

# EMBRACE

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Fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in early childhood education and care

NATIONAL REPORT

Author:   
SKOPJE

## Introduction

In North Macedonia, early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision aims to provide care and education to children from birth until the age of 6 years, when they enter primary education. In practice, children usually start attending preschool when they are 8–9 months old. ECEC is not compulsory, and Preschool education is classified as International Standard Classification of Education level 0 (since 2002).<sup>1</sup> According to a United Nations Children’s Fund report (2019), the enrolment rate of children aged 3–6 years in 2019 was 40 %, which is far lower than the European Union’s recommended level of 95 %. In the ECEC sector there is no precise definition of the target groups. Although the Law mentions that the ECEC sector should enable inclusion of the children with special needs (Article 168).<sup>2</sup> The Program for Early Learning contains the Principle of equal opportunities and respect for differences among children and principle of multiculturalism, that states that all children regardless of their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic and cultural differences as well as different health and special needs have a right of access to education. The Principle of alignment with age characteristics and principle of individualization state that the personality and individual needs, interests, abilities of all children all children including those with special needs should be respected and nurtured.

## Findings from desk research

Inclusive education in the Republic of North Macedonia is a process that started two decades ago and has continuously dispersed and progressed throughout the education system, intensifying in recent years. The National Program for the Development of Education in the Republic of North Macedonia (2005-2015) represented a major step forward in improving the education system for all students. This strategy envisages faster elimination of physical barriers to education, reduction of discrimination in schools on all basis, increased care for children with special educational needs, etc. The current Education Strategy for the period 2018-2025 incorporates a contemporary approach towards inclusion in education. The strategy addresses as one of the challenge – “The system suffers from insufficient number of teaching and other staff in pre-school institutions which is accompanied by lack of clearly defined competencies and standards for managers, educators, caregivers, professional workers and co-workers of

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<sup>1</sup> Eurydice Background Report- Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe 2021 Overview of major reforms since 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Law on Child protection in North Macedonia. 2000.

kindergartens. Mechanism of professional development and career advancement of those employees is actually non-existent while the system of their licensing needs to be revised.”<sup>3</sup> This is also confirmed by the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, 2021, which concludes that the Teachers and support personnel in preschool education are consisted from Professional staff (Psychologists, Pedagogues, Social pedagogues, speech and other types of therapists, but their roles are not always very clear, and professional staff is sometimes used as administrative staff in schools.

There are no official strategies in the country for involving children without intellectual disabilities, the parents and community members in creating a culture of inclusion in ECEC settings.

The Government undertakes, in cooperation with civil society and international organisations such as UNICEF, UNDP and USAID, activities and measures for improving the inclusion of vulnerable groups, in the education system. These measures include financial support and incentives in the form of scholarships, professional support for improving the quality of learning and progression of children and youth with low SES in education, training of teachers for working with and improving their sensitivity towards children, providing schools with equipment and learning and teaching aids, constructing new kindergartens and early childhood development centres in rural areas and smaller towns etc. The general public’s knowledge, attitudes and practices toward children with disabilities shows the country has made incredible progress in removing attitudinal barriers that prevent them from taking up their rightful place in society.<sup>4</sup> Attitudes towards the impact of efforts by the state and society and of families to support inclusion of children with disabilities, are still rather pessimistic - this is likely to be linked to the increased awareness of the rights of children with disabilities and increased understanding of the barriers that prevent children from being included, and could suggest the need for additional efforts to address social norms and system reforms to support inclusion.

## Findings from the interviews

### 3.1. Interview participants/Sample

For the needs of the research in direction of deeper and more comprehensive analysis it covered several key informants from preschool institutions (kindergartens). The sample included 7 key informants- Pedagogues, one Special educator, and one Principle, all of them female, in their 40’s, with educational background in Pedagogy and Special education. All of them have more than

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<sup>3</sup> MoES, (2018): Comprehensive Education Strategy, 2018–2025 and Action plan, Skopje.

<sup>4</sup> “Protecting children from violence and promoting social inclusion of children with disabilities in the Western Balkans and Turkey”, funded by the European Union, and co-funded and implemented jointly with UNICEF.

5 years of experience in ECEC, while the Principle has more than 20 years of experience, and all of them have an experience in working with children with intellectual disabilities.

### 3.2. Key findings

The pre-school institutions have a policy of accepting all children, regardless of their background. They have developed Inclusive policy and positive environment of acceptance is the result of a long process of learning and change. All of the staff learned more about inclusive education through workshops and mentoring and some from their initial education on ECEC. All of them gave completed continuous education and training programmes that papered them to work with young children.

All educators have children with intellectual disabilities in their class undergoing in a genuine process of matching learning needs with teaching skills. Almost all of the correspondents except the Special educator stated that they lack skills and knowledge in working and dealing with children with intellectual disabilities. This is mostly because their completed continuous education didn't include topics such as: different forms of intellectual disabilities (Autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder); the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children; the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education and the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC. These topics were included within their informal educations such as workshops and courses but they were only included briefly and the correspondents shared their concern and willingness to increase their knowledge. The educators stated that there is delegation of tasks which are out of their competence, they pointed out the need for teaming up with relevant staff such as special educator, while the special educators deal with the overburden responsibilities towards the children with intellectual disabilities, because the number of staff is disproportional with the number of children with intellectual disabilities. The children with intellectual disabilities require more intense care and effort by the staff, as well as close and individual monitoring: "It's not only to place the children with intellectual disabilities within the group, inclusion also means that the staff needs to be placed within the group together with the children with disabilities and the children with typical development, and we are lacking capacities and skills, so many times we are trying to figure out the approach on our own, and we are not sure if we are undertaking the right approach" – stated one informant.

One of the most challenging and yet very important connection in order to achieve early identification of intellectual disabilities and positive progress is the parents-staff relation. The staff ensures that they have a good relationship with parents and that they feel involved in the inclusive education efforts, but there is a barrier by the parents in providing the staff information about the disability, mostly because of stigma, which slows down the educational progress. The staff is open

to reach out to them with information about inclusion, and to engage them in individual planning processes for their children, but yet the parents are lacking collaboration.

The general conclusion is that the process of inclusion on ECEC institutions is implemented officially and legislatively, but on spot the picture is different. Educators are facing problems of undertaking tasks which are out of their competence; they lack materials compatible for children with intellectual disabilities; they need team support-by Psychologist and Special Educators, considering them to be more suitable to undertake the tasks related to children with disabilities; and yet the educators are acknowledging the fact that they lack skills regarding inclusion and they are very open to develop their skills, but at the same time they point out that there is a need for whole scale systematic approach in order to accommodate the children with intellectual disabilities in ECEC institutions and within the rest of the children with typical development.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

The lack of clearly defined inclusion standards results in low expectations and an unrealistic picture of the process of inclusion in North Macedonia in ECEC. In general, there is a need to map out and consolidate the considerable technical capacity and it's profiles which are already in place in North Macedonia, ensuring each pre-schools have the necessary and proper human capacity to implement inclusive education policy. The institutions need to ensure providing pre-service and in-service teacher education are developing a cadre of professionals able to engage in child-centred pedagogy and create a collaborative pre-school culture. In particular ECEC staff's continued trainings should address relevant topics including: the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education; the different forms of intellectual disabilities (such as autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder); the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children; and the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC. It is necessary to provide additional support for educators and expanding school support teams, while organising frequent workshops to share examples of successful inclusion with educators, parents, experts and directors, while strengthening the collaboration and feedback from the parents, which is highly important for monitoring of their development.

It is therefore necessary to have a systematically organised approach to inclusion: increasing resources (human and material), mostly human, in terms of staff because educators often feel powerless to cope with the needs of all children because they lack skills on working with children with intellectual disabilities, and they are facing larger numbers of children in the class/group. One of the key priorities is to involve all sectors in implementing a child-centered holistic approach. To achieve this, it is crucial to build the capacity of primary care practitioners, including nurses, educators, social workers and community service providers, as well as to involve the civil society and the parents.

