



**Ensuring Educational Inclusion for Children
with Special Educational Needs**

**Report on Research into the
Process of Transition from
Kindergarten to School**

Chisinau, 2015

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ATU	administrative-territorial unit
FGD	focus group discussion
IDI	individual in-depth interview
LPA	local public administration
PAS	Psycho Pedagogical Assistance Service
RCPA	Republican Centre of Psycho Pedagogical Assistance
SEN	special educational needs

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the research

1.1.1. Context

The project – “Piloting Inclusive Education in Pre-school Institutions from the Republic of Moldova” – is implemented by Step by Step and Keystone Moldova, with financial support from Open Society Foundations/Early Childhood Program. The work is done in partnership with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova, Republican Centre of Psycho Pedagogical Assistance (RCPA), and local public administration (LPA) from 11 administrative-territorial units (ATU). The project’s main objective is developing and piloting inclusive education in pre-schools, by evaluating children’s educational needs and providing the necessary support at institutional, community and specialised district structure levels. The project is implemented in 14 communities and includes 15 pilot kindergartens from 11 ATU.

Within this project, a small research activity was conducted focusing on the issue of transition between pre-school and primary school. This piece of research complements other studies, also funded by Open Society Foundations, in Armenia and Ukraine in 2015/16.

1.1.2. Objectives of the research

- Assess the situation regarding children’s transition from pre-school to school, in order to find ways of ensuring continuity in the development and learning process.

Specific objectives

- Analyse general opinions and attitudes of teachers and parents on enhancing educational inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN).
- Assess opinions regarding children’s readiness for school and determining teachers’ and parents’ roles in this process.
- Identify problems, fears and expectations regarding the transition of children from pre-school to school and the support received by children with SEN in pre-school/ school.

1.1.3. Geographical region and target groups

The study was conducted in four communities where the project is implemented: Anenii Noi town; Magdacesti village, Criuleni district; Panaseseti village, Straseni district; Susleni village, Orhei district.

The selected kindergartens in the four communities are the ones that currently have their children evaluated by the regional Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service (PAS). Out of 15 pilot kindergartens, these four are the largest and have included the largest number of children with SEN (24 children, or 2.5% of the total number of children in these kindergartens). The focus group and interview participants came from the four kindergartens and four schools where the pre-school learners would usually go.

The study involved:

- Pre-school and primary school teachers
- Parents of pre-school children with and without SEN who attend pre-school (preparatory group)
- Parents of children with SEN who attend school (first grade).

Participating parents were those who showed an interest and a willingness to participate in the focus groups or interviews.

1.1.4. Research methods

The study used qualitative research methods including some interactive activities with parents and teachers:

- 1) *Workshops with parents*: four workshops for parents were conducted on the topic “Educational inclusion of children with SEN in pre-schools”. About 100 parents of pre-school children attended these workshops. Within the workshops a session was allocated to the discussion of transition of children with SEN from pre-school to school. Parents brainstormed their fears and came up with solutions/recommendations for better facilitating the transition process.
- 2) *Focus group discussions*: two focus group discussions were conducted with the parents of pre-school children (preparatory group) from Magdacesti village, Criuleni district and Panasesti village, Straseni district. In total 21 participated; 10 were parents and 11 were grandparents. Out of the parent/grandparents, 13 had pre-school age children/grandchildren with SEN. A further four focus groups were conducted with their pre-school and primary school teachers; 23 kindergarten and 9 primary school teachers participated.
- 3) *Individual in-depth interviews* with parents and teachers: five interviews were carried out with parents of children with SEN (two with first-grade children with SEN).

During the focus groups and individual interviews, semi-structured interview guides were used. These contained open-ended questions to elicit respondents’ opinions on: the implementation of inclusive education in pre-schools; their degree of satisfaction with the services provided; their thoughts on specific requirements relating to the preparation of children for school; communication between parents and teachers; fears, concerns, hopes and ambitions of the parents and teachers concerning children’s transition from pre-school to school. Interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes and focus groups lasted around half an hour. Participants were given the opportunity to express opinions freely on the theme of inclusion, but also to initiate discussions about other problems facing children in pre-schools.

The tools used in the qualitative study were developed in collaboration with Ingrid Lewis from Enabling Education Network.

1.2. Background to the context

The number of pre-schools in the Republic of Moldova is increasing, following a drop during the recession in the 1990s. In 2013 there were 1,418 pre-schools, and in 2012 there were 141,100 children enrolled in pre-schools. Since 2007 the number of children enrolled had increased 17.5%, while the number of pre-schools had grown 6.3%. In 2013, 12,532 teachers worked in pre-schools. Less than half of them had teaching degrees.¹

In 2011 the Government approved the Inclusive Education Development Program for 2011-2020;² the main policy document on inclusive education. Within Moldova's education system, educational institutions for pre-school children are organised into ante-preschool (nursery, early education community centre) and pre-school (kindergarten, early education community centre).

Education Code Article 33 regulates inclusive education implementation. It ensures that an individualised approach is used to determine the 'type of inclusion' considered suitable for a learner with SEN,³ and involves complex examination and/or re-examination of the learner. This work is done by authorised structures at local and central level and conforms to a methodology approved by the Ministry of Education.

The actions of pre-school teachers are guided by two documents: *Learning and Development Standards for Children Aged 0-7 Years*, and *National Professional Standards for Teachers from Early Childhood Education Institutions*, approved by the Council for Curriculum in 2010.

In 2013, the RCPA was created. Its aim is to organise psycho-pedagogical assistance at republican level.⁴ The PAS of RCPA operates at territory level. Within-School Multi-disciplinary Commissions were also created. These identify and carry out initial evaluations of children considered to have SEN and refers to PAS those children who have learning difficulties.⁵

¹ Government of the Republic of Moldova Decision No. 944 of 14/11/2014 for the approval of the Education Development Strategy for years 2014-2020 "Education-2020". In: Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova No. 345-351/1014 of 21/11/2014.

² Inclusive Education Development Program in the Republic of Moldova for 2011-2020 approved by the Government of the Republic of Moldova Decision No. 523 of 11/07/2011. In: Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova No. 114-116/589 of 15/07/2011

³ In accordance with the Government of the Republic of Moldova Decision No. 944 of 14/11/2014 and the methodology for assessing the development of the child, children in Moldova can be experience 'occasional', 'partial' and 'total' inclusion.

⁴ Government of the Republic of Moldova Decision No.732 from 16/09/2013 regarding the Republican Centre of Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance and District/Municipal Service for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance. In: Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova No.206-211/823 from 20/09/2013.

⁵ Currently in the Republic of Moldova there is no concept approved at central level regarding the implementation of inclusive education in pre-school institutions.

2. Findings

2.1. Attitudes towards inclusive education

The research respondents provided information that revealed their general attitudes towards inclusive education. There was a mixture of attitudes.

Both pre-school and primary school teachers noted the importance of including children with SEN in a friendly learning environment that is centred on their needs. However, some expressed a preference for using separate activities for children with SEN, believing this would better prepare them for transition to primary school:

“A more effective transition can be achieved by organising separate activities in kindergarten, and not integration ones.” (FGD CD Susleni, Orhei)

Some of the teachers’ comments revealed the belief that the onus is on the child to ‘fit in’, and to have a set of skills that are suited to schooling. For instance:

“Future pupils should be agile, able to help themselves, to prepare their things in time for the lesson, to have developed motor skills, as some of them ... find it difficult to carry their belongings, encountering difficulties in writing, colouring and space orientation.” (FGD CD Magdacesti).

This is at odds with the premise of inclusive education, which stresses the importance of adapting the education process in order to enable every child to participate, regardless of their current abilities or skill levels.

Some teachers acknowledged the role of the school or other people in welcoming all children, and highlighted that pupils tend to be more welcoming than adults:

“It is important for these children to be tolerated and accepted by others”. (FGD CD Susleni, Orhei)

“Adults are usually those who stress pupils’ difficulties, while children accept each other the way they are.” (FGD CD Susleni, Orhei).

On the whole, parents believed that all children, including those with SEN and disabilities, should attend pre-school and school together:

“I think that all children are equal and have the same rights. Inclusion is a very good practice as it offers the child the chance to be treated the same as other children.” (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

“All children should attend kindergarten and school. If we stay at home, we don’t learn anything and they can become thieves. (IDI parent Susleni)

“It’s necessary that every child attends school... It’s important for ‘healthy’⁶ children to be ready to accept these children [children with SEN/disabilities].” (IDI Parent Susleni)

“At kindergarten the child [with SEN] has the opportunity to interact with the other children.” (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

⁶ In this context, parents and teachers spoke in terms of ‘healthy’ children (those who did not have disabilities). However, as disability is not automatically associated with health problems or ill-health, it is more appropriate and in line with the social model, to refer to children with disabilities and children without disabilities.

However, parents did not necessarily believe that children with *severe* disabilities could be included, due to the lack of support, and some of their opinions about these children were quite harsh:

“It’s good that all children attend the kindergarten, but it depends on the degree of disability and the condition of the child. I think children with severe health problems cannot attend kindergarten because teachers are not prepared to communicate and understand these children.” (IDI parent Pânăşeşti)

“There are children who cannot walk or even think. They cannot attend educational institutions because there are no additional services for these children and the environment is not ready to accept them.” (FGD Panasesti)

2.2. Teaching and learning practices

Many of the comments made by teachers and parents focused on the teaching and learning practices used in pre-schools and schools, and how these practices can facilitate or hinder a smooth transition for children from pre-school to school.

On the whole, practices in kindergartens were described – by teachers and parents – as being more child-centred and flexible, more focused on children’s all-round needs (not just learning from a strict curriculum), and more oriented towards children working collaboratively in groups:

“It is very important to see the child and everything that is related to his needs, to discover his potential and to build on this potential. In large group activities we raise children’s curiosity, while in small group activities we satisfy their curiosity.” (FGD CD Pânăşeşti, Străşeni)

“We prepare the child not just for school, but for life! ... The age of 6-7 is the time when the child is going through great changes, both physiological and psychological. The child needs to feel that his opinion or request is heard, to feel group membership, as group work doesn’t mean that each child should work separately with his own worksheet.” (FGD CD Susleni, Orhei)

“The kindergarten teacher understands my child and even when my child doesn’t want to do something she finds a way to involve him in the activity.” (IDI parent Panaseseti)

Most parents who were interviewed felt the pre-school helps their children to develop skills for daily living, learn new things and interact with peers.

Conversely, teaching and learning practices in primary schools were described by teachers and parents as more rigid, more physically and mentally demanding, and less responsive to learners’ needs:

“Schools should change more, in order to achieve child-centred learning.” (FGD CD Susleni, Orhei)

“We, pre-school teachers, emphasise interactive, child-centred learning, while the [primary school] teacher teaches. S/he needs that every child hears and listens to him/her and accomplishes the received tasks accurately. But children are different, each has his own needs and abilities.” (FGD CD Pânăşeşti)

“At kindergarten, working in activity centres, they succeed because they help each other, while at school the lessons are frontal so children don’t cope so well. It’s teacher’s duty to ensure the same

open, stimulating educational environment in which all children, and especially those with SEN, could feel free to make choices, express their opinions and even move when they need! It is a necessity for many of them. Very few children can stay still for 45 minutes.” (FGD CD Susleni)

“The school programme is very complicated. A child from the first grade has already to learn 4-stanza poems. Actually, from the very beginning, the school loads children with a lot of homework.” (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

“I became very worried since my child goes to school, because she has a lot of books to carry in her satchel and this is the cause of her back pain. Is it normal for a child in the first grade to carry the dictionary in his satchel?” (IDI parent Susleni)

The transition from pre-school to school inevitably involves a shock for many children, as they leave a familiar and ‘friendly’ style of learning and are faced with a very different, less supportive approach to teaching. Some parents were very concerned about this imminent change:

“At school I’m afraid he will be rejected by children and teachers.” (IDI Panasesti Straseni)

“As a parent, I’m very worried that soon, when my child goes to school, he won’t cope with the difficult school programme, as the curriculum is very complicated. Even from the very first days of school, children have difficult tasks.” (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

“The biggest concern for me and my family is how my child will adapt in school, how he will communicate, how he will integrate in school together with the other children.” (IDI parent Panasesti)

“I’m afraid that my little boy will not be able to study and everybody will laugh at him because he can’t talk. My husband says we should not enrol him in school... I’m afraid that he won’t cope and everybody will mock him” (IDI parent Panasesti)

“When my child starts to attend school, I would very much like him not to say ‘I want to go back to kindergarten’, but to say ‘I want to go to school!’.” (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

During focus groups, the pre-school teachers also expressed concerns about what happens when ‘their’ children transition to school:

“We always ask questions like: How will our children handle school? What will the teachers say about their preparation? How will they adapt to the new conditions? What impression will the teacher have about them?” (FGD CD Anenii Noi)

“We want very much our children to feel at least the same attitude and approach, as they did in kindergarten. We want that their needs are fulfilled by means of various learning strategies and techniques, so that they are approached individually, as much as it is possible. Children shouldn’t be expected to have the same results and the teachers should have a lot of patience with them.” (FGD CD Susleni)

2.3. Parents’ roles and expectations

The study revealed quite a lot of information about the role that parents have (or should have) in the transition process, and the expectations that parents have for the pre-school or school.

Most teachers felt that parents have an important role to play in ensuring children's successful transition:

"The parent should be more involved in the child's life, to take some responsibilities, to come more often to lessons, at least during child's adaptation period." (FGD CD Anenii Noi)

However, some teachers refuse to allow parents in the classroom, and do not seem to appreciate that parents could be 'specialists' in understanding and supporting their own children's needs:

"During the lesson only the teacher and the children should be in the classroom. ... [children] become more sensitive and irritated when they see their parents in the classroom! If it was a specialist who could offer them the help, then it would be different." (FGD CD Anenii Noi)

Some pre-school teachers mentioned that parents are sometimes relieved when their children start to attend pre-school rather than needing to be looked after at home all day. There are some 'hands-off' parents who:

"...let all the problems be solved by the institution and don't get involved too much. This type of parent thinks that school or kindergarten are obliged to take care of their children..." (FGD CD Anenii Noi).

Parents spoke about the ways in which they expect pre-schools to prepare their children for school. They expect pre-schools to promote personal autonomy and help children to establish social relations, follow social rules and solve problems within personal relationships.

"When the child goes to school he should know how to communicate with others, how to behave and what the rules of conduct are. When at kindergarten, the child should know to count, to tie shoelaces, to get dressed and to undress, to eat healthily... learn basic life skills." (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

Some parents put less emphasis on cognitive competences. Some wanted pre-schools to pay attention to communication skills, but felt that:

"...writing and reading skills are not essential in children's preparation for school..." (IDI parent Anenii Noi).

However, parents of children without SEN felt it was important for pre-schools to prepare children's cognitive competencies before the move to school:

"When my child was evaluated at school, the psychologist said that she can't write and read, thus she won't cope with the requirements, so she needs to learn reading and writing before she goes to school." (FGD parents Magdacesti)

"The child should know to count, should recognize figures, colours, letters..." (FGD parents Panasesti)

"The child who already knows to write and to read when he goes to school may lose interest, because in the first grade they learn letters again, however, not knowing these things can make it very difficult to cope with the requirements..." (FGD parents Magdacesti)

Parents stressed that pre-school teachers should efficiently support the children – as individuals – through the transition process:

“Kindergarten teachers should know the needs of each child and should meet these needs” (IDI parent Panasesti)

“It would be very useful if the teachers worked more time individually with each child and paid more attention to each of them, but they probably don’t manage, since there are so many children in the group.” (IDI parent Panasesti)

The discussions revealed that parents seldom express their ideas and concerns about the pre-school/school transition process because they consider that:

“...kindergarten teachers know better how to prepare the children for school.” (FGD parents Panasesti)

Some parents mentioned that nobody asks for their opinion, and that parents don’t ask questions:

“I don’t talk to the kindergarten teacher, only if she has something to tell me, I listen to her. I don’t ask questions.” (IDI parents Panasesti)

They noted that they need more information and support, especially those who have children with SEN:

“Probably, we parents need more communication and information to support our children.” (IDI parent Panasesti)

However, through interviews and focus groups, parents had difficulties in identifying their own needs and most frequently mentioned family financial difficulties.

Some parents mentioned that parents need to be more active during the transition process:

“[kindergarten teachers need] more of parents’ support in children’s preparation for school. Our attitude counts very much. Some teachers think that if the parent doesn’t care about this child, why should they care.” (FGD parents Magdacesti)

Parents also voiced opinions about their expectations for the role of the school during transition:

“I think that the school teacher has the most important role in this transition stage. It’s very important that the school teacher doesn’t give too much homework from the very first days of school attendance. The child needs an adaptation period and this should happen slowly, gradually, without too many tasks and pressures on the child.” (IDI parent Anenii Noi)

2.4. Communication issues

Many comments were made focusing on the importance of good communication and sharing of information – between kindergarten, school and parents – if children are to have an inclusive transition. The need for proper mechanisms for this was also raised.

“School teachers should inform themselves more about the children who are going to enrol in first grade. They can do this by means of portfolios (as we [pre-school] give them to schools), by discussions with kindergarten teachers, or open conversations with the parents. Secondly, they should observe [the children] and approach them individually, according to their needs.” (FGD CD Susleni)

“I think that teachers from both institutions need a more efficient and intense communication about the best way to interact and approach the children. We need to discuss more about the specific behaviour of some children and to establish some communication strategies with the family of the child with SEN.” (FGD CD Pânăşeşti).

Parents mentioned that they need more information, and need to work with the teachers:

“Children need our support, so we should collaborate with teachers to understand where the child finds difficulties.” (FGD parents Magdacesti)

It was also mentioned that parents need to feel that they are *able* to talk to teachers or that there is a benefit (and no risk) in doing so:

“First of all, the parent should be open to talk about his child’s problems with the teacher, and the teacher, of course, should maintain confidentiality.” (FGD CD Susleni)

“Because some come from vulnerable families, they are not open to be helped, they refuse to come to meetings or individual discussions, and sometimes they say that, anyway, nobody can help their children, so it’s not worth discussing about this with someone.” (FGD CD Magdacesti)

“The parents fear that their children will not cope with the school programme, both at curriculum level and daily routine. They don’t have yet the habit to discuss with the teacher the problems their children are facing. Maybe the cause is the lack of trust in the teacher or the fear that the teacher won’t maintain confidentiality.” (FGD CD Susleni)

2.5. Specialist support

Parents mentioned that children with SEN need support services in pre-school:

“I would need a speech therapist so that my child could talk and be like other children, being able to play and communicate with all children.” (IDI parent Panasesti)

“My child doesn’t benefit from special help. It would be better if the school had a support teacher who could deal individually with him. As far as I know, our school doesn’t have such kind of service, but I hope that next year it will be implemented.” (IDI parent Panasesti)

“My child benefits from the same services as the others, even if I think that he would need more attention and help as he has communication problems.” (IDI parent Panasesti)

Both pre-school and primary school teachers also noted the importance of support from specialists.

“We need specialists who can give us not just periodical advice, but also provide some services for these children. Kindergarten teachers need to know that at any moment they can request the help of specialists such as speech therapist, psychologist or educational psychologist.” (FGD CD Susleni)

“Maybe not every institution, but at least those institutions where there are more children with SEN should have a Resource Centre, where more specialists such as speech therapist, psychologist and therapist would work. A support teacher at kindergarten would help the kindergarten teachers to communicate with children with SEN and their parents in case there is no psychologist.” (FGD CD Măgdăcești).

Some general education institutions have resource centres for inclusive education and support teachers.⁷ Respondents seemed to mention these services as being segregated support:

“My child is in the first grade and he can’t read and write well, that’s why they send her to the resource centre, but I don’t agree. I’ve been to the doctor and I know that my child is ‘healthy’. Yes, she didn’t manage to learn everything she was taught, but this doesn’t mean she should be in a special group.” (FGD parents Magdacesti).

None of the respondents’ comments seemed to discuss whether or how specialist staff provide support specifically at times of transition.

2.6. Suggestions from respondents to make transition more inclusive

Specific practices that can help inclusive transition were suggested. Many of these focused on ensuring collaboration between teachers from pre-school and primary school. For example:

- Organising trips/visits for children from pre-school to school, so the children can see the classrooms where they will study. From time to time primary school teachers should come to pre-school and see the curricular and extra-curricular activities. (FGD CD Magdacesti)
- Distribution of children and class formation should be done in the sixth year of pre-school. As a result, the teacher will know the children who will enrol in his/her class and will go more often to pre-school and get acquainted with children and their needs. They will also establish collaborative relationships with children’s parents. (FGD CD Susleni)
- Teachers should visit [pre-schools] more often in order to notice the psychological state of the child and the methods applied by the pre-school teachers during activities with these children. On the other hand, the teacher should not be perceived as a guest; s/he should be involved in activities and

⁷ According to RCPA data in the Republic of Moldova there are 600 support teachers, and in educational institutions there have been about 600 resource centres for inclusive education created, which have supported 8,500 children with SEN to learn in the community school.

behave as a member of the children's team so that the children act naturally, without embarrassment or frustration. This will give the teacher a chance to really get to know the children. S/he will learn about their needs and potential, and see what to focus on when the children come to first grade. (FGD CD Panasesti)

3. Conclusions

The research revealed interesting and useful insights into issues related to inclusion and transition. Overall inclusive education was seen by many respondents as important for children's development and socialisation, though was not necessarily universally agreed on as an education approach for all learners at all times.

Approaches to teaching were revealed to be significantly different in pre-schools and primary schools. The former were considered by teachers and parents to be more child-centred, supportive and flexible; while teaching in schools was seen as more rigid, curriculum-driven, and unsupportive for learners. The impact on children (and parents) of the transition between these two approaches to teaching and learning is often negative. The challenges faced by children and parents at this time are often not adequately addressed. Some respondents expressed the opinion that schools need to learn more from the teaching methods used in pre-schools, or share experiences more between them, so as to ensure that children face less of a shock when they move to school.

Parents on the whole expect the pre-schools to prepare their children for school, and for the school to be welcoming and less rigid at the start (and primary school teachers also have an expectation that children will arrive 'prepared'). Parents' views varied on the extent to which social and/or cognitive skills should be developed by the pre-school as a precondition for moving up to school. Those whose children did not have SEN tended to place more emphasis on cognitive skill development in pre-school, while parents of children with SEN focused more on the importance of preparing children's social skills.

The role of parents in their children's education and transition to school seems limited, and at times even deliberately restricted. The responses give the impression that some parents lack agency/confidence to engage, while others are unaware of the importance of, or ways in which they could, engage more with their children's education and the transition process. Some parents wanted more information and support from the pre-school, school and specialists.

Systems for ensuring effective, sensitive and practically-oriented communication between pre-schools, schools and parents seem lacking, although ad hoc actions take place. Research respondents offered various suggestions for things that could be done to improve the transition process.