



Situational Analysis - Bulgaria

Flexibility of the System

The system of education in Bulgarian is flexible enough to allow incorporation of alternative teaching methods. Within the general curriculum and State Educational Standards, schools have particular flexibility to offer additional classes in some subject areas. The additional classes are 2 types:

- Obligatory chosen
- Free chosen

Those that are “obligatory”, match to the main curriculum and are covered by the funding, which schools receive as tuition fee from the budget for the kids enrolled during the current year. The “free chosen” classes are not funded by default and any costs that may be connected with them should be covered by restructuring of the school budget. This is the reason due to which some schools do not provide “free chosen classes” to their students.

Another state program, which allows including of additional topics into the curriculum is the so called “Your class”. It is funded by ESF (EU structural funds) and allows receiving of modest funding for introduction of extracurricular activities and/or clubs and other forms of additional schooling. The program allows covering the costs for extra payment to the teachers who implement such program, plus costs for materials and supplies (possibly also equipment). The funding may cover also tickets and travel costs for trips, visits to exhibitions, concerts, etc.

The program is designed with the view of the entire school-year duration and can take place also during the vacations (minimum 72 teaching hours). Teachers receive guidelines for the options they need to take in consideration while preparing their applications. Particular requirements towards the program is that it should be linked to the main educational curriculum, but should not double it. The rules of the program require obligatory involvement of parents (as guest lecturers and contributors to the content of the program).

In addition to that option, schools also can apply within special mechanism, established by the Ministry of Education in the last couple of years and to introduce “innovations” in their curriculum. Such “innovation projects” can be implemented for the period between 1 and 3 years with the endorsement and under the supervision of the Ministry. However, these initiatives are mostly endeavored by the management of schools, which are in competitive environment – those who would like to enroll more students and to compete for a reputation of excellence, since the school receives the label “innovative school”. At present the “innovative projects” are not backed with additional funding, but it is expected that practices that prove their sustainability and innovation may receive funding in the future.

Schools in the rural areas usually have no such ambition or necessity to make extra efforts and to introduce innovations in order to be competitive. Quite often they are without competition, not only in the same town/village, but are functioning as “gathering schools” for the kids from several places in the area.

In many cases, such schools are struggling by high absenteeism rates and premature drop-out from schooling. They usually opt for offering sports and dance clubs, arts or other type of activities, which are perceived as being “amusing” rather than “educative”, since these are preferred by the kids.

Nevertheless, such options depend largely on the talents, hobbies, skills and enthusiasm of the school teachers, as rural areas often suffer from lack of variety of specialists that may be



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engaged in such activities. Taking in consideration the increasing amount of administrative work both teaching and non-teaching staff is required to do, in many cases opportunities, offered by the system and the alternative programs, are not fully utilized.

All in all, school managements are not limited in opting for alternative methods of teaching, but sometimes retain from these, especially if they require additional administration and time spent for organizational, as well as for financial reasons – since extra time of the teachers might require additional payments.

Diversity

The ethnic diversity among schoolchildren in Bulgaria includes mostly Turkish and Roma along with the Bulgarians. The refugee children, enrolling in schools in the country are very few, as most of their families are looking to continue their journey out of Bulgaria.

Nevertheless, the notion of mutual distrust and certain level of segregation quietly persists and deepens as the need to act on the issue grows continuously.

It is exemplary that only in April 2018 a national forum dedicated to challenging trends in the “ethnically mixed regions” was held in Bulgaria for the first time. The event took place in the town of Plovdiv and aimed at bringing to focus the problems local authorities face in regards to cultural and other social issues when it comes to the Roma population.

Context of this analysis

With the view of SEDIN project, Center of Creative Training's team has studied more closely the circumstances in two municipalities. This analysis is based on data collected from rural schools in municipality of Sevlievo and city schools from Plovdiv. Both regions are economically well developed, though with substantial differences. While Plovdiv is the second biggest city in Bulgaria, Sevlievo should be considered more a town and the municipality includes substantial number of villages (the population of the Municipal center Sevlievo is 21000 citizens; the overall municipal population: 39000).

Both regions are multiethnic and multicultural with substantial share of ethnic minorities among the population. Among those minorities, the most numerous and well presented are Turkish and Roma.

Traditionally, Turkish minority in Bulgaria, with some exceptions in the rural areas close to the Southern state border, is well integrated in the society. Families are aiming at good education for their children who are encouraged to study and pursue careers. In a contrast, among the Roma population there are big differences in the attitude to the education. In particular, among Roma families migration abroad for seeking work is widespread. This is a prerequisite for some children to stay behind at the care of grandparents and/or for short term mobility of children and families abroad, which sometimes results of early school drop-out.

Montesori kindergartens in Plovdiv

Six municipal kindergartens in Plovdiv are working on Montesori curriculum. This is a long-term project, supported by the municipal administration, which funded the teacher's training and partially supported the replacement of the toys and teaching materials with such suitable for the Montesori curriculum. In 2017–2018 school year all children aged 3 to 5 in those kindergartens work on Montesori program and just the pre-school groups are still working with the traditional methodology. From the next school year the Montesori curriculum will be introduced for all children.



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Due to this, there is interest towards introducing Montessori methodology in some municipal schools, as this would allow the children from the Montessori kindergartens to continue their education following the same methodology.

Sevlievo – working economy, absent parents

The municipality of Sevlievo is one of the communities with high percentage of ethnic Roma and Turkish population. During the last national census (2011) approx. 75% of the population in this municipality declared Bulgarian ethnicity, 15% Turkish and about 2% self-determine themselves as Roma, while 7% of the people did not specify their ethnicity. However, the Roma children represent above 10% of the school population in this region due to the higher birthrate. The region is not challenged economically as it hosts several strong production companies, which provide with a chance for employment for the qualified members of the community. Nevertheless, low qualified people have problems to find well paid work, due to which the economic emigration is high.

The municipality of Sevlievo accommodates a total of nine elementary schools and four high schools (some of which are vocational). Most of the elementary schools are in the villages, while high-schools are concentrated in the city.

The poor overall performance in some of the schools can be viewed as an opportunity to incorporate new practices and to motivate the staff for better results.

Some relevant quotes from the EACEA report *The Teaching Profession in Europe – Practices, Perception, Policies* (Eurydice, 2015):

... Less than 25 % of teachers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, and Austria are aged less than 40. (p.20)

... big gaps between the amount of teaching time and the time of availability at school (such as the 18- hour gap in Bulgaria) imply that teachers spend long periods carrying out non-teaching duties on school premises. (p.26)

... Bulgaria does not regulate the total working time of teachers but does requires them to be available at school for 40 hours a week, which is longer than in any other European country.

In Bulgaria for example, teachers in the 40-49 age group account for 31.5 % ... of all teachers and express a needs level [in professional development] second only to that of teachers aged under 30 who however comprise 4.2 % of the teacher population. By contrast in Romania, teachers younger than 30 and those between 30 and 39 express the highest needs levels, and together represent over 50 % of all teachers. (p.57)

In Bulgaria and Ireland, the professional development plan is prepared at school level. It is based on the needs expressed by individual teachers and nationwide campaigns launched by the Ministry of Education in response to common needs ... (p.63)

In contrast to the data in that report (2015), which states that in Bulgaria “CPD is not stated in terms of professional duty or directly linked to promotion mechanisms”, the situation is now changed since 2016 when the new *Law on pre-school and school education* was introduced. Bulgarian teachers are now required to pass CPD and to collect within a period of 4 years minimum 4 qualification credits, which are equal to 64 academic hours of in-service training. Availability of such CPD credits will be taken in consideration by the school management for the professional attestation, which is to take place once every 4 years.



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Results from the interviews

The overall opinion of the educators (headmasters and teachers) involved in the data gathering is that the main

Strengths of the Bulgarian educational system are: highly professional teachers / dedicated teachers; good traditions; regular funding for ICT (incl. for upgrades of the equipment); delegated funding to the schools (which allows relative freedom of the school management regarding the spendings).

Weaknesses: constantly increasing administrative overload; often changing regulations; lack of young teachers; low salaries (although this is gradually changing); challenging family circumstances (of the students); low incomes of the families; disinterested students / students not willing to study / low motivated students; absent parents (in emigration) / lack of parental control; lack of support from families.

Values: most often answers enumerate the following:

- Performance
- Respect
- Competitiveness
- Cooperation
- Politeness

Since some of the data are gathered through conversation, it is not easy to put % against the values, mentioned by the respondents.

In general respondents list what they consider valid *in principle*, not particularly to what extent its implementation is successful. Comments usually state that the outcomes / success is variable.

Some respondents acknowledge that the Bulgarian education is still mostly focused on “knowledge”, not on “practice” (or “doing”, or “skills”). Comments also include that young people nowadays do not need particular encouragement of assertiveness as they have pretty high self-esteem.

Benefits/opportunities and risks intercultural situation brings within the class: Differences are mostly perceived as socio-economical rather than cultural. Comments cover mostly the attitudes of the Roma families, typically classified as not interested in education and not supportive for aspiring educational interests or ambitions.

Similarly, the risks are also perceived in the aspects of competition and source of conflicts between those who have more (better dressed, with smartphones and cash) and those who are poorer.

In general, Roma children tend to be among those who are most often considered inferior and even bullied. Due to this, some Roma families declare they are Turks (on the grounds of being also Muslim and generalizing this as ethnic affiliation).

Substantial risk that has been mentioned very often is the lack of sufficient language competences in Bulgarian language in children with different mother tongue. Although this concerns both Roma and Turks, it is again considered mostly a problem for Roma children, and also for children who grew/lived in emigration with their parents. In spite of the fact that the pre-school education (since the age of 5) is now obligatory in Bulgaria, still there are kids who start their school education with insufficient knowledge of Bulgarian language, which impedes their learning progress.



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Is the educational system able to respond to these identified risks:

Putting the risks mostly in areas who are not of direct influence by the school (namely – considered as family responsibility), teachers and headmasters do not think that the educational system is able to respond to those risks. Those risks are rather considered as impediment for the educators' work.

Nevertheless, most often respondents consider that they need trainings on strategies for active involvement of the parents / for communication with parents and for engaging them for support to the educational cause.

Among other possible solutions are mentioned: “differentiated work in the class” – though accompanied with the comment that this is very difficult to be achieved due to the requirements / the pressure from the curriculum.

Although radical solutions have not been suggested, respondents subtly comment that the curriculum contains too much content and maybe a bit looser regulations that may give them options to skip some content to the expense of more practical activities and project work might give better results.

What would you need to be able respond to these risks: answers span through

- “support from the institutions” – namely municipal authorities / mayors and others who may influence parents / families to send their children regularly to kindergarten / school and to encourage them to learn;
- “training” – topics mentioned: work with parents / how to engage parents; classroom management; conflict resolution; how to make education meaningful / how to motivate students / new methods; exchange of good practices / learning from other colleagues
- “parents' club”;
- “support from the community” – involvement of wider group of people (particularly considered possible in villages);
- More lenient policy towards the absences of students who face difficulties (the administrative directions are pretty tight and cases of 15 unexcused absences – where 1 absence is given for an unattended teaching hour – require administrative actions), accompanied by counselling and community support measures;
- “dance clubs” / “yoga activities”;
- “conversations with students” / “motivational meetings” / “meetings with parents”

Do the refugee/migrant children have specific needs: All respondents agree that refugee / migrant and minority children have specific needs.

How to respond to them: answers bring back the same solutions already mentioned above as needed for answering the risks.

At local and regional level, are there networks and collective spaces for discussing these situations with other schools? There are no such establishments – neither provided by the local or educational authorities, nor such formed by the civic society initiatives or networks.

Ideally, when the question concerns the students / kids, support should be provided by the school psychologists / school counsellors. However, schools are not obliged to hire such specialists. This position is optional for schools with less than 400 students; besides, such specialists can be engaged also part-time or shared between 2 schools (on half-day contract). Apart from the question of the mere availability of such specialist in the school, much bigger question is the qualification of these specialists who rarely have undergraduate degree or other comprehensive training in psychology, but just short-term training instead. In



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most cases, these are specialists with pedagogical background, who took some additional career development courses and lack practical experience in the new field of realisation.

With the new *Law for pre-school and school education* (in power since 2016–2017 school year) were established the so called *Centers for support of the personal development*. These are not completely new establishments, since also previously on municipal level existed establishments such as “Child centers” and/or “Resource centers” – with first mostly engaged to ensure extracurricular activities and clubs, and the second ones addressing the kids with special needs.

According to the new legislation, the *Centers for support of the personal development* will provide a *physical, psychological and social environment* for equal access to education and for the development of the abilities and skills of both children and pupils with special educational needs, chronic health conditions or at risk, as well as those with prominent talents. By default, these centers should work with children with refugee / migrant background whose families already have permanent permission for stay in Bulgaria and are enrolled in public schools. They should also provide support to the kids with minority background, who answer either of the profiles described above.

These centers should provide *general* and *complementary* support, determined by the individual educational needs of each child and each pupil. The *general* support includes interest activities, career guidance for students, prevention of violence and tackling problem behavior, pedagogical and psychological support, health care, speech therapies, early needs assessment and prevention of learning difficulties, incl. moral and material rewards and providing dormitory. *Additional* support will include individual work with a child / pupil on a case-by-case basis for children with special educational needs, high school students with chronic illnesses or at risk. This includes also activities that address their abilities and talents in the fields of science, technology, arts, sports, leadership skills, and other.

These centers are also entitled to provide additional psycho-social rehabilitation, rehabilitation of hearing and speech, vision, communicative disorders and physical disabilities.

While on paper this sounds great, in reality these centers are situated in the municipal or county centers (i.e. in the cities) which inevitably limits the access of the kids from the rural schools to their services. Furthermore, taking in consideration that each center provides services to the children from certain area, their resources and capacity is quite limited to reach out all children that may need support.

Not the least, the child can't be directed to the services of these centers without prior parents' consent, which sometimes is not given due to fear of stigmatizing.

Is the official teachers training programme adapted to multicultural contexts:

Respondents consider that the contemporary teacher training is more diverse and allows better preparation for the new teachers. Unfortunately, just small number of young people chose this profession and again – rural areas are more disadvantaged. At the same time, young teachers lack practical experience and confidentiality to implement novelties. They also easily get in distress, if they have problematic students.

In your school, what kind of challenges have your teachers been facing within their class and with their pupils:

Main challenges mentioned are related to giving sufficient attention to the students who are lagging behind – due to insufficient language competences or other difficulties including limited social competences (lack of self-management skills, hygiene habits, etc.). Other challenges include scarce financial resources or lack of family



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support (incl. parents in emigration). Even in smaller classes (with 16–18 students) spending time to pay individual attention to the students with difficulties is considered to be at the expense of the other students.

Teachers usually discuss and seek support from their colleagues in individual conversations. There are no established practices for collective discussion and handling of particular cases, except such that received public attention and which should be discussed by the pedagogical council of the school with the view of introduction of administrative or other punitive measures.

In schools that have pedagogic councilors, teachers occasionally discuss cases with them or, most often, send kids for consulting with the councilor / psychologist. Activities rarely address the whole class or group of children (i.e. mediation, reconciliation, prevention).

With the view of the **participation of your pupils within the class and relations among pupils** teachers share that the relations between the kids in the primary school stage are mostly harmonious and it can't be stated that there are formed groups with strong cleavages. Very often, the core group of children in the class have been together since the kindergarten, where groups are also ethnically mixed. The biggest challenge for the kids in the 1st grade come from the new environment, new social skills and knowledge they have to master. Practically, kids never group or get in controversy on ethnic / religious principle.

Relations of competitiveness and cooperation are mostly based on personal qualities, ambition, educational achievements or character rather than any ethnic (or religious) principle. School activities, on the other hand, are entitled to build skills for cooperation and mutual respect, which are often mastered by curricular and extra-curricular activities.

The cases of disturbance and bad behavior are mostly attributed to lack of social skills and bad examples / influence from the family, neighborhood, or television (rarely on computer gaming – given the age of the pupils). There are also cases of hyperactive children and children with special learning needs (incl. dyslexia) who are also enrolled in the classes with the view of the policy for inclusive education and desegregation.

How would you describe the involvement of the parents: referring to the risks and challenges already mentioned and discussed, respondents repeat that receiving parents' support is sometimes most problematic in their work.

Respondents from the city schools refer also to parents being over busy and lacking time to pay attention to the kids readiness for the school and/ or to respond to other invitations for support from the school / class teacher.

Do the national educational system and/or the civil society offer further education training programs for teachers: Teachers have multiple offers for short-term courses, seminars and trainings. Since late 2016 functions a *National register for the approved training programs for pedagogical specialists* where every organization that provides teacher training courses, and has established system for control of the quality, can register programs after evaluation and endorsement by the Ministry of education. Universities also provide short training programs for in-service teachers. Most of the universities have special departments for in-service teacher training, which provide also systematic assessment and validation for career development, according to a 5-level system. Passing each of the levels grants higher professional qualification degree, which is also connected with higher salary.

The funds entitled to teachers' qualification are managed by the schools who are obliged to spend part of their yearly budget for teacher trainings. They comprise between 0,5% to 0,8%



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from the school budget. Many teachers also declare that they are ready to spend their own money to attend short term trainings, which they consider useful and necessary, as well as to attend training that do not bring them qualification credits.

The current legislation also obliges schools to organize “internal” qualification for the teachers in the form of exchange of good practices and sharing knowledge and information from qualification trainings, paid by the school, which were attended by the members of the staff. The effectiveness of such internal trainings varies between the schools. In some schools there are established procedures for such exchange, while others address these processes rather formally.

Have you heard about alternative and active educational methods, such as Montessori and Creative learning? All respondents state they have heard about Montessori and Creative learning methods.

They do not consider “creative learning” a single systemized methodology, but rather cumulative title for different approaches than employ arts, projects and other activities that provide fun and are, generally, more involving for the students.

Respondents from Plovdiv were much better informed about Montessori, as they know that some municipal kindergartens already work with this methodology. Respondents have heard more general or more detailed information about the method, but neither of those covered by the inquiry knew the method in details.

Teachers from the schools in Sevlievo municipality have heard about Montessori, but considered it more applicable / spread among the private educational institutions and expressed doubts to what extent it matches with the official curriculum.

What do you think about these methods’ compatibility with you educational system: Neither of the respondents in the inquiry considered him/herself informed enough to make conclusions regarding the methods’ compatibility with the national educational system. Doubts expressed were mainly regarding the compatibility of the methods for the systematic delivery of the content for meeting the standards of the national external assessment, applied at the end of each school stage (including the final examination – the so called “matura”).