FIESTA'S INNOVATIVE TOOLS AND MATERIALS IN FACILITATING SEN STUDENTS' TRANSITION

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Abstract

The article is a study of the main outputs of the European FIESTA project (FIESTA- 5177848-LLP-1-2011-1-IE-COMENIUS-CNW) and the way it has been implemented by EuroEd Foundation. The project aims at developing a multi-disciplinary learning approach for professionals in education, health and social services in order to facilitate the additional learning and support requirements of children with special needs during periods of transition. The network facilitates children with special needs during the following periods of transition: (1) Transition of children with special needs to mainstream environments. (2) Transition of children with special needs from pre-school to primary school and from primary school to secondary school. The article presents the results of the research programme which examined the existing best practice models/structures and educational practices used in nine European countries in order to establish a set of standardised criteria/ recommendations and overall baseline for best practice models to assist children with additional needs during periods of transition. It also focuses on the project main outputs: the online training course and its three modules as well as the way it has been received in our country by stakeholders as a result of its implementation. The modules and courses addressing the national teacher training curriculum aim at producing qualified teachers who address and support transition stages for disabled students in inclusive settings.

Key words: innovative, SEN, students, transition, education, curriculum

In Romania inclusive education started in the 1990s. Before 1990 children with disabilities were marginalized and isolated in special schools as it was then commonly agreed that education was not accessible to them. Nowadays according to the Romanian Constitution all children and people have the right to free education, irrespective of social or ethnic origin, sex or religious beliefs (Ghergut A., 2005).

After1990 the right to education is ensured at each stage and age in a differentiated manner, according to the type and degree of disability. Special education services are also provided in both special and mainstream education establishments (Gheorghiu I., 2012). Since 1993 lots of initiatives have been carried out by the Ministry of Education in Romania with support from UNICEF, with a view to encouraging the development of more inclusive practices. The need to provide awareness training to academic staff and administrators has often been highlighted lately as well as the role that advanced technologies can play in enhancing the pedagogic and environmental adaptations that facilitate disable students' integration.

The FIESTA project (Facilitating Inclusive Education and Supporting the Transition Agenda), a three-year (2012-2014) project approved by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme, aims at enabling effective transition and inclusion for children with special needs. It brings together experts in the fields of education, health and social services from eight countries. The FIESTA project promotes a multi-disciplinary learning approach relying on collaborative work of professionals in education, health and social services. The project facilitates:

- Transition of children with special needs from pre-school to primary school and primary school to secondary school.
- Transition of children with special needs to mainstream environments (www.fiesta-project.eu).

The FIESTA project enables professionals, pupils and parents to examine and analyze the common issues, knowledge areas and skill requirements that are demanded of those working

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with pupils across differing occupational boundaries and contexts in the fields of health, education and social care. "Across the three main service systems of education, health and social services, we need a shared perception of what it means to have a disability; a shared means of addressing the challenges it raises; a shared agenda of research and personnel training" (McConkey R., 2009).

Transition for pupils with special needs is a difficult process; in addition to the usual changes, the process concerns a whole new range of provision and related educational, health and social

services. Recent studies have found (McConkey R., 2009) that effective transition programs in particular for children with special needs involves a range of stakeholders. This project aims to address the lack of cohesion between education, health and social services during periods of transition. Using an participative approach this project will facilitate collaborative working for all stakeholders involved in periods of transition e.g. children with special needs, parents/families, educators, allied health professionals, social workers, NGOs.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

By focusing on education, health and social systems the Fiesta project enables a holistic inclusive approach. Stakeholders have the opportunity to collaborate and meet the individual needs of special pupils during transition. A wide range of tools are used such as the self-assessment tool, transition starter kit, 3 training modules and online stories, which can be used for not just pupils with special needs but for other pupils who may be particularly vulnerable during periods of transition e.g. pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The present article also focuses on the main outcomes of the Fiesta project. The first stage of the project was the research dedicated to the exploration and examination of the existing literature on inclusive education, transition and collaborative work in each partner country (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Romania, Spain and Scotland) and which resulted in the elaboration of the Best Practice Report. The FIESTA research, which is at the basis of the Best Practice Report, was held in eight countries and aimed at informing on the development of the inclusion, transition and best practices in these countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, the UK). The research outlined the existence of different inclusive education approaches and stages in these countries due to different political and cultural contexts. The report presents best practices for inclusion, transition management and collaborative working, but also provides an in-depth analysis of the factors that contributed to the findings.

The research was held in three phases:
- Theoretical overview of existing national and international acts, research findings and articles that have defined the current policy and practice in the field of inclusive education and its two aspects in particular focus here: transition and collaborative working;
- Quantitative field research that collects evidence for respondents' attitudes and practices and the factors behind them (completed among educational, health and social professionals);
- Qualitative field research that encouraged the respondents to be self-reflective and to discuss their experiences with other stakeholders. Thus, FIESTA consortium received the opportunity to apply a more

exploring approach towards the attitude, processes and tendencies identified during the quantitative research and on this basis to open social debates on certain issues (www.fiesta-project.eu).

The findings highlighted common issues and a recent tendency towards integration (not inclusion) in all eight countries; integration means the education of children with special needs in the mainstream system: the special child's needs must be adapted to fit in the mainstream school. However, inclusion is the other way round: schools have to change in order to meet the child's requirements, which needs further support and training for educational professionals. The Best Practice Report has identified barriers, which affect the inclusion of children with special needs (www.fista-project.eu):
- Attitudes of parents, teachers and pupils
- Over-emphasis on attainment and accreditation
- Lack of diversity and flexibility to meet children's needs
- Professional fears/prejudice, scarcity of teaching methods and strategies
- Preoccupation with disability classification
- Inability of national policy to influence local settings and practices
- Inaccessible buildings
- Lack of training or professional development for teachers.

The Best practice report also highlighted a number of approaches which facilitate inclusion such as:
- Access to a flexible curriculum
- Programmes for staff exchanges and training
- Regular reviews
- Dialogue and communication with all stakeholders e.g. pupils, parents, school, voluntary organisations.
- Facilitation of a collaborative/partnership approach
- Active pupil participation
- Peer mentoring (Bruce A., 2013):
Most partner countries agreed that further training is a priority in order for schools to be fully inclusive (Colibaba A., 2013). The next stage in the project aimed at meeting this priority. It focused on professional development and key competencies through training resources. Three training 'Managing Transition' modules were created, whose topics centre on 'Disability Awareness and Inclusion', 'Mentoring/Learning Supports' and 'Collaborative Working' ('Professional partnerships in education,

health and social care' and 'Enabling transition to mainstream environments from specialized settings'). The online modules (http://fiesta-project.eu/web/) are based on the results of the research review as well as on the feedback from the first conference.

Each online module presents up to date theories in the field accompanied by real cases of students with disabilities and solid bibliography which invites visitors to contribute with their own views on the online forum.

The purpose of the Training Modules is to provide practical tools to be used by schools and educational institutions for collaborative working and facilitation of pupils through transition. The training modules provide three professional development resources for professionals within education, health and social sectors. These resources were adapted to suit the needs of other target groups also, such as parents, pupils, policy makers.

Training for education, health and social services professionals include:
- understanding each other's ethos, environment and methods of working,
- the skills required for collaborative working, and
- information for teachers and other educational professionals on disability and therapeutic programs and for health professionals' information on the curriculum (www.fiesta-project.eu).

The target group who piloted the online course was made up of teachers from main schools as well as teachers from special schools, interested in facilitating disabled children's transition and inclusion. There were also psychologists and therapists working in state and special schools. They were involved in a wide range of activities with a view to working on and improving both their knowledge and skills.

The first module focuses on Disability Awareness. The purpose of this course is to deal with issues related to disability awareness. The learners learn about the medical and social models of disability and about the nature and range of different barriers that prevent people with disabilities from being able to participate in everyday activities. Participants are also provided with some tips they can use in order to achieve more inclusive education.

There are several activities for the course. Participants are first introduced to the definition of disability and its social and medical perception, whose content is broadened by in-depth reading and a video clip. Participants are expected to contribute to the discussions on the forum and share their own experience related to disability awareness.

The second module focuses on Collaborative Working. In this course participants deal with issues related to collaboration in the efforts for transition. More specifically, they examine different types of collaborations between teachers and parents, between schools and other professionals (e.g. psychologists, speech therapists, etc) and between schools and paraprofessionals. The slides presenting several types of collaborations are accompanied by in-depth reading on the issue and a video clip with a concrete case. Participants are also expected to share their experience in the forum on how they are currently collaborating with the parents of one of their students with special needs and the other professionals and paraprofessionals working with that student.

The third module is based on Mentoring. In this course participants deal with issues related to mentoring. They examine and analyze how they can mentor students, teachers and parents. Participants are encouraged to reflect on how mentoring could be used in a successful transition and inclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study centers round an online questionnaire filled in by the participants in the Fiesta online course after they completed the online course. The questionnaire highlighted participants' opinions and attitudes towards the role of such courses in raising awareness about the issue as well as the necessity of a common effort in dealing with disability (www.fiesta.project.eu).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire had 18 questions divided in three parts: in Part 1 the participants were asked to answer general questions about the positive, negative and useful aspects of the course; in Part 2 students had to give their opinions about the benefits of the course content, and in part 3 they had to express how comfortable they felt about the course delivery. Students' comments on each item of the questionnaire were always encouraged.

Questionnaire results and analysis

In the first part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to answer general questions about the course and present positive or negative aspects related to the course. *Table 1* shows the results.

Most respondents felt very positive about the online course because it presented disability from different angles by involving them in a wide range of activities. The course presented state-of –the-art information about the issue providing a concrete context. Participants appreciated the content of the course, its delivery, forum discussions and video clips.

"It is a very interesting course although at first I thought that it would be too general. I had only gone through the slides! Then I realized that the slides simply introduce the topic in a very appealing way. If you want to go deeper there are the articles and then the videos displaying concrete experiences of life. I also enjoy the forum discussion opportunity. I'm sure it will be more dynamic in the future."

"I think the course is for everybody- having different interests and coming from all walks of life. We all can find something that can interest us. Its generous and varied structure also appeals to all learning styles. There are still lots of opportunities in the forum discussions option."

Table 1

Results: first part of the questionnaire

Question	Your comment:	%
For you, what were the main positive issues about the course?	-content	83,3
	-delivery of the course	46,6
	-forum discussions	33,3
	-video clips (concrete cases)	83,3
	-lively slides	33,3
	-bibliography	16,6
For you, what were the main negative issues with these modules?	-not enough links to in-depth reading	56,6
	-forum discussions (not enough; people are not ready yet for them)	50
	-not enough concrete cases	33,3
Did you find the methodology involved helpful? Were the activities useful for your personal learning/understanding?	yes	46,6
What have you found most useful (content, activities, etc.)?	content	60
	video clips	83,3
	sharing experiences	33,3

The only negative comments were related to the participants' lack of experience related to forum discussions. Most of them were aware of the potential that forum discussions can have in their profession.

"We should benefit more from the forum option, which encourages interaction among participants. People are still shy. Interaction will help us with sharing ideas and working together."

"We need more practice on using the form discussions, I think."

"Participating in forum discussions is the extra bonus of all online courses. This is one way of improving the materials or updating them. It is also a means through which we can help each other to find common solutions and support."

"We should use the forum discussion more. I think this is one of the advantages of the online course. People get informed about the issues by reading the materials or watching the films but they also learn a lot by sharing ideas or experiences. There is a lot of potential in the forum discussions option and we should make the best of it."

In Part 2 of the questionnaire (*table 2*) participants had to give their opinions about the benefits of the course content. The following table shows the results:

Table 2

Results: second part of the questionnaire

Question	strongly disagree, disagree, neutral	agree	strongly agree
The aims of the courses were clear?	-	10%	90%
The courses met my expectations?	-	20%	80%
The topics and material covered were relevant to me?	-	-	100%

Most participants were of the opinion that the aim of the course was clear and met their expectations. The findings show that all participants appreciated the topics and material as relevant to their job.

"I really enjoyed this course. You can access and study it at your own pace whenever you want and how many times you want. I also liked its structure: the slides with the general introduction, its in-depth articles and video clips with concrete cases."

"The online course has a very friendly structure addressing all types of learning styles. The information is very useful. The more the better."

"I especially like this course for the way the information was delivered; it was also very well structured, concise and to the point. I also watched the video clips with great interest. It will be useful in my job. We need such concrete cases and even more cases (description of such cases) presenting young children with disabilities, the way they act and interact during classes with their classmates. The module on mentoring was new - I was familiar with mentoring for teachers- the course introduced new types of mentoring with parents and children."

Part 3 of the questionnaire reflects the way the course was delivered. *Table 3* shows the results.

Most of the respondents enjoyed their online experiences for different reasons: its novelty, varied activities, lack of distractions, opportunities to learn on their own, at their own pace, not having time constraints, its interactive character or online forum discussions.

Table 3

Results: third part of the questionnaire

Question	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
The course length was appropriate for the topic to be covered well?		10%	90%	
Did the e-learning format work well for you? Please describe in what ways	17%	17%	20%	46%
Do you think the technology used gave you benefit in these courses? Yes/No (please describe)	17%	17%	20%	46%

"Online learning is a very interesting experience. I like it because I can learn and go through the material on our own at my own pace. There are no distractions because I usually use headphones when I start studying. The instructions are very clear so what I have to do is follow them. If there are questions we should use discussion forum or call my colleagues."

"There are no distractions and I can complete the tasks at any time that is convenient for me. The instructions are simple and clear. This is not my first course done online. Probably you need some experience in online learning and learning on your own."

"The technology made it interesting and interactive. The information was accessible and very useful. The forum discussion option was also very interesting and useful. We could cooperate with colleagues from other countries."

However, there were also voices which were not familiar with online learning and did not feel comfortable in a virtual environment. They favored and supported classroom environment and blended learning.

"From my own experience, I have been more interested, and understand better if I am with my colleagues face to face. I learn by doing and seeing experiences or examples; they help me understand concepts. Now after this course I experience mix feelings related to my former perception. There were lots of cases, very concrete ones, which made me really see and understand the issues presented in the course. I personally will go for blended learning next time!"

"I'd rather learn in a classroom than online. I feel more comfortable having all the materials I need and my colleagues and my teacher supporting me."

CONCLUSIONS

Education systems throughout the world are faced with the challenge of providing an effective education for all children and young people. Faced with these challenges, there is an increased interest in the idea of inclusive education, which is perceived as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners (http://www.unesco.

org/education/sne/) and no longer as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings. It presumes that the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion seen as a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society (Miles S. et al, 2011).

Inclusion is a process aiming at finding ways of responding to diversity. It teaches one how to live with differences and how to learn from differences. Differences tend to become incentives motivating learning. Differences are no longer perceived as barriers: they become challenges fostering learning. Inclusion has to identify and remove barriers by collecting and evaluating information, which has long been hidden and kept secret. The evidence collected will be used to find solutions. Inclusion is based on students' participation and achievement through the joint efforts and collaboration of all factors involved in the process.

The first step in this process is focused on professional staff at all levels: "enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about" (Miles S. et al, 2011). The FIESTA project examines how multi-disciplinary ways of working and collaboration among experts from several fields can enable enhanced inclusion and a cohesive system that centres on the child's educational, health and social needs (Bruce A., 2009). The specialists in the field of inclusive education highlight the need for training trainers in the spirit of the principles and values required by inclusive education. Teachers have highlighted the need for training on disability in initial teacher training as well as knowledge on how to implement inclusive approaches.

Romanian experts in inclusive education highlight the need:

- to increase the number of institutional structures that provide educational services in school and organizing, in each community, of one resource center, able to manage teaching and

methodological changes in mainstream schools and help them to become more inclusive;

- to develop and expand programs for training and further training for teachers;

- to improve the identification process of special educational needs in order to enhance services of school psychology, compensation and educational support services.(Ghergut A., 2005);

- to use a multidisciplinary method in dealing with disability. Traditionally disability, though a complex state, was dealt with uni-disciplinarily: separating health or social services from its educational functions and responsibilities. Recent literature draws attention to the difficulties families face in assessing services and co-ordinating all the supports. The need now is to find multidisciplinary ways of working which enables inclusion and meets the child's educational, health and social needs (Colibaba A., 2013).

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