stages of early childhood and using observation techniques to learn how to allow children to develop skills at their own pace.
- Working to build a team that joins together the program, family, and child.

A child-centered environment was created through on-site practical training.

Caregivers received information and advice from early childhood development experts in key areas: how to support infants' and toddlers' emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical development; and how to work with families and other professionals to ensure a quality program.

UNICEF provided appropriate furniture, and Step by Step donated toys and other materials. This was the first reconstruction of the creche since its founding in 1953. Technical assistance, on-site visits, feedback, and support took place weekly during the first

six months and monthly during the last six.

Three important publications were produced that year:

- *Creating Child-Centered Classrooms for Infants and Toddlers*. This curriculum guide provides all the necessary research information, practical techniques, and skills required by caregivers to apply Step by Step methodology. It was distributed to program participants and all creches in Tirana.
- *Manual of Creches' Administration.* This publication surveys the administrative problems common in Albanian creches and offers new ideas to solve them based on child-centered philosophy. It was distributed to creche directors (participating and non-participating) and local government agencies.
- *Learning and Growing Together.* This is a guide for parents of infants and toddlers on understanding and supporting children's growth. It was distributed both at parent meetings and to parents of children not attending creche.

Findings

The case study research documented the continued implementation of child-centered methodology at the Kombinat creche in key areas. Although the researchers noted the need for improvement, they observed enriched language interaction between children and caregivers, increased family participation and community involvement, and a greater emphasis on individualization of instruction.

Positive changes were noted in:

- Language interactions between caregivers and children
- Family involvement
- Community development
- Observation, planning, and individualization
- Learning environment
- Daily routines
- Physical development and support

Language Interactions between Children and Caregivers

The research showed improved language interaction between children and caregivers. Caregivers are better able to respond to nonverbal cues, listen attentively and patiently to children, and monitor those with difficulties. Caregivers listen most keenly during activity time. They are knowledgeable on language development levels for specific ages, and understand that children develop individually. However, insufficient attention is given to expressing children's actions in words and to avoiding the use of infantilizing language interactions. Step by Step training emphasizes the importance of books for language development, but books are not placed in reach of children.

Family Involvement

Family involvement has been a key reform. The institution is no longer closed to parents, who now share information beyond health and feeding issues with caregivers. Parent participation remains uneven, but all agree that relationships have changed dramatically for the better.

> *"My older child went to the same creche. It was so totally different from what you see now. …The main difference is that caregivers are very friendly. With time, I have become friends with some of them."*
>
> —Engjellushe Hekuri, parent

Parents participate in the enrollment and initial entry of babies into childcare, staying with their child during the first week to ensure a supportive environment for children's attachment and separation experiences. Information-sharing processes, including a questionnaire, help caregivers get to know families and babies better.

Community Development

Kombinat creche is evolving into a community development center. Parent meetings, parenting classes, and conferences have been organized. Nevertheless, more parents attend celebrations than meetings. The creche has an elected parents' committee with decision-making powers. However, the committee spends much of its time managing funds collected from parents to provide food and materials, for which there is no state provision. In order to keep children in the creche, parents must pay $20 (USD) per month for food and also contribute toward the purchase of paper, pencils, and other teaching consumables. A third of Kombinat households live below the poverty line. Many children attend creche spo-

radically, due to inconsistent family income. Without local government support for families in need, unemployed parents cannot enroll children in the creche.

Observation, Planning, and Attention to Individualization

While fundamental Step by Step goals and methods concerning observation, planning, attention to individualization, and inclusion of children with special needs have been introduced, there is still much to be done to close the gap between understanding objectives and achieving them. Caregivers find observation a useful tool for organizing teaching strategies. The creche follows a weekly observation practice, focusing on two children and monitoring their developmental progress, temperament, and interaction with others. Planning has brought fresh perspectives to establishing child-centered learning environments, and trained caregivers have become sensitive to individual differences between children and their emotional development.

However, contrary to the principle of individuality, activities are selected by carers and all children are required to participate. Children need greater freedom to determine their activities. Rules are often stated in negative terms, and caregivers tend to deploy conditional love—both behaviors are contrary to a child-centered approach. Attention is given to children who show special needs, and caregivers are committed to raising awareness of the importance of specialized treatment and resources in this area.

Learning Environment

We found the creche extremely clean and orderly. Toys are placed on reachable low shelves—an uncommon practice in Albanian creches. Marjeta Gogo, a caregiver for 22 years, remarks, "I thought that this was not very smart, as children would make a mess. But I see now that children learn to take care of things if the caregiver teaches them to." Tablecloths are neatly ironed, shelves and beds are tidy, and even the leaves on pot plants are polished. However, Step by Step training emphasizes education, and the environment seems overly, even excessively, orderly, suggesting too much time spent on cleaning.

Daily Routines

Eating, dressing, cleaning, and toileting routines are used as learning opportunities. Because of the region's poverty children's diet in Kombinat is generally poor, and parents, most undereducated themselves, have little knowledge of children's nutritional needs. The creche provides a balanced diet, fresh food, appropriate portions, and timed feeding. Children help lay the table. They eat together, serve themselves, and use forks, knives, spoons, and napkins with ease. At home, children ask to help set the table as they do in creche. This was an area in which we observed the sensitivity to gender roles encouraged by Step by Step:

"Once, the caregivers encouraged only girls to help with tables. Now it is both, boys and girls, they all love to. However, the families often undermine the elimination of gender differences, as the culture is largely masculine."

—Lavdie Lamce, caregiver

Physical Development and Support

When the day is warm and sunny, the children play outside in their wonderful garden, developing gross motor skills. Caregivers monitor their safety. Parents describe the garden as "the nicest place in the neighborhood." The playground is well equipped because UNICEF wanted it to become a community center where parents could bring children even if they were not enrolled in the creche. The hope was to serve as many children as possible, but unfortunately the intensity of this community's need makes the playground oversubscribed. Creche director Behie Gjakova reports that she is forced to keep the gate locked "because too many children would come, and it would be destroyed. This playground is the nicest thing in the creche."

Reflections

Parents bring their children to creche because they believe they will be better cared for and educated:

> *"The older was brought up at home, with the TV and looking at Grandma's back as she was doing chores in the kitchen. The development of the second who goes to day care is beyond comparison with that of the first. She is better behaved, more organized, more self-responsible, more careful, more skilled, more linguistically active, and empathic."*
>
> —Arta Likollari, parent

In every country where it has been introduced, Step by Step has looked beyond short-term emergency interventions to develop partnerships with government and other agencies and encourage policy reform. In Albania the municipality has started restructuring creche education and is demanding radical reform. So far 21 of Tirana's 29 creches have been reconstructed. The municipality encourages trainings with different donors, has introduced staff-development policies, and welcomes the contributions of NGOs to implementing advanced practices for infant and toddler development. It has hired a psychologist and aims to bring social workers into the creche system. Local government is setting up a new educational structure that will address more needs for children from ages one through 18. Step by Step has successfully trained local education professionals through the local training teams for pre- and primary schools, who now regard the maintenance of good standards as part of their job. Expanding this system would perpetuate and institutionalize government training of caregivers in child-centered methodology. Step by Step has also recognized the need for pre-service and advanced/university certification to support professional development.

In Albania, Step by Step has created new models replicable within the existing education system that promote child-centered methodology, educate children in the qualities of democratic citizenship, and seek to empower communities to build a strong civil society. And so it is, three years after Step by Step withdrew direct support, that the Kombinat creche is still applying Step by Step methodology. There is still a long way to go. It is often hard for caregivers, especially those trained as nurses, to reconceptualize their role as educators. Despite these challenges, the caregivers in Kombinat creche have made gigantic steps toward child-centered practice. The Albania case study showed clearly that some aspects of the methodology need more reinforcement, but there is no turning back:

"When we heard what was asked of us during the training, we thought that we couldn't make it. But we got better step by step, and now it's impossible for us to go back to the old style."

> *"When we heard what was asked of us during the training, we thought that we couldn't make it—it was so much more than what we were used to doing! But we got better step by step, and now it's impossible for us to go back to the old style."*
>
> —Behie Gjakova, director of Kombinat creche

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Gerda Sula and Milika Dhamo, *AHA! So Children Learn in Creches! The Application of Step by Step Child-Centered Methodology in an Albanian Creche*.

The Family School: Parent Education in Armenia

Case Study Researchers: Gayane Terzyan, Yerevan State Pedagogical College, and Luiza Militosyan, PhD, Yerevan Linguistic University

"The most difficult profession is to be a parent." —Lala Soukiasyan, parent from Martuny, Armenia

Introduction

Qaraglukh is a small and ancient village in Armenia where fewer and fewer children are born every year. There is no kindergarten. Villagers took part in a Step by Step pilot program to implement an innovative curriculum designed to help families prepare their kindergarten-age children for school. This case study focuses on the implementation of the Step by Step pilot parent education project in Qaraglukh, and also notes the effects of parent seminars in Yerevan and Martuny. It examines key policy issues related to reaching children and families outside of preschool, including the preparation for schooling by parents and families, the role of kindergartens in supporting home-based child development and providing support for young mothers, cooperation and collaboration among donors and other partners, and the ability of Step by Step to influence national policy through good program results.

Reaching Out in Qaraglukh

Gohar Poghossyan walks along the village street. Children playing on the edge of the road see her from a distance and run toward her.

"Hello, hello!" they greet her warmly.

"She is our teacher," one of the children explains to his friend. "She also teaches our mothers."

"Your teacher? Or your mother's teacher?" the friend asks, disbelieving.

"Both mine and my mother's," the first child says proudly.

"Mothers don't have a teacher!" the friend confidently objects.

"They do! Ask Mrs. Gohar," comes the reply.

The village Qaraglukh is located in the Armenian marz (district) of Vayk, on the southern side of the Vardenis Mountains. Some old dwellings from the fifth century still stand—the church, St. Mamas, was built in 1230. Today, the village has 220 farms and 930 residents. Many families survive on money sent by a family member working abroad, mostly in Russia. There are 184

pupils in the local school: 21 in tenth grade but only 15 in the first. The village has never had a kindergarten. The building that was constructed in 1996 to be a kindergarten was instead made available to villagers as apartments.

The village is not far from the town Yeghegnadzor, but the bus only goes there once a day: it leaves the village in the morning and comes back in the evening. Armenia is a small country, but the territory is very rocky and steep. Even small distances can be too far. This is the reason there are so many Armenian dialects that not only sound so different but that vary also in vocabulary and structure. Kindergarten No. 5 in Yeghegnadzor is a model Step by Step center and an outreach partner in the pilot parent education project. Step by Step educators decided to deliver the training in the village, as they knew it was difficult for parents with little children to leave home for the whole day. The lessons were conducted at the village school.

"My husband is from Qaraglukh," says

Gohar Poghossyan, who is also the director of Kindergarten No.5. "I know the situation there very well. There is no kindergarten in that village and this is why we implemented our first outreach program there. The school principal was very happy, because the children there start school with a very poor knowledge of literary language and they speak in the local dialect. In the year we offered the parent education program there, 12 out of 15 first-graders' mothers participated and we looked forward to a good first class at the school. The life in the village is very difficult. There is a lot to do for the household. But it's gratifying to see how those overloaded women make time for their children, what interesting work they bring and show at each seminar. Parents were inspired, therefore the results were good."

And mothers who participated in the program were enthusiastic: "These seminars helped me a lot," says Shoushan Amiryan, "especially the materials. I used to teach my boy numbers and letters, but now I do it in a more organized way and the methodology is interesting—teaching through play. Now I know what I should do, how I should do it, and in what order. My boy often brings his friends home, demonstrates the materials, and teaches his friends."

"We had heard a lot about the kindergarten in Yeghegnadzor that worked with the Step by Step Program," says Yether Michaelyan, another mother in the program. "My neighbor's grandchild attends there and my son was very interested. He often asked me: 'Mum, why don't I go to kindergarten?'

When we began to participate in those seminars, my son was happy that the teachers from Ellen's kindergarten would come and teach him. The program materials helped us very much. I learned that I could combine teaching with my daily work. We have serious problems trying to turn from dialect to literary language. Children, of course, understand literary language, but they speak dialect at home. We have been working with our children the whole year. It will be interesting to see the results of our work once they go to school."

"This program also inspired me so much," Gohar Poghossyan adds, "because children in our villages are deprived of so many things and the social conditions are very poor. When children happen to see me in the village, they feel happy. 'Our teacher is coming,' they say."

Preschools in Armenia

Education has traditionally enjoyed high prestige in Armenia. By 1988 an extensive network of preschool institutions included 1,255 nursery schools and kindergartens enrolling 44.2 percent of all eligible children.

Social and political changes since 1988 had a huge impact on the educational system of the country, resulting in a diminished capacity to provide preschool education. The earthquake of 1988 was also a heavy blow, destroying 277 schools that accommodated more than 100,000 students.

Above all, however, the decline of preschools in Armenia can be attributed to the 1996 policy decision to decentralize education and place preschools under the supervision of local government. With this policy move, the extensive network of preschool institutions established during Soviet times was lost. The number of kindergartens sharply decreased, as did child enrollment in all preschool institutions. In many communities, the very survival of preschool education was threatened. By the year 2000, the number of children enrolled in kindergartens was less than half of enrollment in 1990.

The Pilot Parent Education Project

In 2002 the Ministry of Education in Armenia approved a broad program of parent education that included the establishment of regional resource centers. The government and UNICEF initiated a pilot parent education project in five communities of Gegharkunik marz. Step by Step undertook the Early Learning and Preparation for School component of this project.

In December of 2002, Step by Step in Armenia, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and other partners, began implementing Step by Step's child-

centered model of parent education in several marzes throughout Armenia. The project aimed to help parents whose preschool-age children did not attend kindergartens prepare their children for school. The hope was that children would reach school age not only healthy and well nourished, but intellectually curious, socially confident, and equipped with a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

The content of the materials was based upon existing Step by Step child-centered curricula and classroom activities. Age-specific sets of parent materials as well as a series of developmentally appropriate child activities and workbooks were created with support from an international early childhood expert, Cassie Landers. In addition, a four-day training workshop was designed, both to introduce trainers to the materials and to focus on how to work with parents and children.

The project was implemented through the 11 Step by Step training centers. Twenty-two experienced Step by Step teachers were selected to participate. They attended the initial training course and continued with on-site follow-up observations.

The project had a large geographic coverage: six kindergartens and five primary schools in four marzes. In the first 10 months 416 caregivers were trained, but the project's influence was wide: participants frequently passed the seminar materials on to their neighbors, relatives, and friends. Since the project included children of different age groups (five to seven), as well as different learning abilities and backgrounds, parents were trained to expand or simplify the assignments to adapt them to the diverse needs of their children.

To monitor project progress, and to identify challenges faced by the parents and provide them with timely assistance, the trainers introduced the Parent's Monthly Feedback sheet, Trainer's Notes for Group Meetings, and End of Year sheets for recording the children's achievements.

Mothers' Clubs

In Qaraglukh, the parent seminars effectively became "mothers' clubs." These were especially successful in rural areas, where opportunities for information and communication are limited. Young women particularly looked forward to the seminar and consultation days. They had noticed an interesting change: they spoke about different things. "Before, the most interesting theme of my talk with my neighbors was discussion of the events of the last series of a soap opera," says one mother. "Now we talk much more about our children and their success in learning."

Mothers in Yerevan and Martuny also flocked to the parent seminars. Suzanna Chibukhchyan, director of Kindergarten No. 184 in Yerevan, explains that despite their different backgrounds, all seminar participants believe that children who do not attend kindergarten desperately need

preparation before starting school. "They became a community that shares the same concerns," Chibukhchyan says. "Most of the parents come to seminars and consultancies with their children. They bring the children, so that they can communicate with the children of the same age, play and interact with them. Children attend with pleasure. 'Today is our kindergarten day,' they say."

Tamara Farmanyan, a mother from the town of Martuny, comments: "Before, my husband never spent time with children, played with them or read books… he did not consider it to be something to be done by a man. He used to come home from his work tired and just lie down on the sofa and watch TV. However, now, when the children ask him, he helps them, he participates. First, he got angry when I was attending the seminars. 'Why should a woman be out for four hours? What were you doing there all that time?' Now he feels comfortable with that. He likes the program."

Ani Ohanyan, also from Martuny, says, "We have formed a sort of mothers' club. The manager gives advice just like a friend, a mother. When we learn something new, we want to change ourselves. When we get out of our houses and have contact with each other we feel more relaxed and more comfortable."

"I can get lots of advice from these seminars," says Martuny mom Lala Sukiassyan. "Not only on education, but also

on childcare, health, and interfamily relations. Even my husband has noticed that I have changed and that I became more tolerant and friendly."

Developing the Content

During a meeting with the authors of the Step by Step parent education program, parents evaluated the program materials and offered a number of interesting suggestions. They wanted more puzzles and math assignments, and more songs and poems. They thought the modules should include activities with scissors. They also wanted material to be developed for younger children.

As the material relies heavily on stories, parents felt that short, adapted texts with big letters were necessary so that children could learn to recognize letters. They also recommended that it might be useful to skip one episode in a picture story and let children complete it on their own, thinking out the missing part of the plot. Parents suggested that the readings include stories about school in order to introduce children to school before that scary first day. And they thought texts about the world, environment, and events surrounding the children would be interesting and educational.

Example of a Workshop to Prepare Teacher Facilitators Who Will Work with Parents

Introduction

- An Introduction to Child Development for Parents
- Principles Underlying Home-Based Curriculum
- Basic Principles of Adult Learning
- Building Effective Partnerships with Families
- Parents' Expectations for Children's School Readiness

Curriculum: Introduction and Overview

- Teachers' Expectations (Standards) for School Readiness
- Developmental Domains Profile
- Introduction to the Curriculum Materials
- Principles Underlying Curriculum
- Overview of Monthly Themes
- Activity: Small Group Work—General Review of Months One to Three
- Matching Exercise: School Readiness Expectations and Month One Activities
- Small Group Work: What a Child Learns
  - What Does this Activity Communicate to Parents?
  - How Might You Extend/Adapt the Activity?
  - What Problems Might Be Anticipated?
- Summary: Guidelines Emerging from Small Group Work
  - Characteristics of Effective Parent Facilitators
  - Skills of Effective "Parents as Teachers"

Curriculum Review and Development

- Conducting Parent Groups: Facilitation Skills
- Parent Group Session Planning Guide
  - Group Work: Monthly Planning Guides—Months One, Two, Three
- Gallery Walk: Session Planning Guides (cont.)
- Songs and Poems: Identification and Activities
- Plenary Brainstorm: What to Do about Handwriting
- Common Problems in Early Learning
  - Pair Work Vignettes
- Parent Tip Sheets: Behavioral and Learning Issues in Early Childhood
- Project Planning and Management
- Designing Your Program: Project Planning Process
  - Who, What, Where, When, and How?
  - Materials Development
- Monitoring and Evaluation Instruments
  - Family/Child Enrollment Form
  - Parent Feedback Form
  - Facilitator Feedback Form
  - Child Assessment Form
- Project Administration and Coordination
- Summary and Reflection

Policy Change and Systemic Effects

According to Ruzanna Tsarukyan, director of the Step by Step Benevolent Foundation, there is now effective cooperation with the Ministry of Education (MOE). "The parent education program is officially recognized by the MOE and was included in the *State Program for Education Development, 2001–2005*," she says. "The

Example of a Monthly Activity Module for a Parent Seminar
How to Use Learning Materials to Prepare Your Child for School

	Month 1 Theme	Activity
Literacy Activities	**Recognize letters**	• Learn the letters in the names of various family members • Game: "Matching Letters" • Read the picture together • Make a book together • Look for letters everywhere • Read a poem together
Math Activities	**Count, write, recognize, and present numbers 1–10**	• Find the matching cards • Read the picture together • Grouping the cards • Pick them up • Game: "Numbers All Around the House"
How to Teach	• **How to work with the materials** • **Keeping track** (every month fill in the calendar-diary with the child) • **How to make these activities useful for *your* child** (tips on how to adapt them to the child's age and capacity) • **Final thoughts**	

Ministry also encourages the application of Step by Step methodology and the creation child-centered classrooms."

An important achievement of the parent education project is that the 11 training centers have become community education centers, operating—like the "mothers' club" in Qaraglukh—as havens for often isolated parents. Family members come to the centers for more than learning: they discuss many personal, family, and social issues with each other and the trainers. Especially in rural areas, such "clubs" address serious issues of isolation faced by young women who do not work outside the home. The seminars also helped many parents develop skills for self-discovery and self-realization as well as parenting. One of the mothers reports that while she was working on a drawing with her own child she discovered that she could draw well. Now she volunteers in a kindergarten to teach drawing. Very significantly, notes Ruzanna Tsarukyan: "Project participants testify to tangible changes that have taken place in their mentality, behavior, and attitudes. Most of them note that, as a result of this project, they think differently now and communicate with children differently."

The Ministry of Education and Science also evaluated the results of the pilot project, concluding that the project "supported state policy through promoting access to quality education and extending a high level of services to a vulnerable population." The project, in turn, has had its impact on the educational system—the project materials and methodology are borrowed and used by other educational institutions.

Reflections

Innovative and participatory approaches to early childhood schooling such as the parent education project provide flexible policy options. Universal state provision of preschools is, in any case, not achievable in the near future. Expensive, privatized alternatives are not the only options left for parents and communities. The experience in Armenia demonstrates that parents and families themselves, with the right guidance and support, are a huge and largely undertapped resource for preparing children for school and for meeting early childhood development needs.

This article was prepared by Hugh McLean, based on the full-length case study by Gayane Terzyan and Luiza Militosyan, *Preparing Children for School: Parental Education in Armenia*.

Step by Step to Survival: Saving Bobek Kindergarten in Kazakhstan

Case Study Researcher: Zhumagul Taszhurekova, PhD, Master Teacher Trainer, Community Foundation Step by Step

"Who said we are unable to change the situation for the better? Our kindergarten must operate despite the constraints!"

—Olga Kotorova, Director of Bobek Kindergarten, Talgar, Kazakhstan, when faced with the closure of her school

A Kindergarten Faces Extinction

Bobek Kindergarten, located in one of the most deprived areas of Talgar, was for many years attended by hundreds of children from different ethnic groups, often from vulnerable communities. A Step by Step model school since 1996, Bobek, or Kindergarten #2, was thriving, with 200 pupils a year and active, engaged parents. But when government support for preschools throughout Kazakhstan was withdrawn in 1999, the kindergarten was threatened with total closure.

With the sudden loss of government funding, Kazakhstan preschools began to flounder. In Talgar alone, 24 of its 26 preschools closed their doors. From 1992 to 1998 Kindergarten #2 had received state funding. In 1996, it was reborn as Bobek Step by Step Kindergarten with funding from both the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan and the state. But now Bobek Kindergarten was faced with extinction. In order to stay open without state support, its only hope was to look for contributions from parents and the local community.

Olga Kotorova, the school's dynamic and tireless director, appealed to local authorities for support, but with no success. She appealed to the parent community as well, but at first her pleas fell on indifferent ears. It was difficult for parents to understand—or face—the severity of the situation. What was to be done?

Historical Background: Preschool Education in Transition

Since the declaration of Kazakhstan independence in 1991, political transition has had a huge impact on the national preschool education system. During the 1990s, Kazakhstan was faced with enormous social change and economic upheaval. With unemployment running at 50 percent, families and communities were placed under severe economic and emotional stress. The impact of these changes on ordinary people and vulnerable communities can be seen in the case of Bobek Kindergarten.

Prior to independence, a strong public preschool system in Kazakhstan played a key role in both the socialization of children and the development of civic awareness among parents of the values of education. Access to preschool services was practically unlimited. About 30,000 preschool institutions operated, serving a population of

20 million people. "Before the closure of kindergartens, children aged five to seven were properly prepared for schooling," comments primary school teacher Aiman Abraimova. But the economic destabilization caused by transition led to the closure of numerous kindergartens. The Republic of Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science reported that between 1992 and 2000, the preschool network was reduced by 85 percent. Although local government was vested with the power to implement social reform, it lacked sufficient funds to do so.

International funding has been crucial to supporting the Kazakhstan education system through this transition period. NGOs such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Eurasia Foundation have made considerable contributions, as have government agencies like the British Council. The Soros Foundation Kazakhstan was also a leading contributor to the early childhood development sector in Kazakhstan. In 1997, the Step by Step Program helped many preschools avoid closure and destruction.

The case study explored how the Bobek Kindergarten director and her team, equipped with problem-solving skills from Step by Step methodology, responded to impending school closure and challenging circumstances of economic and social deprivation.

The Bobek Kindergarten Story

Despite the support of Step by Step, without state funding Bobek Kindergarten was faced with closure. Yet Bobek endured and became an exemplary story of survival in a nation that saw preschool after preschool die. How did Bobek beat these daunting odds?

The case study explored how the Bobek Kindergarten director and her team, equipped with problem-solving skills from Step by Step methodology, responded to impending school closure and challenging circumstances of economic and social deprivation. Through research based on one-on-one interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, and community members, the case study explored the survival strategies and documented the measures that enabled this valuable kindergarten to keep its doors open—and indeed, to expand its mission to provide care and services to families most at risk.

Steps to Survival: Measures Taken to Tackle the Problem

Bobek Kindergarten was fortunate to have a passionate, persuasive, and persistent director: Olga Kotorova. Undeterred by the many obstacles, and with the support of Step by Step, she eventually motivated families to contribute their time and energy to keeping the school open. But the road to success was long and rocky, with difficult curves along the way.

No state assistance

Before approaching parents, Kotorova looked for external support. After being turned down by the local authorities, she approached the Oblast Department of Education and Ministry of Education. But that effort too was in vain.

Parents

When Kotorova turned to the parent community, their first reactions were discouraging. According to a questionnaire completed by the parents of children at Bobek preschool, 70 percent believed that the only way to keep the kindergarten open was with the support of the local authorities. Another 20 percent believed that there was no way at all. Fortunately, however, some parents were willing to assist Kotorova in her effort to save the school. A small group, 10 percent, proposed strategies. A full 15 percent were willing to actively contribute to the operation of the kindergarten.

Teachers and staff

Teachers and staff confronted a problem: should they leave and find another job, or take the risk of staying on and trying to do something for the survival of the school on a volunteer basis? Four people chose to stay on. With Kotorova's leadership, this team of staff and parents planned to establish a parent fund for 18 to 20 children and three or four employees.

Community and media cooperation

Working with Step by Step, these parents and staff organized television coverage

to advertise the kindergarten. This TV coverage, which reported on the Step by Step Program and the activities of Bobek Kindergarten, raised a great deal of interest within the city and local community. Small and medium-sized local businesses offered to donate specific services, such as providing the school with heating facilities, food, and linen. Cooperation with the media and the support of local community businesses proved two vital keys to success.

Step by Step Kazakhstan

According to Olga Kotorova, her most crucial move was deciding to approach Step by Step for help. "My first move was to appeal to Dina Aidzhanova, director of Community Foundation Step by Step, as our collaboration with Step by Step has always been fruitful," she says. "And again they did not frustrate my plans. They contributed a secondhand automobile to deliver food and other necessities to the kindergarten, shared their didactic materials with us, found volunteers, discussed our need for support with USAID and other stakeholders, and met with our parents and community leaders."

The combined efforts of all these groups—the moral and material support of the Step by Step team and the hard work and dedication of teachers, parents, and director—were successful. Against all odds, Bobek Kindergarten survived.

Working with the Community: the Family Resource Center

The kindergarten had been saved—but mere survival wasn't enough. Disturbed by the critical needs of the families in the community who were unable to send their children to kindergarten, teachers, parents, and the Step by Step team developed an innovative program initiative called Working with the Community. The goal was to help the Step by Step team, teachers, parents, and representatives of the community address the needs of at-risk children. The project aimed at community mobilization, social partnership, and volunteer participation to promote community interests.

With a small amount of external start-up funding, Bobek renovated an unused area of the kindergarten into a Family Resource Center. Some community members were trained in Step by Step methodology; a small library for the purpose of parent education was set up; psychological and pedagogical consulting and family visits were organized; joint celebrations of holidays and achievements were arranged. In 2004, Biorn and Vera Kal Varsen, a Swedish family, bought a sewing machine for the kindergarten and offered some financial sponsorship.

Today, the activities of the center are many, and continue to expand. They include a Step by Step parent-education library, home visits, group activities for young children, and celebrations. The center now provides early-learning opportunities for 25 families with children from ages two to six.

Parents report that the Family Resource Center is extremely important, as it enables them to participate in the social and cultural life of the kindergarten together with their children. The kindergarten teachers conduct classes and consultations on a voluntary basis with the children and the parents, alongside other kinds of educational services.

Attending the Family Resource Center reduces parents' social isolation and provides them with an opportunity to communicate and exchange knowledge and experience. It promotes social networks,

provides emotional and psychological comfort, and encourages an optimistic view of life that parents communicate to their children. As preschool networks expand and children's clubs and sports facilities are established, parents build stronger social ties and feel increasingly empowered. Family Resource Center activities have challenged and changed the stereotypes of both categories of parents: the jobless and those who are more or less economically and socially secure.

Currently the Family Resource Center is regularly attended by about 25 parents from poor unemployed families—among them single mothers, alcoholics, and drug addicts. The families are struggling financially, and therefore experience feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and social and cultural prejudice. Many have lost self-confidence and no longer believe in their own potential. In consequence, it is natural that their children also suffer from various mental and physical ailments and emotional disturbances. These parents say that they highly appreciate the Family Resource Center activities and the role of the kindergarten in the community.

"I never ever understood, nor did I try to understand, the constraints faced by poor families. I thought that they themselves were the source of their grievances. In the kindergarten, I saw how the Family Resource Center helps these 'lost' people gradually change and become capable of resolving their vital problems independently."

—Father of Alisher Marimov, a child attending the kindergarten

"For a long time I did not feel useful for anybody," comments Anna Borovikova, who frequently attends the Family Resource Center with her two children. "This Center has had a positive impact on my outlook. I understand now how important I am for my children."

Through contacts established with other parents whose children attend the kindergarten, Borovikova found a job. Several other unemployed parents found employment through parent networks established at the Center.

Furthermore, through the Family Resource Center, parents of children from more economically and socially secure circumstances became aware of the difficulties faced by less advantaged members of their communities, and developed greater empathy and understanding for their situations. "I never ever understood, nor did I try to understand, the constraints faced by poor families," comments the father of Alisher Marimov, a child attending the kindergarten. "I thought that they themselves were the source of their grievances. In the kindergarten, I saw how the Family Resource Center helps these 'lost' people gradually change and become capable of resolving their vital problems independently."

At a joint holiday celebration for both the children attending the kindergarten and those from the Family Resource Center, the children from different backgrounds played together with enthusiasm. The children who attend the Family Resource Center have become more self-confident, open, and cheerful, and the kindergarten children have become friendlier and more empathic toward their less fortunate peers.

Parents and teachers describe the Center as a small island of joy and happiness. Children have responded to an environment where they are cared for and respected.

The most profound and unanticipated benefit of the program has been its impact on parents. Parents are actively involved. Even fathers were seen mending old furniture and making toys. "I am thankful to my neighbors whose children attend the kindergarten," one parent comments. "It was they who invited me to come to the Center. For the first time in many years, I feel useful and important to my children."

An Ongoing Success Story

Two key factors contributed to the survival and ongoing success story of Bobek Kindergarten:

- The role played by motivated individuals, parents, and communities.
- The role played by Step by Step philosophy.

Motivated individuals, parents, and communities

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the role played by one dynamic individual, Olga Kotorova, the kindergarten director. Her maxim—"Who said we are unable to

change the situation for the better?"—has been key to her strategies and tactics in the heroic effort to keep the kindergarten going.

In interviews, Kotorova's colleagues, Bobek parents, and the Step by Step team members stressed her optimism, determination, and commitment. These personal traits would not let her take the same path as other kindergartens in the town that had been refused funding in those most difficult years, and showed how one individual can make a difference by inspiring and supporting colleagues and a community to overcome apparently insurmountable obstacles. Leading by example, she motivated the people around her to seek means and ways out of the situation.

Of equal importance is the contribution of parents who wanted to preserve the kindergarten for the benefit of their own children. In this context, the combined forces of parents and community form a vital part of the social infrastructure, capable of facilitating change and community development.

Step by Step philosophy

Dina Aidzhanova, director of Community Foundation Step by Step, attributed much of Bobek Kindergarten's success to the joint efforts of children, teachers, and parents. She stressed the role of the Step by Step methodology as a crucial, solid foundation, providing the skills needed to face unexpected, severe challenges. These skills included parent participation in the teaching and learning process, closer communication between the kindergarten and the community, and the active involvement of community members in the resolution of issues both specific to the preschool and important to the wider external community and society.

Reflection

Today, Talgar's economy is improving: new jobs are emerging in small and medium businesses and in agriculture. The strengthening local economy should improve the economic security of families and communities, and revive interest in the possibility of sustaining and developing preschool education.

Bobek Kindergarten is also more secure. The administration has restored 20 jobs, and has re-employed former teachers and staff. In 2002, the kindergarten was down to 50 children. Today, there are 100. Yet the school remains without government funding and is financially supported only by parents and the community. Salaries of teachers and staff are inadequate. Times remain hard—but the mutual respect, support, and partnership among the staff, parents, and Step by Step team help Bobek Kindergarten continue to survive.

This case study demonstrates how the Step by Step methodology on which the activities of Bobek Kindergarten have been based since 1996 has substantively changed the thinking and convictions of many community members, notably their attitude to events taking place in their communities. Bobek Kindergarten has become the center of cultural and social life of the area. Through shared cooperation among the Step by Step team, teachers, parents, and members of the public, the joint educational project of the Family Resource Center and Bobek Kindergarten is rendering aid to the most vulnerable population in the area and asserting their civil right to quality education.

"I enjoy the friendly atmosphere, cozy environment, and the teacher's desire to help our children. We parents learn to communicate, share grievances and achievements, and help our children. It seems to me that adults also learn to live a new life and hope for a better future."

— Anna Borovikova, who frequently attends the Family Resource Center with her two children

Or, to give the last word to Bobek parent Anna Borovikova: "I enjoy the friendly atmosphere, cozy environment, and the teachers' desire to help our children. We parents learn to communicate, share grievances and achievements, and help our children. It seems to me that adults also learn to live a new life and hope for a better future."

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Zhumagul Taszhurekova, *Bobek Kindergarten in Kazakhstan: Keys to Survival.*

A Place for Everyone: The Children's Creative Center in Skopje, Macedonia

Case Study Researchers: Atina Tasevska, Educational Coordinator, and Darko Marchevski, Roma Educational Initiative Coordinator, Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives (FECIM) Step by Step

Kristijan's Story

"Kristijan told me he would like to draw. He took my hand and pulled me to the art studio. I sat close to him, but he ordered, 'Give me some paper! Give me the brown color … now give me the black one.' I noticed that my new friend held his head very close to the paper—only a few centimeters away. I did not know the reason. I wanted to warn him that this could be bad for him, but I stopped at the last moment. After some time, he raised his head. He had made the most beautiful sketch of a lion I have ever seen. Kristijan simply stood up and left the art studio very confidently. I asked the teacher to tell me about Kristijan and I discovered he is seven, and that he only has 20 percent vision in one eye and no vision at all in the other. My respect for him grew. I felt that everything would be all right with little Kristijan. In spite of his physical handicap, his soul is obviously strong and untouched, and will keep him together in life."

—Miroslav Stojanovic, art instructor

A Snapshot

The Step by Step Children's Creative Center in Skopje is alive with the sound of children playing games, visiting houses, and taking "trips" to different cities in Macedonia.

A child enters one of many model dwellings—perhaps the Indian *tipi* or the African village hut or the Roma caravan. She is transported, making discoveries through role-play: "I live there, sleep and cook there," she says. Other children cram into the modern Macedonian house: "It is beautiful… my house doesn't have many things and this modern house has different things to see and play with," a girl says excitedly. Another group enters a traditional Muslim home for the very first time. "I have only seen it in the movies; it is the first time I got to go into this kind of house," says one child. Another observes, "This house is different from mine; here you sit on the floor, not on a chair, and it is so colorful." Children are fascinated by the experience: "Every house is different," one small boy says eagerly, "and you learn many different things, different music and traditions."

A group of Roma children on a visit supported by the Open Society Institute's Roma Educational Initiative (REI) are singing and smiling as they learn about three different towns in Macedonia, Skopje, Ohrid, and Tetovo. "Look at how different Skopje looks and sounds in Macedonian, Albanian, Turk, and Romani!" a child cries out in delight.

As the children leave the model dwellings they enter an art studio where they draw, paint, and work on projects in a variety of media, including paper, paint, and clay. Many choose to create replicas of the amazing homes they just visited.

Parents at the Center—some of whom are visiting Skopje for the first time—are pleased that their children are meeting

new friends from other cities, including "children of other nationalities." The children, one mother says, "learn about different cultures" and have an "opportu-

nity to see children who are different from them—and even very young ones learn the main cities of the country." In the Center "all children are together," comments a parent, noting Macedonia's mix of cultures and ethnicities. "The multiethnic parts

The Children's Creative Center is "a place where children can develop their creativity and learn new things about the different cultures in Macedonia."

here are very precious."

The children also appreciate the diversity they find at the Center. "Here we have a chance to play with different children, and we don't have conflicts—there are no fights," one boy says happily.

The Children's Creative Center: A Living Interactive Museum

Opened in 1997, the Skopje Children's Creative Center is the only children's museum in the international Step by Step network. It has successfully implemented Step by Step philosophy in an informal environment. For these reasons the Center provided a unique opportunity to evaluate the impact on children of participation in child-centered creative play activities. As described in its project proposal, the Center is:

> *a place where children can develop their creativity and learn new things about the different cultures in Macedonia. They learn about other places and cultures, about our old customs through play and conversation in the old village and city houses. They learn how to behave in a different environment and become aware of the characteristics of the country they live in. They get to know the structure of the population and how many languages are spoken in Macedonia. Here they become aware of the diversities of the everyday world in which they live.*

The case study utilized a number of information-gathering methods, including focus groups, in-person interviews, and questionnaires.

Housed in the Youth Cultural Center, the Children's Creative Center is a large building of approximately 1,000 square meters (almost 11,000 square feet), with a big outside courtyard. Entering through a dim empty foyer, visitors go up to the second floor and encounter a huge, colorful wall inviting the young ones to experience an entirely new world, built just for

them. Bright color is everywhere, from green and yellow dinosaurs painted on the windows to a basketball court outlined in red. Tables and chairs are set up for snacks and drinks.

When children enter the first exhibit area, called Dwellings—the model homes visited by the eager children described above—they learn that not all children live the same way. The exhibit, originally named Celebrating Our Differences, was financed with a grant from the Balkan

Children and Youth Foundation. To their left is a traditional Macedonian house with furnishings used in the past and present. Across the way is a traditional Muslim house, very colorful with a large terrace. As they wander, children discover a modern house, a cart, a cave displaying rock art, a Mongolian *ger*, a traditional Native American Indian *tipi*, and an African shelter full of interesting facts. Wall displays represent people from different cultures and parts of the world.

The Planetarium area includes a mock-up of a television studio, a computer center, and a small library. The Art Studio is packed with interesting materials and all children are encouraged to experiment. On a Stage volunteers from the Faculty of Arts and Drama at Skopje introduce children to theater. In the Greenmarket area children use weights and measures in their shopping, then compute the cost of their fictional purchases on a cash register. In one corner of the market an enclosure, designed for small children between the ages of two and four, is filled with big sponges in different colors and shapes, intended to accustom them to basic geometric shapes and help develop their motor skills.

Development of the Children's Creative Center

Step by Step was introduced into Macedonia in 1994. In 1999, the Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives (FECIM) Step by Step, a non-profit nongovernmental organization, was established to ensure the development and implementation of high-quality education programs to which all children have equal access. Since starting with 18 classrooms in 10 kindergartens in 1994, Step by Step has evolved to include more than 600 classrooms in 84 primary schools and has delivered extensive training activities throughout Macedonia.

In the spring of 1996, the Step by Step team organized a 10-day exhibition in the Skopje Museum, presenting children's drawings along with work by parents and teachers. The exhibition was an enormous success, attracting some 6,000 visitors. Parents and children enjoyed and valued the experience and asked for more. At the same time, the Step by Step team was concerned about the small number of Macedonian children enrolled in preschool. Public kindergartens in Macedonia could only accommodate about 20 percent of the preschool population; the remaining 80 percent did not attend preschool at all, either because of economic hardship or because there simply weren't enough kindergartens. Hoping both to build on the success of the exhibition and to increase educational opportunities for young children, the Step by Step team envisioned "an interactive learning-through-play environment" open to all children, "not only the children going to kindergarten." Their vision was that the development of a Children's Creative Center would be a way to support these types of learning opportunities for all children in Macedonia.

The Open Society Institute (OSI) provided 50 percent of the initial funding for the Children's Creative Center for the first three years. The other 50 percent was provided by the Youth Cultural Center, which had a long tradition of providing creative activities for young people, but had suffered a dramatic loss of resources during Macedonia's political transition. The Children's Creative Center opened in 1997 with a mission to provide:

> *…a unique informal educational environment that welcomes all children from our multicultural country, from every neighborhood and different family background; and, to be a place where the children are valued and encouraged to participate in exhibitions that educate, engage, inspire, and entertain.*

The Relationship between the Children's Creative Center, Step by Step, and the Macedonian Educational System

Since 2001, all Center funding, including salaries, building rental, maintenance, and utilities, has been provided by the Ministry of Culture, supplemented by ticket fees and facility rentals. Recently, "funding has become a huge problem," Center officials say, due to the limited resources available from the Ministry. The unstable economy means corporate sponsorship is not yet a possibility.

Step by Step continues to "set the educational direction" for the Center while maintaining connections with local schools and parents. In order to help address the funding shortfall, FECIM Step by Step ensures that "all grant applications include an effort to bring children into the Center."

An example of this approach was provided by Step by Step's response to the refugee crisis during the NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia, when staff used the Center to welcome and provide organized activities for children from the refugee camps. Programs to help children and parents cope with stress were developed for families displaced from their homes.

The Center has provided a model to establish similar centers in Tetovo, Gostivar, and Radovis in cooperation with the Mott Foundation and Save the Children–UK. The Roma Education Initiative, funded by OSI Budapest, has incorporated visits to the Center by groups of Roma children and their teachers. The Step by Step team's work with parents has included a range of well-attended workshops and seminars with such titles as How to Be Better Parents and Improved Communication as a Means of Enhancing Parenthood Skills.

What Happens in the Center: Activities and Impact

Cece's Story

Twelve-year-old Cece, now in sixth grade, started visiting the Center when she was six. The Center "has influenced Cece's development enormously, " comments her mother. "She is an only child, and here she has found many new friends." Cece learned to make origami at the Center and the quality of her work led the staff to encourage her to share her skill with others. She now teaches origami workshops every Wednesday with the help of her mother. Cece says:

"As a very young girl I wanted to become a teacher and my wish has come true. I want to share my knowledge with others. Maybe, when I grow up, I will be a teacher. I think that children and parents in my workshops learn how to make origami figures, but the children also enjoy the presence of other children. They make new friends. My students sometimes show me new origami figures they have made at home, so I learn from them. We learn together!"

The bright and colorful Children's Creative Center is equipped with materials unavailable in many kindergartens or schools. Many kindergartens have "very small activity rooms," making it difficult

"for children to move and develop skills… to touch things or play with toys," one teacher comments. The Center's large size provides children and teachers with "plenty of space to improve on the work we do at the kindergarten. There are art, multiethnic, drama, motor skills, and literacy activities." Experiences at the Center expand on what children have learned at school: "They can touch things, make different creations, and their cognitive and creative skills are stimulated." The activities incorporate many areas outlined in the curricula and after visiting, children identify topics in which they are interested: "They ask for it, the children initiate it themselves."

Educators say the Center is a happy place that children enjoy. Through play and

exploration, they explain, children "learn to socialize and to have fun. They learn how to control their behavior in the games with the other children and to make new friends." A Center staff member comments that children experience art, drawing, and drama, all of which are "good for their self-esteem as they have the pleasure of making something on their own." The "visual impact of the Center stimulates them to ask more questions," says a teacher. Children are provided with "different choices, " another

"The Center is a very precious place for all children—it's their kingdom."

teacher adds. "They can create, they can socialize, they feel secure and they feel like it is their place." They learn new perspectives: "The Center fills the cultural gap found in many communities."

Parents stress the Center's importance to their child's socialization. Center staff view "the presence of parents as crucial when the child is playing…it involves them in the learning process."

For one child, who did not attend kindergarten, the Center provided "contact with other children...socialization, and developed her communication skills," her mother says. Another parent describes the effect of being in "a new space with children who speak different languages" on her son: "He learned new words and this inspired him to ask questions and find out new things." Parents agree that their children learn "skills needed for everyday life, like coping with failure and success."

The Center provides a meeting place for teachers and parents involved in the Step by Step Program. "We are working on several topics in our kindergarten in cooperation with the parents and other kindergartens," one teacher explains. "We meet in the Creative Center and we are pleased; the parents become involved in the activities."

Teachers say:

"The Center is a warm and friendly place."

"There are no restrictions and we as educators feel the children are secure and safe there."

"Children get to touch new things and toys they have not seen in their kindergartens."

"Many children are very poor and the Center gives them a chance to play with toys they do not have at home."

"The work children do in the art studio helps to raise their self-confidence…they are valued for something."

"The Center is a good guide for the social, emotional, and cognitive development for all children."

Parents say:

"The Center provides more relaxed time to be with the children."

"Children can express what they really like—their individuality comes into being—they can find their own interest and explore."

"Working with my son has helped to develop my relationship with my child."

"As a parent I could see communication skills developing and a new aspect of their personality emerging."

"This is a way to develop the creativity of children. Usually at home we don't have time or never do it."

"Through drawing, clay work, origami, my son learns patience, precise movements with small things—fine motor skills."

"Children make a choice to meet their own needs."

The Center is a "very safe place to play."

"The painting corner gives children freedom to use materials and have instruction to help

with techniques they didn't have the opportunity to experience at preschool or primary school."

"Patience and tolerance are things children learn a lot here."

"The Center is a very precious place for all children—it's their kingdom."

Taking Stock and Moving Forward

Educators and parents believe the Creative Children's Center is a great asset to Macedonia. Yet the Center faces severe financial struggles that make its mission more difficult to fulfill.

Both teachers and parents note that children are provided with a safe setting in which to meet and interact across different ethnicities and cultural groups. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized and the extent to which it is appreciated cannot be overstated. The Center provides children with activities and encounters not readily available elsewhere in Macedonia, and with opportunities to explore and play in ways not possible either in their homes or at school. The exposure to Macedonian towns and cities they would otherwise not see and the ability to visit and role-play in different dwellings helps to kindle an appreciation of Macedonian culture and history.

However, the Children's Creative Center is being affected negatively by shrinking financial resources. The issue of static exhibits and the need for ongoing refurbishment needs to be addressed to counter the declining attendance. Many parents recognize the need "for more equipment" and for broken equipment to be replaced. They also desire "more frequent changes in content." Staff agree there is a need for new exhibits and continuous refurbishment. Both staff and parents want the Center to expand.

Children are provided with a safe setting in which to meet and interact across different ethnicities and cultural groups. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized and the extent to which it is appreciated cannot be overstated.

The Children's Creative Center has become a resource to thousands of children in Macedonia. According to one Step by Step team member, regardless of the hurdles that the Center must overcome:

"We are continuing the dream. Once, to many people it was unbelievable that a small country like Macedonia could open an informal place for promoting the Step by Step philosophy. The love we carry in ourselves for the Creative Center as well as for all children who love the Center forces us to continue our mission. We will continue to dream and we know our dream will stay true!"

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Atina Tasevska and Darko Marchevski, *Children's Creative Center—A Place for Everyone*.

Step by Step at the Roma Settlement in Jarovnice-Karice, Slovakia

Case Study Researchers: Eva Koncokova, PhDr, Executive Director, Wide Open School Foundation, and Jana Handzelova, PaedDr, Supervisor, State School Inspectorate

"When I told the other teachers I was interested in the integration of Roma children into regular school, they said, 'You must be crazy!' Maybe I was, but I was keen on this new methodology. It brought a new sense of meaning to my teaching." —Maria Lichvarova, Step by Step teacher and social worker

Parents as Teachers

Nine children, ages two to six, are sitting at the table. Their mothers are crowded closely behind them. A big sheet of paper with the week's plan written on it is hanging on the door. One of the mothers is holding a big, colorful picture book. She reads loudly and clearly a Slovak version of the fairytale *Cinderella*. She reads one sentence, and immediately another woman repeats it in the Romani language. The children listen carefully. The mother then asks the children about the content of the fairytale. She checks to see that they understand all the words.

"We wouldn't accomplish anything if the parents themselves didn't want it. It all starts with them."

The mothers gathered for their weekly training session are part of a group of 30 parent volunteers who implement a home-based preschool program for 42 children and their families in the Roma settlement in Jarovnice in eastern Slovakia. At one time Maria Lichvarova, the Step by Step teacher and social worker, taught all the preschool children herself, "but as the number of children and parents increased, I could no longer do it, so we gradually involved the family members," she says. "We wouldn't accomplish anything if the parents themselves didn't want it. It all starts with them."

Education among the Roma Population

The Roma minority in Slovakia has been poorly served by the Slovak educational system. Most Roma children are regularly confronted with linguistic barriers at schools with Slovak (the majority language) or Hungarian as the language of instruction. In a large number of cases, Roma children are tracked into special schools for mentally disabled children based on aptitude or readiness tests given in Slovak, a language that many Roma children do not understand well. The tests also often include references to objects outside the children's experience.

For both these reasons, reform groups see the tests as culturally and linguistically discriminatory.

Approximately 50 percent of 15-year-old Roma students have repeated at least a year of primary school or have finished their formal schooling in special schools for mentally disabled children. According to local sources, the proportion of Roma who went beyond basic education was only 6 percent. In other words, even most of those who obtained basic education did not continue their studies—either at secondary grammar schools, at another type of secondary vocational school, or at apprentice schools.

Without equal opportunity to attend schools of high quality, the Roma face a major obstacle in reaching their full potential in Slovakia. The goal of dedicated individuals like Maria Lichvarova, and of Step by Step in Slovakia, is to help change this situation.

The Wide Open School Foundation

Slovakia's Wide Open School Foundation (WOSF), home of the country's Step by Step Program, started its work in 1994. According to its director, Eva Koncokova, "Our goal was to support preschools having a high proportion of children from less supportive family environments. The Open Society Institute gave us strong support.

Without equal opportunity to attend schools of high quality, the Roma face a major obstacle in reaching their full potential in Slovakia.

This was the beginning of our journey to help Roma children and their families. It was the beginning of Step by Step in Slovakia, in a period of deep social change." WOSF has implemented a variety of educational initiatives in the area of Roma and general education, framed by the following ideas:

- Sensitivity and respect toward the Roma culture and language and the aspirations of the Roma community, with decision-making power in the hands of Roma leaders.
- Equal opportunity in the education system, following legislation eliminating all segregation and discrimination.
- Free, high-quality preschool education for economically disadvantaged children, and curriculum reform connected with the professional development of teachers.
- A comprehensive approach for children from infancy to age 18 and their families, including prevention of school failure; intervention to decrease the dropout rates; and development of mentoring and tutoring for dropouts.
- Implementation of child-centered methods and parent engagement as core principles in the education of children from birth through age 10.
- Inclusion of children with special needs into integrated child-centered settings with appropriate support.

WOSF's communication and cooperation with other beneficiary institutions—particularly the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Roma Communities—has been distinctive. It has reinforced and enhanced the services provided to the Roma community and secured their long-lasting sustainability.

Step by Step in Jarovnice

Jarovnice lies in the valley of the Mala Svinka river surrounded by woods and hayfields in the Presov region of eastern Slovakia. For a long time, the ethnic minority—the Roma—have been the numerical majority. The social conditions of the Roma in Jarovnice are harsh.

For decades, Jarovnice's Roma inhabitants—73 percent of the village's population in 2002—have endured severe hardships. Many of the dwellings in the settlement have consistently been in the worst possible condition; many had poor sanitary facilities, lacked toilets, and were too small for the number of people living there. The 1,566 children under the age of 15 living in the Karice settlement in 2002 had little access to quality education. Unemployment has been a constant, with the unemployment rate reaching 96 percent in 2000. Life has been difficult and dangerous. In 1998, when the Mala Svinka flooded its banks and inundated Karice, it swept away not only property, but the lives of 44 children. The Roma, living in the valley, were battered by the raging water. Slovaks, generally living on higher ground in the village above the valley, escaped the

worst of the flood's devastation.

In the same year as the flood, WOSF started its cooperation with the settlement. It offered the Roma help in improving the educational level of their children. In a short time, WOSF raised funds to build a new Community Center and implemented a multipronged approach to achieve Roma inclusion.

The Community Center

The programs at the Community Center strive to change interethnic relations and to improve life in a multicultural environment by undertaking a comprehensive community approach, emphasizing the local needs of the Karice settlement. The core of the work at the Community Center is the preschool program. The goal is to prepare the Roma children for admission to regular school, and thus end their segregation into special education. The neediest children attend half-day classes in the Community Center building. Other children participate in the home-based preschool program staffed by parent volunteers. In preparing the children for primary school, these preschool programs encourage a more positive attitude toward school and education and have radically changed the learning environments both in the homes and in the community.

Teachers, Roma assistants, and parents are involved in the preschool programs. The teachers work directly with the children, focusing on Slovak language and mathematics. The curriculum covers material that will be on the entry test to regular school (recognition of shapes, vocabulary, etc.) as well as active learning activities typical of the Step by Step curriculum. Children who would otherwise have no access to pencils or crayons for the first time learn to draw. Emphasis is placed on the "whole-language" approach to developing pre-reading and pre-writing skills, providing context and meaning by broadening children's exposure to language. The teachers assess the developmental level of each child in terms of performance. Instruction is individualized by using different kinds of observation and creating portfolios.

In preparing the children for primary school, these preschool programs encourage a more positive attitude toward school and education and have radically changed the learning environments both in the homes and in the community.

Parent and Community Engagement

The focus on family involvement goes well beyond such traditional practices as parent-teacher conferences, parent meetings, and helping children with homework. Parents and community members are invited to school to tell stories and to talk about the history of the community. Parents also participate in the cooperative learning for an additional reason—for personal self-improvement. The Community Center provides adult classes in cooking, parenting, language, and sewing and is also used as a place for community meetings and sports. In the community, one can now see greater interaction and communication, more effective use of resources, increased coordination, and greater emotional involvement.

The Special Primary School at Jarovnice

In Slovakia special primary schools were intended to provide special education for children with disabilities, using specialized

instructional methods, tools, and forms. The pedagogy and materials were developed nationally for students with mental, sensory, or physical handicaps; students with behavior problems; and ill or weakened students placed in medical facilities. Most Roma children in special schools were classified as having language delays and related disabilities, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia.

Placement in special schools was determined by tests administered in the Slovak language by psychologists and special committees. For financial and other reasons, most Roma children did not have access to preschools where experience with the Slovak language could be obtained. Their lack of fluency and their cultural and behavioral disadvantages, combined with a lack of other school readiness skills, resulted in their being labeled "handicapped."

Many Roma parents agreed to place their children in special schools without understanding the long-term consequences. However, most of those parents who did realize the constraints these schools placed on their children's future thought they had no alternative. Of the 64 pupils attending the Special Primary School in Jarovnice, 59 were Roma.

Step by Step implemented a special-school initiative in four countries to promote equal education for Roma children by providing appropriate conditions for learning, pedagogy, and personal support. One classroom in Slovakia, in the Special Primary School at Jarovnice, participated in the initiative. The goals for this classroom were:

- To identify Roma children who were misplaced in special schools.
- To improve their academic skills and integrate them into the mainstream.
- To develop and implement a viable model of school success for Roma children.
- To propose changes in national education policies.

Key project components included:

- Use of the mainstream curriculum in place of the special-school curriculum.
- Implementation of Step by Step early childhood methodology as the vehicle for delivering the curriculum.
- Instruction in antibias education for all teachers and administrators in the project.
- Appropriate methods to support second-language learners.
- A Roma teacher assistant at each project site to bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between school and community.

The Step by Step classroom in the Special Primary School at Jarovnice was one of five classrooms in four countries participating actively in this experiment; five other classrooms served as controls. Almost all test results were higher in the treatment classrooms, whether these were measurements of intellectual abilities, communication skills, social and emotional skills, or speech and language development. Eighty percent of the students in the five treatment classrooms passed the tests with a score of 75 percent or higher. This initiative was seen as demonstrating that Roma children were capable of academic success when provided with appropriate conditions for learning.

The process of changing the attitudes and practices of school staff members was seen as key, with major implications for the design, delivery, and funding of professional development at both the pre-service and in-service levels. The staffs at the pilot sites identified aspects of the Step by Step methodology and antibias education as some of the most important things they did to try to meet the needs of students in their classes. They also indicated that more information on Roma culture, strategies for involving parents, and training sessions would help them be even more effective in the future. Almost all staff members in the pilot classes said that participating in this project would have long-term benefits for them and for the students.

"Children from Step by Step classrooms appear to show more empathy to their peers," comments Eva Lukacova, headmistress of the Special Primary School. "I think that the methodology leads to better school readiness of Roma children. It increases their independence and ability to solve problems. This methodology becomes a kind of guarantee of further cognitive, emotional, and social growth."

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Reflections on Program Accomplishments

Despite major problems such as increasing poverty, harsh social conditions, continuing prejudices, and a high dropout rate among Roma, the benefits to Slovakia of the Step by Step Program have been substantial. They include an acceleration of school success for Roma students, experimental verification of Step by Step methodology for preschools and primary schools, and integration of Roma students from the socially and educationally less supportive environments of special schools into participation in the life of the majority population.

WOSF's program of multicultural activities has also stimulated Roma families' interest in the formal education of their children. It has strengthened relations between the Roma and non-Roma communities, especially between representatives of the municipality and Roma parents and community leaders. WOSF's director, Eva Koncokova, reports that the Roma people have become committed to facilitating their children's learning processes. They have gained a better understanding of the policy issues involved, as well as of the role of the social environment, and have started to become involved in decision-making processes. At all levels they have demonstrated a capacity for problem solving, management, and self-evaluation. Thanks to lessons learned through formal educational activities, they have improved their skills not only in intercultural communication, but in communication among families, children, and volunteers.

The Roma themselves have upgraded the organizational and cultural work in their community. Knowledge of Roma culture—particularly of the Romani language and of Roma history, ethnography, and sociology—has improved the self-identity and self-awareness of Roma youth and has strengthened their ability to face oppression and conflict.

The potential of the Step by Step multipronged and multigenerational approach to mobilize a local community in such a way as to profit the community and to reciprocally benefit the project itself is aptly demonstrated by the words of one of the parents involved in the project: "I expect to change. For this reason, I have started to work as a volunteer at the Community Center. I made a book for the children. It is about carving things such as animals, birds, and handles for kitchen utensils. Iveta Fabulova, the coordinator of the Community Center, helped me put Slovak and Roma names on them. I am proud of it. Now the book is used for teaching at the Community Center."

This article was prepared by Hugh McLean, based on the full-length case study by Eva Koncokova and Jana Handzelova, *Impact of Step by Step at the Roma Settlement Jarovnice-Karice: Slovakia Community Resource Mobilization*.

Family and Community Engagement

Families have the greatest influence on a child's life. The active participation of families is an integral component of the Step by Step Program. Teachers and families must work together to develop mutual relationships based on communication and respect. The involvement of parents in all aspects of school planning and decision making reinforces Step by Step's democratic principles. Parents are involved in a range of activities, including parenting-education programs, formal and informal parent associations, making learning materials, and participating directly in the classroom activities.

Step by Step seeks to develop a reciprocal relationship between the school and the community. Teachers use the community as a resource for learning by inviting community members into the classroom to share their experience, cultural traditions, skills, and knowledge. Links with the community go beyond the classroom and include provision of additional resources, school-improvement programs, and community/school partnerships. Families and communities play a critical role in long-term program sustainability.

Families and communities play a critical role in long-term program sustainability.

The case studies from Haiti, Moldova, Russia, and Tajikistan highlight some of the creative ways parents and communities contribute to the development of quality preschool and primary school initiatives. The authors provide insights into some of the most challenging aspects of these partnerships and the ways in which roles are shaped over time.

The case study from Haiti documents the power of community links. In Haiti, most children do not attend school. As illustrated in this case study, one Step by Step village school has managed to improve these odds. The school belongs to the community, and teachers and families engage in joint problem solving.

The Moldova study examines the role of a joint initiative between Step by Step and the World Bank's Moldovan Social Investment Fund (MSIF) targeting the physical rehabilitation of rural schools as well as curriculum reform through the introduction of democratic educational practices. The study explores how this initiative became a catalyst for change in the Chiscareni community and its school.

The case study from Russia examines the impact of Step by Step on the attitudes and practices of both teachers and parents toward active parent involvement in the classroom, exploring Step by Step's effort to establish mutually supportive relationships between parents and teachers based on communication and respect. Genuine involvement of families in their children's learning, rather than delegating this function to the state, brings an individual into the life of the community, thus accelerating the progress of civil society.

The Tajikistan case study examines the degree to which parent involvement in the classroom has been accepted by teachers and parents. Of particular interest is a discussion of factors influencing parents' motivation to participate, which examines why some are more receptive than others to the Step by Step learning environment. This case illustrates that the Step by Step Program changed the attitudes of teachers and parents. Parents began to see their child's unique personality. Teachers began to see children as open, friendly, free, and competent. This is a significant achievement in societies where children's opinions and individual differences are traditionally neglected.

While the challenges of sustaining both community and family participation are at times daunting, Step by Step communities learn that they hold the power for change when they assume responsibilities and work together to solve problems. Their effort to build democratic educational practices creates democracy within the communities as well.

The School Without Socks: The Te Kase School in Haiti

Case Study Researchers: Caroline Hudicourt, EdM, and Dominique Hudicourt, FOKAL Tipa Tipa Program—Step by Step, Haiti

The children, bright and eager, walk up the stairway of their beautiful pink concrete school to their classrooms, leaving behind the schoolyard with its newly planted ornamental garden, their small homes made of clay soil blocks or palm tree wood, the pale green grass and the often dusty—or slippery and muddy—dirt road they have trudged here on. They chatter cheerfully, both disciplined and delighted, like children in happy schools everywhere. Not one of them, from the tiniest three-year-old to the most gangling sixth-grader, wears socks.

To traditional educators, explains Veronique Phanor, director/principal of the Te Kase School on Haiti's Central Plateau, a citizen "is a person wearing a tie, always well-dressed, wearing socks, perfectly waxed shoes, always clean." But at the Te Kase School, Ecole Marie Educatrice, "a citizen is not a person with a tie. It is a person who likes his environment and who adapts well to his own reality."

Not all that long ago, the children of Te Kase were required to come to school in shoes and socks like the city kids. But the charismatic local religious leader Brother Franklin Armand protested. Socks, he said, were made for children who drive to school in cars and walk on clean concrete, for children whose parents have washing machines and the soap to put in them. For peasant children walking to school through squishy mud, they were merely one more problem to take care of, one more piece of clothing to buy and wash, one more source of stress on parents' limited resources. In rainy season they keep children's feet hot and wet. In dry season they become flaked with dust. Today, the children of Te Kase no longer wear socks to school. Those who arrive with socks are asked to take them off. During the rainy season they even remove their shoes, slip-

ping their feet into plastic or rubber sandals, keeping their feet cool and dry and the classrooms clean.

The children of Te Kase "come to school to learn so that they can change the society in which they live," says Phanor, a former nun who left her congregation to marry and then studied public health as a nurse. "Even if they go to other places to study they should come back to their home to help the area. If they wear ties and beautiful shoes, they might not want to come back to the country and get them all dirty."

A Sense of Place and Possibility

The Te Kase School, just outside the major Central Plateau town of Hinche and about 100 miles northeast of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, is the most successful of the four pilot schools developed by Tipa Tipa, Haiti's Step by Step Program. It was funded and constructed in 1997 by FOKAL (Fondasyon Konesans ak Libete), a Soros network foundation. The small rural hilly community surrounding the school is poorly developed, partly because of the difficult roads. The clay soil that should be an economic asset makes the dirt roads and dirt airport extremely slippery and sometimes unusable in the rainy season, when the area is often inaccessible for days even by plane. The large, brightly painted concrete school built by FOKAL—a two-story, U-shaped structure housing 248 pupils from preschool through sixth grade—seems incongruous when viewed from above the surrounding hills. Most other buildings, including schools, are small tin or thatched-roof houses made of palm tree wood or soil.

Michele Pierre-Louis, FOKAL's director, says she was confident that the peasant community would welcome Step by Step. "Ask the parents what is the most important to them," she comments. "They will tell you their children's education, even if they are hungry. School is perceived as a gate that helps them get away from the peasant condition, and that enables the children to help their parents."

As impressive as the gleaming pink concrete is, the Te Kase School stands out from its surroundings in more intangible ways as well. It distinguishes itself even among Step by Step pilot schools in the quality of relationships it has built among the director, teachers, parents, and children, and by the intense involvement of parents in the school's activities. The success story of Te Kase is a story of community building. The parents, says parent coordinator Myriam Clerveaux, "are ready to do anything for the school. When they compare their children to others they see elsewhere, they realize that the school offers something extra. It increases their self-esteem, because they can talk and be listened to. Being aware of the program, they make sure the teachers follow it. They help fix the school materials; they encourage students to hurry to school." And among other Marie Educatrice schools—local schools supervised by Brother Armand's congregation, Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Incarnation—Te Kase stands out as a builder of democracy.

"Ask the parents what is the most important to them. They will tell you their children's education, even if they are hungry."

"Tipa teaches democracy," says Lochner Etienne, a supervisor appointed by the

congregation to monitor the community's schools. "They work on democracy as a permanent theme: respect for others, self-respect, respect for the environment, and respect for the country. That's the type of education Haiti needs."

Community Assets

The Te Kase School's unusual success has been built on fertile, if often muddy, ground. The directors of FOKAL wanted to invest in rural, somewhat abandoned, communities, but they looked for communities with strong local structures already in place. Three of the Step by Step pilot schools in Haiti are associated with religious organizations and the fourth is connected with a peasant association. In the case of Te Kase, Brother Armand and his congregation offered support at every stage of the project. The area, known as Pandiassou, looks better every year, partly because of the 34 artificial lakes Brother Armand has built over the last decade. Fish are multiplying, water is pumped in to irrigate fields during the long dry season, and the land is slowly being reforested. "Brother Armand always says that when you first arrive in a fraternity you don't really do something for the people," says Brother Cenor Jonas, administrator of the congregation. "You listen to them. After a while, they tell you themselves: 'This is how I would like you to help us.'" In addition to the strong leadership of Brother Armand and Phanor and the enormous enthusiasm of community parents, Te Kase has a natural advantage: houses are crowded together, making it easier to build community. In many rural areas, children have to walk several hours even to get to school.

Like other Step by Step programs around the world, Tipa Tipa offers a child-centered pedagogy that develops children's autonomy, natural curiosity, and creativity. It works with children from birth to age 12, preparing them to become active and engaged citizens, encouraging their ability to make decisions, formulate hypotheses, and make critical judgments. The program values parents' participation in school activities and functions democratically: parents walk directly through principal Veronique Phanor's open door in their bare feet; children run in to speak with "Vero." Classrooms are clean, with activity corners for the youngest children and tables for the older ones. Tipa Tipa's goal is to offer poor rural children a method of learning comparable to methods common in wealthy developed countries.

Parents see the school itself as a great material and physical gift to the community. They are grateful for the toilets: the fact that here the children don't have to use the floor as their toilet and wipe themselves on rocks, Pierre-Louis says, "is a humanizing process." Tipa Tipa teaches hygiene along with the alphabet: "When they leave school to go home," says Marie-Maude Rodrigue, a community school supervisor hired by the congregation, "it's not the parents who need to tell them that they have to bring water and wash their hands before eating. The children know that good hygiene requires them to wash their hands before

eating and after going to the toilet. It's a big change." Indeed, Clerveaux comments, the Te Kase children's emphasis on cleanliness sometimes offends other members of the community. When they ask to wash their hands before eating at the marketplace, she says, other adults are apt to scoff, "Oh! Who do they think they are?"

Step by Step trains both teachers and parents to treat children with respect. Corporal punishment—the most common method of discipline in Haiti—is strongly discouraged. "When adults make mistakes nobody beats them," Clerveaux tells parents. "And sometimes adults make very serious mistakes. Sometimes they might break a glass. If it is an adult it's not a problem. When it is a child who breaks a glass we feel obliged to scold or even beat him." She tells the true story of two boys in Port-au-Prince who were sent to fetch water. To save time they went to a neighbor's reservoir even though they knew they weren't supposed to. When one boy fell in the water, the second was so afraid of being punished that he ran away to hide instead of getting help. His brother drowned.

Some parents feel "disarmed" when told not to use the whip because they have never known anything else. It is not unusual for parents to beg a teacher to beat their children if they don't behave. And even in Step by Step schools, some teachers still use corporal punishment; the teachers themselves were raised with the whip. But parents and teachers believe in the training because they see such encouraging changes in their relationships with their pupils, their children, and even with their spouses. "You feel it's a life-giving role, a role of love," says a parent.

Parents as Allies

The intensity of parental involvement is striking. One secret of Te Kase's success, says FOKAL director Michele Pierre-Louis, "is the relationship between the school and the parents." A parent adds: "The way parents are welcomed at school is very important. That's one of the main reasons why parents like the school." And Rodrigue points out that parents are grateful to be included in school activities. "That's what they like," she says. "They know they were alone in the bushes; now you put them among other people. They start feeling like they are people like everybody else. It's more interesting. Tipa Tipa says, 'Come to us. There is room for you in society. Whatever you know how to do, come and share it. Show us how you wove your basket. What you can do is important to our classroom.' It is important for the peasant to feel that he is not alone in the country."

Parents find the Step by Step training sessions particularly valuable. "Parents are always asking for more training," a parent says. "They would prefer if the training sessions for the parents lasted several days rather than just one day." Another parent adds, "It gives us new paths, new knowledge, to help our children better at home." Clerveaux tells a story about a Step by Step-sponsored parent meeting in a remote school. Some parents were given the wrong date and showed up a day early. Even though they had to walk as many as eight hours to be there, following a difficult muddy path—sometimes adding stones to the road to walk on, sometimes cutting through thick weeds—and even though some had to leave home at 3 a.m. to be on time, they all made the trek again the next day.

Parents say:

The school helps the children develop well, especially in their language skills.

Physically they are more developed.

When he sings, he seems more alive.

The children are more open.

When the children are at school they seem to feel at home, they look comfortable.

Even when the child is playing, he takes his time to play. Even when the child is making a house, he can tell you: this is such and such part of the house. Another child playing the same game will do it thoughtlessly. The Step by Step child takes time to do it well.

If they took them away to put them in a different school, you'd feel they would be going backward.

Challenges

Despite its many strengths, Te Kase struggles daily. Retaining teachers is sometimes a problem; state schools offer a retirement plan, and Tipa Tipa teachers sometimes feel criticized by colleagues at other schools jealous of their pleasant working conditions. Sometimes it's difficult to match Step by Step educational materials with national exams. Step by Step's experimental approach to science, for instance, doesn't help children memorize the facts they need for the national science test. (Nevertheless, all sixth-graders passed the national exams.) The children start reading in French in first grade even though their first language is Creole; they don't begin reading Creole until second grade. Parents are thrilled that their children are learning French, a language they feel will give the children access to levels of society the parents have been excluded from—but teaching children to read in a language other than their mother tongue goes against Step by Step methodology.

By far the biggest problem is money. The school lunch program has been cut off because of lack of funds and Phanor reports that paying teachers regularly is a constant struggle. Haiti is a desperately poor country; as Clerveaux points out, one reason for the Te Kase parents' enthusiasm is that because of the congregation's work in the area, their standard of living had improved. "To be able to give something, you have to have something," she says. When daily survival is at stake, parents cannot participate in school activities, and children cannot learn. If despite training other schools do not follow the Step by Step Program, she feels, it is because they lack space and materials. To many teachers and parents who would love to embrace Step by Step philosophy, financial conditions in Haiti make the luxurious Tipa Tipa classroom feel like an impossible dream.

When members of the Te Kase community—teachers, parents, children—describe the school, certain themes recur: democracy, equality, freedom.

Vision and Hope

"Tipa Tipa's future is a challenge, but at the same time there is a lot of hope, because visibly something has changed in the student body," says Phanor. "This generation, which has followed that training within the Step by Step Program, will create a new society, a society with justice and respect for people."

When members of the Te Kase community— teachers, parents, children—describe the school, certain themes recur: democracy, equality, freedom. "The children have to be able to choose," says a parent. "You don't give them freedom to do whatever they want, but you have to let a child make some choices so that he can be aware that he is able to choose and discover what he

likes. Before, parents did not know that."

Marie-Maude Rodrigue, one of the congregation's school supervisors, agrees. "The choice board is something very interesting," she says. "Because the student knows he is free to choose whatever he wants: 'When I go to the math corner, nobody tells me that I have to go to the science corner.' The student can say, 'I choose to go to the math corner.' That's a kind of freedom, the freedom to choose." And Lochner Etienne, the congregation's other supervisor, adds: "If tomorrow the child is going to be president, senator, or in any government position, he will not have any difficulty listening to other people's opinions because they will have told him to listen to others. There should be a high school that's using that same method."

One teacher from a different community who had just started the Step by Step training reports that he was so struck by the program's egalitarian perspective on male and female roles that he decided to help his wife around the house. Their relationship improved enormously, he says; a few months later she was eager, even excited, for him to attend another week of training.

Alinx Gauthier, director of another congregation school, says that if all schools were like Te Kase, "We would have Haitians with another mentality. If all the schools in the country followed the Step by Step model, after 10, 15, 20 years, school in Haiti would be like school in other countries."

The Step by Step experience, Phanor feels, is transformative. "If all the Haitians could behave differently and think differently, if all the children could be like ours, it would be extraordinary."

Teachers say:

Every day I see the face of our school change. Before, the children were different. When you talked to them they didn't listen. Now they behave differently. When you talk to them they understand; they act according to what you have told them. They used to fight a lot more than they do now.

We are relaxed with the children and we create activities.

I find more materials. When you find more materials, the work becomes easier for you.

To me the program helps because of the sitting arrangements in the classrooms. When the children sit around tables, you can do group work and individual work.

In other schools the kids are stacked up in piles. The Step by Step Program does not allow a classroom to have more than 30 children. It allows the work to flow better.

The program helps us to have a greater variety of experiences.

The school lies like a cooking pot on three stones: the parents, the child, and the teacher. If one stone does not function at the same level, if one stone is low, the pot will lean sideways.

Children Thriving

"Children are their parents' wealth," says a Haitian proverb. Children are also a community's wealth, a nation's wealth. But the blooming children in the science corner, or learning to read Creole, or washing their hands before eating, or working in the vegetable garden aren't worried about being anybody's wealth. Learning and playing, they look like children in good schools everywhere—except that none of them wear socks.

Children say:

What is in our books, the other books don't have.

The school helps us a lot in our work.

We feel comfortable when we are working.

We enjoy dancing.

Photographs by Caroline Hudicourt

This article was prepared by Carol Sternhell, based on the full-length case study by Caroline Hudicourt and Dominique Hudicourt, *Community Mobilization: The Te Kase School in Haiti*.

Sustaining Democratic Change in Moldova: The Role of Partnerships

Case Study Researchers: Cornelia Cincilei, PhD, Director, Step by Step Moldova, and Valentina Pritcan, PhD, Dean, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, Balti State University

"Our school plays a very important role in the development of the whole community. The teachers have a great degree of credibility among villagers. That was very helpful in getting the villagers' support to collect the local contribution for the school renovation, which was our first successful project. Other community projects followed, initiated by the school, like the water supply system and the road."

—Silvia Turcanu, Mayor of Chiscareni, Moldova

Silvia Turcanu's description captures the breadth and depth of change in the rural village of Chiscareni, where the partnership between Step by Step and the World Bank's Moldovan Social Investment Fund (MSIF) in Moldova helped village schools become a catalyst for sustainable democratization throughout the community. Case study research conducted in Chiscareni in 2004 explored the factors that brought about this dramatic transformation, addressing all community stakeholders in the partnership, including teachers, students, parents, families, the school principal, and the mayor.

Country Context

At independence in 1991 Moldova was a middle-income country in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); now it is the poorest nation in Europe. Sixty-four percent of the population live in rural poverty, and this majority have been severely hit by escalating unemployment, declining living standards, and the erosion of education, health, and other public services.[1] There has been a huge exodus of the work force abroad, including many teachers.

In these adverse conditions, village schools are the community's organizational and spiritual center, as well as the main hope for change through its younger generation.

In these adverse conditions, village schools are the community's organizational and spiritual center, as well as the main hope for change through its younger generation. Step by Step and MSIF therefore decided to channel their activities and resources to rural schools in Moldova.

Post-Independence National Education Reform

Plans for Moldovan national education curriculum reform were regarded by international experts as exemplary for the region,[2] but economic transformation in the 1990s did not meet expectations. The reversal of fiscal decentralization policy after the 2000–2001 election and the return to recentralization compounded the country's economic problems.[3] Between 1996 and

1999, public financing for education as a percentage of GDP declined by 50 percent. Increasingly fewer children received basic education. By 1999, one in seven children of compulsory school age either did not attend regularly, or did not attend at all.[4]

Step by Step was launched in Moldova in 1994, by the Soros Foundation Moldova and the Open Society Institute. In 1998, the Ministry of Education recognized Step by Step as a good practical model of developmental education at the preschool and primary school levels and recommended it for large-scale replication. Step by Step, currently managed by an independent NGO, now has 1,920 classrooms in 350 institutions (100 kindergartens and 250 schools). The Step by Step team has trained 3,486 teachers and administrators serving 45,675 families and children, along with faculty from three pedagogical universities and seven teacher-training colleges.

Forging Partnerships: Step by Step and MSIF

In 1998 Step by Step and the Moldovan Social Investment Fund (MSIF) signed a partnership agreement. MSIF is a state project funded with the support of the World Bank, aimed at improving the living conditions of poor rural populations by targeting capacity-building through community participation. To qualify for Step by Step–MSIF funding, villages must mobilize to commit to a 15 percent local contribution to the general project cost. MSIF invested in creating appropriate physical classroom environments, and Step by Step, with funding from the Soros Foundation Moldova and the Open Society Institute, focused on teacher training. In 2000 joint fundraising efforts by MSIF and Step by Step brought a further $50,000 grant from the Netherlands Embassy, equating to $5,000 per school. By 2004, nearly 200 schools had joined the Step by Step network through this partnership.

The Case of the Chiscareni Community

Chiscareni is a large village of 5,000 residents 100 kilometers northwest of Chisinau, Moldova's capital. Four other small villages nearby are home to 2,700 inhabitants. The village school comprises 13 primary, 17 secondary, and 4 high school classrooms, with a total of 823 students, 32 of whom come from other villages. Over the past decade, only five teachers have left; unusually for Moldova, the school does not suffer from a shortage of staff to fill its 53 teaching positions.

In 1999, Chiscareni took advantage of MSIF's call for project proposals and identified the renovation of the school building as its first priority. The initiative group, consisting of the school principal, several teachers and parents, and local government representatives, planned a project, estimating its costs and starting a fundraising campaign for the community's funding match. They collected about $7,600 of the total $50,500 project cost, the majority from direct cash contributions by the villagers. Considering that the average teacher's salary is $35 per month and one kilo of meat costs at least $2.50, this was a large amount of money.

School as a Catalyst for Change

Teachers and parents pointed to the leadership qualities of community members and Step by Step training as the vital catalysts in community transformation. Previously, state training courses gave teachers no control over curriculum content and perpetuated traditional teacher-centered practices.

"The first eye-opening experience for me was the training, Modernization of Education in Moldova, that I attended in 1997," comments Chiscareni School Principal Nicolae Spanu. "It suggested changes I had dreamt about for a long time: to create a learning environment in which students

would not be afraid to express themselves, but would rather become active participants in the learning process. As a student I had bad experiences with very authoritarian teachers and, although my intention was to be an agricultural specialist, that humiliating experience determined my choice: I decided to become a teacher and treat the children the way I myself longed to be treated by my teachers, to make them feel that they are respected and treated as personalities and not just as an object of education. When I came to school as principal in 1994, my first request for the teachers was to exclude humiliating language from their communication with students."

Spanu prioritized training opportunities for teachers. His energy and enthusiasm were contagious. When MSIF suggested that the school adopt the Step by Step Program as part of the complex school renovation, the principal and teachers jumped at the opportunity. Two eager primary teachers attended the initial Step by Step training in 1999. MSIF provided classroom furniture, shelves, and blackboards, and Step by Step provided training and additional classroom resources.

"It was very exciting to try the new things we learned in the trainings. I liked the possibility to create, change the environment, and the new psychological climate in the classroom; I enjoyed the children's lively discussions."

"It was very exciting to try the new things we learned in the trainings," recalls teacher Olga Panaite. "I liked the possibility to create, change the environment, and the new psychological climate in the classroom; I enjoyed the children's lively discussions. But all these came gradually. At the beginning it was not easy: it was much more work than I was used to."

Indeed, Panaite adds, despite her enthusiasm she would not have been able to implement the new methods without the support—both practical and emotional—of the Step by Step team. "Sometimes I doubted whether I was doing the right thing, having only one other teacher with whom to share my doubts and concerns," she says. "Some of my colleagues came into my classroom to learn new things, pushed by curiosity and eagerness. Others reacted with jealousy and sarcasm, asking us if we were paid for the extra hours. A couple of these teachers never accepted change and never will. The support from the Step by Step seminars meant so much to me, it was so different from my previous experience. The regular seminars allowed me and teachers from other schools to share problems and experiences and to get support from the Step by Step team."

Within five years, 11 of the 13 Chiscareni primary teachers were Step by Step-trained. Trainings aimed not just at introducing modern active-learning techniques, but rather at changing the whole paradigm of interactions and classroom management. The overall goal was to create classrooms where children lived and learned the principles of democratic community. Teachers appreciated the new freedom to create their own curriculum with their students.

"Observing the classrooms of my colleagues who first started Step by Step, I was much impressed by the possibility the program offered them to choose their own teaching strategies, what materials to use, when and how to teach certain topics, without having somebody to decide that for them," says teacher Valentina Jurjiu. "I liked the diversity of teaching techniques they used, and how actively children participated, and how others listened to their opinions. I said I wanted to learn how to do that even though it clearly meant much more work."

Teachers said that although many parents realize the advantages of the program for their children, it is not easy to get some of them to participate in the classroom, perhaps because they lack either time or interest. And parents who don't participate find it more difficult to see and understand the benefits of Step by Step's child-centered approach to education.

A big step toward promoting meaningful learning was the introduction of an optional ninth-grade course, Community Development. When teachers and school administrators attended trainings on facilitative leadership offered by Step by Step, they realized how important it was to also develop these skills in their students. So they introduced this leadership-building course focused on project-development skills, including problem identification; context analysis; practical analysis, known as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats); and action plan development and implementation.

The Step by Step–World Bank MSIF Partnership Continues

At the core of the Step by Step–MSIF partnership is the shared recognition of the importance of investing in human capacity and in changing the attitudes and abilities of the project's beneficiaries in whose hands lies the durability and sustainability of these projects. To fuel school activism, Step by Step–MSIF launched a competition in 2002 to select the best-performing local school based on the joint project's standards: evaluation of the quality of Step by Step implementation in classrooms, follow-up activities, and the project's impact on community life.

Chiscareni School, declared the winner in 2002, received new furniture and funding for library books, teaching materials, sports equipment, and study trips. Chiscareni also won the right to implement between two and five new projects, funded by a grant of 1 million Moldovan lei (about $75,000) offered by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and administered by MSIF, on the condition that the community collect 15 percent matching funds. Following the strategy of the first microproject—the school building rehabilitation—deciding upon the new projects was a participatory process, with the whole community voting at a general village assembly. The villagers came to the meeting quite well prepared by the information they received from their local radio station.

The Role of Local Media

In most villages the former local broadcasting networks were destroyed, leaving rural populations with limited access to information. Chiscareni radio, however, is a self-sustaining local enterprise started by one of the villagers. Since 2001, it has run on monthly subscriptions and fees paid for announcements, advertising, and special greetings. Announcements of general public interest are free, creating an important communication tool for community building.

During and after the joint Step by Step–MSIF competition, the radio offered broadcasting time to formal and informal local leaders to talk about community opportunities and for open debates and interactive discussions with the listeners. This played a key role in raising the required 15 percent community contribution: communities elsewhere found this an insurmountable barrier, despite good project ideas. Chiscareni used its radio station to fundraise and thanked contributors by name, spurring further contributions. Providing access to information was a major step in getting the support of the villagers, who place more confidence in local leadership than national government. Transparency of public spending was another way of building trust in local governance. A local ecology newspaper, *Terra*, published detailed information about the approved budget and accounts of a grant for the local scout group from the Regional Ecological Center.

"We are very lucky to have this newspaper that promotes changes," comments Chiscareni Mayor Silvia Turcanu. "It wakes up those who did not yet understand that it is impossible nowadays to live like in old times. The local public administration, together with the civil society, has to contribute to a change of mentality."

As everybody in the community was suffering from insufficient and poor-quality water, the first new project selected was to improve the water supply system. To identify the next project, the principal and teachers organized a broadly participatory process, including focus groups with parents and other community members and a questionnaire for middle school and high school students. Opinions converged on the need for a village road infrastructure. Community fundraising activities resulted in identifying new sponsors for other needs. For example, a Chisinau businessman gave money for the renovation of the village kindergarten.

Community contributions to projects:

2002 Renovation of water supply system: $7,200 (of $48,600 total cost).
2003 Extension of the water supply system: $850 (of $5,700 total cost).
2004 Roads renovation: $12,270 (of $73,850 total cost).

Only 5 percent of these sums came from the regional budget; most of the rest came from the direct contributions of the villagers.

Children Educate the Villagers

According to Mayor Turcanu, the most important contribution made by Step by Step and its partners was to change the younger generation. "Now the students

and young people come up with their own educational programs for the radio and with various initiatives for community building," she says. The local Children's Council, created as part of a UNICEF project, was recognized as the best of 54 countrywide councils.

"If I have an idea for solving community social problems I go to the school, and if the children like it, they become the best promoters of it," Turcanu adds. "They mobilize the adults via the radio. I suggested having a competition for the most active village district. The children got together and decided to create playgrounds. You should have seen how they debated why this is a priority. Then they did some fundraising—the local administration also contributed a special prize for the best project."

Under the post-independence impetus to depoliticize the education system, the former pioneer organizations for children were dissolved, shutting down the so-called "pioneer palaces" in many villages. Aside from their ideological underpinning, these centers had a positive role in giving children opportunities for extracurricular activities like arts, music, choir singing, and sports. Chiscareni managed to reinvent their center, giving it a new life and mission. With almost no state funding, the administration had to learn how to keep it functioning.

Together with the children and young people from the community, they organized several formal and informal interest groups that established partnerships and found donors. Out of this emerged a scout group, Porumbelul ("Dove"). Using the skills the students learned in school, they successfully applied to various grant-giving organizations. As a result, the following projects came to fruition: Summer Ecology Camps (funded by the Regional Ecological Center), Ecologic Project (also REC-funded), Network of Youth Organizations (funded by Soros Foundation Moldova), and the ecology newspaper, *Terra*.

Key examples of youth initiatives that became organizations:

The Youth Association for Sustainable Development "The Third Millennium"—*fosters youth activism and leadership skills.*

CONTACT Center—*information and Internet center.*

Peace Corp—*antidrug campaign.*

Regional Ecological Center—*eco-cycling tour throughout Moldova.*

The Local Council of Children and Youth—*"parliament members" from 12 to 16 years old, elected by 440 students, advocate for the needs of community children and youth.*

The Teenager—*aims to contribute to solving teenagers' problems with community support. Soon to be registered as an NGO, this group won a $900 grant from CIDD/UNICEF for the project "Developing business management skills and organizing leisure time for the youth," collecting a $100 local contribution. With this money students started two profit-generating activities: purchasing equipment for the school disco and creating a paid parking area for bicycles.*

Students explain why there are so many projects in their community:

"There are more initiatives here because we have the desire to change things."
—Cristina Rotaru, 9th grade, The Teenager

"We think about the future of our village and we care about what will happen to us."
—Ana Dedov, 10th grade, Local Council of Children and Youth

"We like to solve our own problems, without being influenced or imposed upon by others."
—Adela Panainte, 11th grade, The Teenager

"We know what we want and are ready to get it because we think positively about people."
—Vica Spanu, 10th grade, The Teenager

"Because we know how to identify resources, we all worked as a community and everybody has contributed."
—Andries Moraru, 9th grade, The Teenager

The Synergy of Partnerships Helps Build a Civil Society

Chiscareni's young people are not the only ones who have discovered the importance of partnerships in their efforts to build community and spark change. Adults too have been taking initiative and forging networks.

"The durability of the changes is guaranteed by the many existing partnerships created," comments Mayor Turcanu. "We learned lessons from implementing the first MSIF project. Now practically every initiative group that wins a project creates an NGO, contributing to civic society building and securing durability of democratic change. Recently we jointly developed a community development strategic plan with community NGOs, and every side committed itself by signing a memorandum of agreement to implement the plan. Thus they all became stakeholders."

Adult NGOs created in the community include:

- *Chiscareni Women's Association, registered in 2002, which helps to actively integrate women in community life, promotes better parenting skills, and acts to reduce domestic violence;*
- *Association for Children with Special Needs;*
- *Teachers and Parents Association; and*
- *Association for Water Consumption, an outgrowth of the community water project initiative.*

Conclusion and Reflection

Community partnership has brought about positive and lasting impact on village life in Chiscareni, such as the improvement of school facilities, more democratic teaching practices, the engagement of youth in positive activities for the benefit of the whole community, and improvements to local roads and the water supply.

Community partnership has brought about positive and lasting impact on village life in Chiscareni.

International donors in the region are concerned that grants and projects may create community dependence on external assistance, replacing the responsibilities of state provision. However, local governments at present lack resources to adequately address even the most urgent community needs:

"The political legacy of the Soviet Union has left Moldova, particularly rural Moldova, without traditions of social activism, association, or personal responsibility to the community. The severe economic pressures that resulted in the fall of the Soviet Union and the economic decline that hit Moldova in its wake have reinforced feelings of disillusionment and powerlessness, and left communities with extremely limited financial resources to invest in resolving community problems. Given the dismal economic situation in rural Moldova and the increasing general sense of personal powerlessness, it is imperative that action be taken (by international organizations) to build social capital, engage community resources, and empower citizens in ways that can produce immediate improvements to local living conditions and demonstrate that citizen participation and democratic action work."[5]

Not all of Chiscareni's inhabitants have overcome their despair that life will ever improve. However, these multiple partnership projects have created tangible and positive change and helped villagers revitalize their community through democratic practices. "The Step by Step Program changed the teachers, they have changed the students, and now these students are further changing their teachers," comments teacher Viorica Ignatiuc. "In this way, our whole community keeps changing."

Notes

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This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Cornelia Cincilei with contributions from Svetlana Semionov, Valentina Lungu, and Valentina Pritcan (field researcher), *Sustaining Democratic Change: The Role of Partnerships*.

"Our School Is Another Family for Us": Parent Involvement in Matreshka Step by Step Nursery School, Russia

Case Study Researcher: Elena Yudina, PhD, Department of Psychological Training of Teachers, Moscow Psychological and Pedagogical University

"You must have noticed the atmosphere is very special here! The staff are very friendly, you can ask for help from anybody, from the head to all the other teachers and staff, and they will always explain everything, and give you as long a time as you need because they all are very warm. Our school is another family for us!"

—Larissa, mother of a child at Matreshka Step by Step Nursery School in Odintsovo, Russia

Introduction

Anyone familiar with the Russian education system knows how urgent it is to involve families in the teaching and learning process in nursery and primary schools. The real involvement of families in their children's learning, instead of delegating this function to the state, is a critical tool for bringing individuals into community life and accelerating the establishment of civil society in Russia.

Teachers commonly claim that parents are their partners in education, but in practice treat them just as a material resource. Parents often consider education the province of professional educators only, and trust them to do all the work. Parental involvement and responsibility for children's development is one of the basic principles underpinning the program—and a fairly new idea for Russian people. Step by Step, known in Russia as Soobschestvo, was introduced at Matreshka nursery school in 1994. This case study focused on how and to what extent the program established real partnerships with parents, and if it managed to shift the traditional allocation of responsibilities.

Local Context

Founded over 600 years ago, Odintsovo is a small town with a population of 171,700 people situated an easily commutable four kilometers (about two and a half miles) west of Moscow. It is a picturesque area, with lakes, a big river, and a popular resort known as "Moscow Switzerland." A city since 1957, it is now the center of Odintsovo region.

As elsewhere in Russia, post-perestroika reforms precipitated economic crisis. Factories, plants, and state-funded agricultural farms closed, and residential housing construction stopped. Previously unheard of, unemployment escalated. However, owing to economic recovery, regional development and production are now rapidly expanding, particularly in the sectors of private and state-funded agriculture and residential construction. There are now almost 3,000 small and medium businesses. The area is developing as a resort, with burgeoning hotels and sanatoria supporting the expan-

sion of transportation and communication services.

There are many young people in Odintsovo, including more than 10,000 children preschool age. Over the last four years the birth rate has increased, with a record 2,069 babies born in 2003. The number of families with two or three children is also increasing.

Young people prefer mainly to work in Moscow, where salaries are higher. Most jobs in Odintsovo are in the state sector, where salaries are lower. There are lots of new restaurants, private services, and supermarkets; but no heavy industry, and very few vacancies for people with university degrees.

The number of families where both parents work full time has rapidly increased—there are many more working mothers. Families want to increase their income, and women want to be financially independent. The state child allowance is extremely small and one salary does not support a whole family. Prices in Odintsovo are as high as in Moscow, making life expensive. Parents don't want to lose their jobs, and often can't afford long maternity leave; they therefore want to send their children to a nursery school at a fairly young age, generally between 18 months and two years. The typical age of children going to nursery schools is getting younger—forecasts show that nursery schools will need classes for one-year-olds and even younger infants.

The population has now split into strikingly different social groups: young families with a higher than average level of income, and poorer, vulnerable families, often headed by single or unemployed parents or struggling with drinking problems.

Education Infrastructure and Demand

Thirty percent of the Odintsovo state budget is allocated to education. There are 118 schools, four of which are for children with special needs, a Center for Psychological Support for Children and Teenagers, two Children's Homes, 46 state-funded nursery schools, and a medical center for preschool-age children.

Strong birth rates and almost full employment mean that nursery schools have waiting lists. New private nursery and primary schools have opened to meet parent demand for high-quality education, although the tuition fees are high and therefore access is limited. In addition to the Soobschestvo/Step by Step Program, nursery schools have adopted other government-approved innovative curricula; however, the more traditional Vasilievskaya Standard Syllabus is still widely used.

Traditionally, parental expectations have been strongly shaped by the formal, conventional, rather severe system of Russian education. In preschool, most parental expectations and anxiety focus on the child's transition to primary school. Preschool education in Russia is not mandatory, but covers the majority of the population. Primary schools often demand a certain level of attainment and, although testing is both illegal and disapproved of by early-development psychologists, most schools still test children for literacy and arithmetic skills before accepting them.

The child's preparedness for primary school is therefore crucial for families who are worried about whether their child's development level meets school entrance requirements. Many parents expect the nursery to prepare children for primary schools in terms of knowledge and skills.

They want their children to be able to read, write, calculate, and concentrate. Teachers report that parents want a lot of extra lessons for their children.

Soobschestvo at Work in Matreshka Nursery School

Nursery School #21 in Odintsovo is a Child Development Center called Matreshka, meaning Russian doll. The Step by Step Program started at Matreshka in 1994. The school currently teaches nine groups of children from the ages of two to six. It has a music room, a gym, a family room, a small theater, and a small outdoor roof area for each group.

The school shares the building with the Moscow branch of the Russian Foundation for Education Development (RFED) Training Center, which runs Soobschestvo/Step by Step teacher training. Nursery teachers and staff must pay for their own training. During the last three years, the training center and school have hosted teachers from more than 60 nursery schools in Moscow and its surrounding region.

The school principal estimates that 60 to 65 percent of the parents whose children attend Matreshka work in Moscow. Some 71 percent of mothers now work—representing a 30 percent increase in the number of working mothers over the past three years. Five of the 182 families with children at Matreshka are single-parent families. Income levels indicate that most families whose children attend are middle class; during the past two years children from vulnerable families have not applied. "Our parents are basic taxpayers," the school principal explains.

What Do Parents Know about the Program?

Although well-equipped with information about the program, many parents say that their concern is more for their child's well-being than for the specifics of Step by Step curriculum.

"We came here and met the head. She said to us they had this Step by Step Program, but we did not go deep into what it is about. What we like this school for is that you bring your child here, leave him here, and never worry. You know that the children are happy, that they are looked after and the teachers work with them; they are not just taken care of, but have some activities."

—Svetlana, a mother

Other parents want to know the program contents in detail.

"I asked other parents, but learned very little, so I went to the head, and she gave me a video. I watched it at home and liked it very much. I felt very good about this school, and I was happy to bring my child here."

—Nelia, a mother

"I knew that all the children are divided into groups, and that there are different activity centers—some children go to a literature club, some are building something. Of course, it is interesting. I have never heard of such practice."

—Natalia, a mother

Parents' expectations of the aims of preschool education typically focus on the following priorities: the child's care and comfort, discipline and development, creativity, socialization within a community of other children, and the acquisition of skills. One mother told us:

"A good nursery school is about full development

of a child. You bring your child here and then you collect a well-developed personality ready for primary school, and you don't have to worry about anything."

It is unusual for an education program to influence choice, as parents usually choose the school closest to their homes. Soobschestvo/Step by Step is an exception—families living quite far away want their children to attend because they favor its approach to child development, and only 10 percent of parents have chosen the nursery because they live in the vicinity.

"I like everything I saw inside and outside! And then I started asking questions and heard about the Soros program."
—Nelia, a mother

"We came inside and immediately saw the children's paintings. Everything is so unusual; they use waste products to make things, and all the corridors are decorated for the children—not just photographs or something formal. It is clear that this is a real world of the child."
—Svetlana, a mother

Some parents transferred their child here from another school. "They are our promoters," the principal says. These parents appreciate the attitude of teachers and staff, particularly toward a child's physical well-being and care.

"We gave up another school and came here—and it was such a relief! In the previous school I used to collect my child from the outside area. Once I took almost all his clothes off, it was so hot and he was all sweaty, and the teacher was standing aside with only her T-shirt on. I said to her, 'Are you feeling fine? Then why did you put all these clothes on him?' But she didn't care. Here the attitude is completely different!"
—Irina, a mother

Many described the teachers as excellent substitute mothers, and the school as being like home, or having better facilities than home. Parents appreciate the teachers' flexibility: they are grateful that they are able to bring their children to school late when necessary, or even pick them up late at the end of the day. Parents repeatedly comment that teachers willingly work overtime and never reproach them for being late. Such practice is strikingly different from that of other nursery schools.

The school's popularity among parents means that there is a shortage of places and a long waiting list. The waiting list for Matreshka is several times longer than the list for any other school. Many parents enter the waiting list a few years in advance:

"Once my baby was born, we went to the nursery school to get on the waiting list. Unless you have your name on the waiting line, you can miss what you really want, or even miss everything."
—Galina, a mother

Parent Participation in the Classroom

For parents and teachers, parent participation in the classroom is the most innovative aspect of the Soobschestvo/Step by Step Program. Russian teachers are not used to having their classroom work observed or participated in by parents. Well-prepared and rehearsed "open lessons" used to be the only opportunity for parents to engage in their children's school learning.

Assistants and volunteer helpers provide structured parental involvement in the school. Assistants are mostly mothers,

For parents and teachers, parent participation in the classroom is the most innovative aspect of the Soobschestvo/Step by Step Program. Russian teachers are not used to having their classroom work observed or participated in by parents.

so the increase in working mothers, and changes in the law concerning maternity leave, are making it harder to find assistants. RFED Training Center runs regular, compulsory Soobschestvo/Step by Step training workshops for assistants, most of whom have college degrees.

To tackle the waiting list, the administration sometimes suggests immediate admittance for a child if the mother works as an assistant. This suits parents who want to be with their child, especially as other Odintsovo nursery schools prevent mothers from working with the class that her own child attends, even if she is a professional teacher.

Generally, a mother works for three or four months and then resumes her usual work. All teachers consider it important for mothers to work as assistants, even for a short time.

"They understand us better then. Sometimes they work for some time and then start crying, 'I'd rather pay any money not to do this work! I can't imagine how you manage to do everything!' And then they turn into most responsive parents, always eager to help."

—Valentina, a teacher

Volunteer helpers work as assistants free of charge, attend when they can, and don't have a detailed job description. Often they provide cover when teachers or paid assistants fall ill.

"We need any help! Even the children understand it. One of our girls went to her mom and said, 'How do you think Tamara will manage alone?' Well, the mother came to help."

—Tamara, a teacher

Vicka, a mother, said:

"If they need me, I'll come. I'll find the time. I can't say 'no' to our teachers. Their whole hearts are in their work; they are mothers to our children too!"

We spoke with Yuri, a father who is very busy at work and still finds time to visit often:

"I sometimes think I am going to live or work in this school. I just love children, they are a part of our life. I organized competitions and brought prizes to the winners."

Other key ways the school gets parents involved are through information sharing, celebrations and festivals, direct requests for help, and parents' meetings. For example, teachers may ask parents to speak to a class about their work, or to bring objects from home for study purposes.

The school principal told us that whether actively involved or not, all parents confirmed their confidence and trust in the school.

Links between Nursery and Primary School

School #6 Primary is situated near Matreshka and has been offering a Step by Step curriculum for several years. Grade 1 of the primary school used to be based in the nursery school and run jointly by a teacher from the primary school, the children's usual nursery teacher, and an assistant. Then the children went to the primary school and formed Grade 2. This system was changed in 2001 when the Local Committee for Education legislated that all Odintsovo schools were to admit only children who lived in the local catchment area. Since children from many different areas of the city attended Soobschestvo, it became impossible to pass them all over to the primary school. Parents objected to this change, as children were happier under the former system:

"When they became six years old they had Grade 1 here. Then they all went to School #6. They were not stressed at all, no one was scared of starting the school. It was wonderful! They had friends in their grade because they'd been together since they were three."

—Svetlana, a mother

In 2004, parents of Soobschestvo/Step by Step children ready for primary school wrote a collective letter to the Committee for Education, asking that the nursery school class be admitted into the primary school as a group. The parents had formed a team to influence education outcomes for their children.

Preparation for Primary School

Parents regard the need for extra lessons as particularly important for ensuring that their children will be admitted to prestigious School #6. Teachers say that the level of parental anxiety is very high:

"Though we assure them that the program will prepare a child for primary school, they still want extra lessons in the afternoon."

—Tamara, a preschool teacher

It became clear that the preschool teachers run a lot of extra lessons—based mostly on traditional methods—with children in the transition class. Teachers feel this situation is wrong, but can't contradict the parents. The school administration tries to assure parents the program will meet children's needs, but as preschool teachers point out, parents have just grounds for anxiety because the children are still tested for admission to the primary school. "To explain that children will start reading, writing, and calculating easily when they are developed enough is very difficult," comments Olga, a preschool teacher.

Children with Special Needs

Matreshka is the only inclusive nursery school in Odintsovo. Children with special needs usually have to go to special schools where they are isolated from society. In 2004, there were 13 children in Matreshka with visual, hearing, mental, and speech impairments, palsy, minimum brain dysfunction, and heart diseases. Teacher trainers believe Soobschestvo/Step by Step facilitates work with special-needs children, while many teachers, and some parents, feel that there are insufficient resources in the nursery to support these children. Parents of children with special needs also often feel vulnerable and unable to discuss their requirements.

Farkhat's Story

Farkhat did not speak when he came to Matreshka at age three. At first he was overexcited and could not get used to having so many children around. The teacher suggested that his mother, like all other mothers at this school, should come to school with him to help the teachers. "The children are very small, we can't pay him as much attention as he needs," she said. "Why don't you start coming together with him?"

His mother gave up her work and began accompanying Farkhat to school. "I was sort of a special nurse for my child," she recalls. "We also attended the Center for Psychoneurology. He couldn't concentrate very well, he switched off to something else immediately. But we had to do the task!" Gradually Farkhat started interacting with the other children. Now he has friends, imitates other children, and if he is unable to do something, keeps trying until he overcomes the difficulty. The children accept him and play with him.

Farkhat turned seven in July 2004. He can now speak comprehensibly, is literate and numerate, and although he has not developed as quickly as the rest of the children, his development level is absolutely different from the verdict signed by doctors three years ago. If his mother had not been able to give up work and go to school with him, he would probably have been sent to a school for children with special needs. But his mother vehemently rejected that solution:

"No, because there are only children like him there. What can he learn from them? Now I am sure I was right. In the Center for Psychoneurology they told me, 'You have saved your child, you deserve a reward.' I would not have been able to save him in the nursery for special needs. Everyone was so helpful. Whatever they were doing in the school, they gave me all the materials and explained what to do with them, and we did at home what he could not finish at school. Wherever I needed help, I got it."

We asked Farkhat's mother how she managed to live for so many years without work. "Our father made our living," she replied. "When Farkhat goes to primary school, I'll start working. Then I will just have to take him to school and collect him after lessons."

Farkhat's teacher is enthusiastic about his mother's partnership in the classroom. "She has lived with us for all these years," she says. "And it is not only her own child she plays with and helps, it is all the children!"

This year Farkhat will go to primary school.

Reflections

This study shows that the principles underpinning Soobschestvo/Step by Step do change teachers' and parents' thinking and expectations. Parents start to understand and value their child as a personality, respect that the child has his/her own opinions, and like and appreciate that the children are open, friendly, free, and competent. This is a very significant achievement in a context where children's opinions have not traditionally been accorded proper respect.

Teachers still generally regard parents as a resource rather than a real partner. However, the crucially important change that has taken place is that this resource is no longer purely material (to buy, to pay, to mend, to wash), but has become human (to come, to participate, to join in the teaching and learning process and the life of the school).

The study revealed that the school is open to parents, and teachers are eager to meet all parents' needs, even though they receive no additional salary for taking on the extra workload. Many parents told us that their friends just don't believe them when they speak about the nursery school. Parents are evidently happy to be present in the nursery school, though some families participate only when it is necessary. Nevertheless, it is clear that there has been a positive change in Matreshka: parents feel much more involved in and responsible for their children's education. This is very unusual in Russia.

The child-centered focus of the Soobschestvo/Step by Step approach contrasts with traditional methodology. At Matreshka, children are not forced to study. Yet the teachers' techniques are unique; somehow they manage to satisfy parents who want a lot of extra lessons and individual training for their children given in a traditional way without harming the child.

Teachers still generally regard parents as a resource rather than a real partner. However, the crucially important change that has taken place is that this resource is no longer purely material (to buy, to pay, to mend, to wash), but has become human (to come, to participate, to join in the teaching and learning process and the life of the school). This is a new perspective on family participation dramatically different from the rigid style still practiced elsewhere; and it's a huge step on the way to building civic responsibility and community.

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Elena Yudina (with research assistance from Alina Kulikova), *Involving Families in the Preschool Teaching and Learning Process in Odintsovo, Russia*.

Parent Engagement in Tajikistan: A Case Study of Kulob Secondary School

Case Study Researchers: Nurali Salikhov, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Russian Literature, Tajik Slavonic University, and Zarina Bazidova, Teacher, Dushanbe Secondary School No. 21

"The parent is as much responsible for the children as the school."
—Sveta, grandmother of a first-grade pupil

Introduction

Parent involvement is a burning issue among educators: Step by Step recognizes that families have the greatest influence on a child's life and learning. The participation of families in a range of activities, inside and beyond the classroom, is a core principle of Step by Step methodology. In 2004, we undertook a case study of the involvement of parents in the implementation of the Step by Step Program in Tajikistan, focusing on Kulob Secondary School No. 2. Our research objectives were to use classroom observation and interviews with teachers, parents, and school administrators to:

- Define the role of parents in the educational system; and
- Assess the successes and failures of parent participation in the process of program implementation.

Background

When Tajikistan acquired independence from the USSR in 1991, centralized subsidies and funding for education ceased. Poverty was exacerbated by the 1992–1994 civil war. These events impacted forcefully on life in Kulob, an ancient city, situated in the south of Tajikistan. Eighty-seven percent of Kulob's population of 82,500 are Tajiks. In the Soviet era, some 60 nationalities inhabited the city, but many left due to intensified ethnic tensions during the civil war.

Kulob has 10 secondary schools, two primary schools, three lyceums (one of them Turkish), one gymnasium, and one boarding school (internat), with a total of 20,186 students. There are no statistical data recording the number of students aged zero to six or six to 14. Kulob has a university, medical college, technical school, and music school. Some new schools have been built, while existing institutions are badly in need of repair. Schools suffer from overcrowding, insufficient electricity and fuel for heating, inadequate water supplies, and sewerage

problems. Currently, all Kulob's schools have outside toilets. There is a shortage of textbooks, teaching materials, and furniture, particularly boards, desks, and chairs. Many of the 37 NGOs now active in Kulob are involved in the educational sector, attempting to address these problems.[1]

History of Step by Step in Tajikistan

"We live in the 21st century. The times themselves require a new approach in the system of education."
—Jamshed Boboyev, Director of Kulob Secondary School No. 2

Step by Step was launched by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in Tajikistan in 2002, supported by the Ministry of Education and mentors from the Step by Step Education Initiatives Center in Kyrgyzstan, and with financial support from USAID.[2] Step by Step organized trainings for 204 teachers from schools and kindergartens, pedagogical universities, and in-service teacher-training institutes, along with Ministry of Education officials. The program now operates in 40 primary and 64 preschool classrooms around the country, serving approximately 3,120 students and their families.

Kulob Secondary School No. 2 opened in the late 1970s, designed for 1,272 students. Today, 3,500 pupils attend. Despite new buildings and some renovation, overcrowding means the school has to schedule classes on a shift system (four shifts in 2004), and has old furniture. Of the 48 primary classes, 11 are first grades. Forty-six teachers—32 of whom have higher education qualifications and 14 who have specialist secondary education—work with first-grade students. Tajik is the language of instruction. Step by Step has been implemented in four classrooms, all of which now have new furniture: mainly desks and chairs, arranged as classroom activity centers.

Historically, parents participated by visiting the school at least once a month, monitoring good performance and behavior, and running a parents' committee that dealt with students' performance, school attendance, and extracurricular activities. However, over time this participation declined due to the pressures on families. Civil war, unemployment, migration, and an aggressive drug culture—Kulob is on the border of Afghanistan—mean that Tajik parents face a multiplicity of everyday problems. Life is not easy, particularly for women.

Parent participation is essential to children's education. Involved parents bring variety to school activities and supplement the talents of teachers with their own, whether drawing, sewing, or carpentry. As well as providing valuable practical skills, these crafts draw children away from negative influences, such as television and street crime.

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well as providing valuable practical skills, these crafts draw children away from negative influences, such as television and street crime.

Case Study Findings

"It is true that parents took part in the process of education before. … They visited classes and were interested in how their children were doing at school and whether they behaved well. They also took part in the social life of the school and sometimes would provide help, either financial or in kind. However, parents have never been directly involved in the teaching process. Now the family can be directly involved in the process of education. They help teachers in conducting activities in class. They help children to do this or that task or activity, and they show lots of enthusiasm in this new role."

—Jamshed Boboyev, Director of Kulob Secondary School No. 2

First Steps

Immediately following their training, the school director and teachers held a meeting. As Gavhar, a mother, recalls: "The director told us that the school was joining the Step by Step Program, and that parent involvement is its cornerstone. He said that children would be taught at the activity centers and we—the parents—would be working with our children in the centers." Director Jamshed Boboyev emphasized that the program would qualitatively develop children's thinking, practice child-centered methodology, and encourage children to exercise choice in selecting their own topics and themes for study. "Parents have to be directly involved in the program," he explains. "They have to help teachers. Only on this condition can the program be implemented well."

Most parents were interested and very enthusiastic. According to Hanifa, a mother: "We were very happy. At long last some new things have reached us here as well, and our children will make the first step—they will not be taught as before. These methods should change their viewpoint—the way our children see life." Most parents expressed their consent and readiness to help teachers. Teachers were asked to devise methods to involve parents. This included having them make teaching aids and encouraging them to participate in holiday festivities and celebrations organized by the school.

Parents started coming to classes from the very beginning. At first, the teachers felt ill at ease having parents in class, but the children were happy. Shirinmah, a mother, reports, "Every day my son asks me to come to school." Rajabgul, another mother, confesses, "Sometimes I feel a little ashamed because my daughter keeps complaining that I don't come to school often enough. She will say, 'Jamshed's grandmother comes every day and you come only once a week.' And I do feel sorry but I help her at home. She has changed—she really wants to study now."

Parents' opinions changed during the implementation process. At first, parents made the following observations:

- *"When I came into the classroom for the first time, I didn't like the way the lesson was conducted. The children were noisy and they could not move from one activity center to another in an organized way. Then I thought that this method is probably not particularly good because it puts the children off studying."*

—Hilolbi, a mother

- *"At first I was surprised. It was noisy there. The children could not understand lots of things. The teacher herself was at a loss. I could notice that the teacher felt embarrassed."*

—Sveta, a grandmother

- *"Everything was surprising. The furniture was put in an unusual way. The children moving from one activity center to another was also unusual. The teacher was trying to organize the lesson in accordance with the new methodology. I could sense that she found it difficult. Then I started helping the teacher. It is important not to be afraid of doing good things however difficult they might be."*
  —Hanifa, a mother

However, parents rapidly saw significant differences between traditional classes and Step by Step classes. Everything looked different: the students sat facing each other and talked to each other and the teacher. Every child was free to express his or her opinion on any issue, share ideas, and find out the opinions of classmates. Parents started coming to school with increasing frequency. They watched the children, observed their work in class, and began to work in the activity centers. Lots of preparation was required to make this happen.

Working with Parents

The key concern of Step by Step teachers was how to get parents working in activity centers. To help solve the problem, the teachers decided to devise a schedule, agreed upon in advance. Safargul, a teacher, explains: "I would keep inviting parents, saying, 'Do come when you have free time,'

"Every day my son asks me to come to school."

but nobody would come. Each of them was hoping somebody else would come. So I suggested that we should compile a schedule for parents to visit the school." When each mother was asked to choose a day suitable for her, the ice finally broke. Parents were asked to come the day before to discuss with the teachers what they would have to do in class the following day and how to help children in the activity centers. Parents often showed up for these planning meetings an hour before the classes started rather than the day before, but nevertheless, they were now coming at their allotted time.

As soon as parents got involved, they lost their initial skepticism about the program. Rajabgul, a mother, reports: "After I had visited three or four classes my opinion

about the program changed dramatically. I worked with the children myself in the activity centers, and I noticed that the children were changing. My daughter now comes home and without any reminding she sits down to do her homework. Then she starts making something or drawing or making clay toys. I very much liked working in the activity centers with the children."

During our classroom observations, we noticed that most parents moved from one center to another together with their child, without paying much attention to the work of other children. However, we also saw a mother who successfully worked with and took an interest in all the children. The teachers told us that the quality of participation depended on how well parents prepared in advance.

Most parents prefer to help in the arts or reading activity centers. Working in the science, writing, or math centers requires special knowledge. Step by Step teacher Nighina observes: "After classes, when looking through children's work, I would find mistakes. I knew that it was parents who helped children in these activity centers. I concluded: it is important to carefully select parents for work in the centers, or to thoroughly prepare them for this kind of work." Another teacher explains: "Not every mother can work in the writing activity center. You have to remind the children to sit straight, not to bend over the table, to hold their pens correctly. But some mothers don't know these kinds of things themselves. Many of them have no table or chairs at home where their children can sit and do their homework."

The Impact on Children

Children played an important role in getting their parents involved. Although teachers had told them that their mothers would be helping out and observing the progress of their work, children were so surprised when parents showed up in classes that they stopped listening to the teacher and sat staring open-mouthed at their parents! This quickly changed; children soon felt happier and more energetic because they tried to show themselves at their best for their parents. Teacher Jamila reports, "When a child can see his or her mother in class, he or she is happy and tries to be active. Children are very proud of their mothers when they see them helping other children."

"Teachers and parents develop a better understanding of each other. Before parents didn't know what their children actually did at school, or what their activities were."

The children agree and are pleased to share their feelings. First-grader Saidali says, "My mother likes to work in the arts center. She often comes to the school. I like it when my classmates show her their work. Then I tell everyone that it was my mother who helped them." The teachers didn't anticipate this level of enthusiasm from children. According to teacher Nighina: "At the end of the school day when I would remind children whose parents were supposed to come to our class the next day, the students would run to me and say, 'Would it be possible for my mother to come as well?' 'May my mother come?'"

Not all parents have become involved. Some don't participate in the Step by Step Program because they cannot see any changes in their children. Others are prevented by adverse economic circumstances. Not all parents can come to school regularly, even if they wish to. On average, each woman has five or six children. Sharofat, a teacher, explains, "Many parents don't refuse directly to participate in the Step by Step Program. But they work from morning till night and they don't have time to come to the school. Sometimes a parent comes just before the class to tell me that she will not be able to help me that day."

During our research, we saw a father in class only once. He sat with his son, did not pay attention to the work of other children, and was ill at ease in the classroom. He was visiting for a week from Russia, where he had been for over a year trying to earn money. The teachers told us that they cannot hope for help from fathers. There are very few men in the town: some perished in the civil war; many are away working. Where both father and mother are present, they are able to give more of their time to the school. Taking these variables into consideration, we concluded that Step by Step provides equal opportunities for children with different economic backgrounds to get a quality education.

The Impact on Parents

- *"Surely we ourselves changed as well. I personally started spending more time with my child at home."*

—Arus, a mother

- *"I knew before that teachers' work is very difficult. But after coming to classes our mutual understanding of each other improved and now I have a great respect for our teacher."*

—Sveta, a grandmother

- *"I can see some changes in my husband as well. He can see that I pay more attention to our children and he likes that. He starts helping the child with the homework."*

—Hilolbi, a mother

Sharofat comments that the transition in parents' attitudes since they became involved in the program is striking: "Parents have been changing as well. … They develop a very different view on the role of the school in educating their children. Teachers and parents develop a better understanding of each other. Before parents didn't know what their children actually did at school, or what their activities were."

In addition to working in the activity centers, parents are actively involved in other ways. Informal three-person parents' committees have been created in all Step by Step classes. There used to be very successful parents' committees in the traditional education system, but their role became very formal and bureaucratic. The school director explains the changes: "Parents' committees in Step by Step class-

es work less formally. They treat all issues in a more considerate manner and deal with the problems much quicker than others." Many more parents now attend school meetings. Involved parents practice inclusivity; as grandmother Sveta says, "Parents who do not take part in the program by helping in the classroom by all means should participate at the parents' meetings. They should know what their children do at school."

Teachers used to meet with parents in the classroom or the schoolyard, but now they have a special meeting room. Resources are limited, so there is not much furniture. Teachers said they would love to have some books on education and fiction for parents to read and discuss together. Parents also requested books in Tajik; they and their children very much like the books they received from the Soros Foundation—they are big, colorful, and beautiful—but they are in Russian.

The most common form of parent participation in school life is preparing holiday parties and festive events. When we visited the school, parents and children were busy getting ready for the spring holiday, Navruz. Parents and teachers celebrate children's birthdays—presenting small skits and performances, reciting poems, dancing, and singing.

Recommendations

Our case study showed that after only two months, Step by Step had a markedly positive influence on parent involvement. Teachers developed the following goals to enhance parents' participation in the Step by Step Program:

- Teach parents how to work in the activity centers so they can participate in math, science, and writing, as well as in reading and arts.
- Use a differentiated approach to parents—taking into account their skills, knowledge, interests, and preferences.
- Encourage parents to choose, rather than be assigned to, activity centers.
- Share experiences of parents' involvement with other schools and non-Step by Step teachers.
- Encourage all forms of parent participation.
- Provide more trainings for teachers on parent involvement.

Based on findings from the case study, other recommendations include:

- Encourage teachers to involve more parents in the activity centers.
- Organize one-day trainings for parents.
- Encourage teachers to vary the type of work to capitalize on parents' skills and maximize parent participation.

A key concern was raised for the future: "What will happen to our students when they finish Grade 4, the end of primary school?" Teachers worried that, after studying in Step by Step classrooms for four years, children will not want or be able to continue their education with old methodology; parents forcefully agreed. The solution is to teach the Step by Step methodology to secondary school teachers as well. Parents will be vital partners in the next steps toward expanding the program.

Notes

1. Donors directly involved in the improvement of education and the construction of schools in Tajikistan include Save the Children (USA), Save the Children UK, UNESCO, USAID, UNICEF, OSCE, TB OSI AF (Soros Foundation), Aga-Khan Foundation, the World Bank, the Asian Bank for Development, Relief International, IREX, AED, and the Japanese government.

2. In 2003 Step by Step joined the USAID/PEAKS project. This project provides financial support to Step by Step and cooperates with NGOs that work in education and community projects.

This article was prepared by Rachel Holmes, based on the full-length case study by Nurali Salikhov and Zarina Bazidova, *Parents Are Critical: Parent Participation in Step by Step Tajikistan*.

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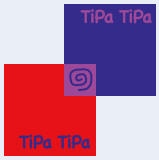

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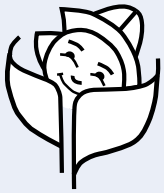
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