

STEP BY STEP NETWORK - TO A HIGHER QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IN KINDERGARTENS

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In 1994, the Open Society Institute of Slovenia decided to start introducing the Step by Step Programme (hereafter SbS) in Slovenia, which was designed by the Open Society Institute, New York (hereafter OSI). The program was aimed at renewing approaches to early education and care in the public education system for children from birth to 10 years of age, with the introduction of humanistic and democratic approaches that focus on the well-being of the child; the right of all children to quality education and care (ECEC); active cooperation and the inclusion of families and communities in educational work and the inclusion of children with special needs and Roma children in regular programmes of kindergarten and school. After thorough preliminary preparations (formation of the core team; development of the implementation plan; selection of kindergartens; setting personnel and structural conditions in the selected kindergartens, and providing training for future facilitators), we started implementing the programmes in the school year 1995/96 in 8 kindergartens, in 18 departments with children aged three to 6 (school entry age). For two years, OSI provided funding for all personnel and material conditions for the operation of the program. After two years, we transferred the SbS programme to the Educational Research Institute, where we established the SbS Centre to ensure the sustainability of the programme's operation and development. In order to ensure continuity in approaches, we also started with the introduction of the SbS programme in kindergarten departments with the youngest children as well as in the first four grades of primary school. However, this paper will focus on the development of initiatives in kindergartens, where by the year 2000 the SbS programme was implemented in 231 departments around 38 kindergartens. In the same year, the OSI financial support for the expansion of the programme completely stopped, which posed a challenge to maintain the already achieved changes in practice, further expansion and development of the programme and funding of the Centre (Vonta, 2015).

After the implementation of the Kindergarten Curriculum (1999), the interest of ECEC professionals in continuous participation in the SbS programme somewhat faded, despite the fact that in the same year the Expert Council for Education of the Republic of Slovenia validated the SbS methodology as one of the implementation forms of the national kindergarten curriculum. At the same time, the interest in trainings, which were also co-financed by the Ministry of Education, increased. During this period, 550-850 professionals attended multi-day seminars, which were organized and conducted by the SbS Centre. The power of our influence on the practice of these participants was limited, due to the lower intensity and non-continuous support for introducing changes into practice and thus for critical

assessment of their own practices. Based on this we can assume that certain number of professionals or kindergartens failed to achieve all the desired changes in practice. Furthermore, the SbS Centre could not monitor continuously the quality of implemented changes by the ECEC professionals into their practice due to the larger number of training participants.

This situation led us to consider the design and development of an integrated system of continuous support for improving the quality of the educational process, which operates at all levels of the competent system: 1) at the level of the individual professional, 2) at the level of the kindergarten, 3) between institutions and kindergartens and between kindergartens, 4) at the level of evaluation and support of achieved changes. For this purpose, the Step by Step Network for Quality in Education (hereafter the Network) was established. Despite having a good insight in the international development in this field, we did not find similar solutions that would form a competent system at all these levels.

From the very beginning, the Network's mission has been aimed at ensuring the quality of the educational process. This was done by developing, implementing and evaluating systems, processes, tools, organizational solutions and substantive support in order to facilitate this process for practitioners. It was based on the knowledge that only high-quality preschool education has lasting positive effects on the child's development, that the continuous professional development of all the providers of this process is crucial for the achieved level of quality, and that in this process the providers need professional support. We understand the concept of the quality of educational work as a dynamic process of development, which is based on information from the practice, from the research findings, political initiatives as well as from increasingly demanding social phenomena and trends. However, the responsibility for prompt responses to these changing conditions and having a critical view on what has been achieved cannot be put only on ECEC professionals. This situation needs competent system support, which was confirmed also by the recent research (Urban et al., 2011, Sharmahd et al. 2017, Ionescu et al. 2018), which also involved our Network as an example of good practice. We therefore link the process of changing practice with the processes of continuous professional development of the individual, which takes place in cooperation and support from others.

The Network has been changing organizational-wise over the 20 years of operation according to the already described needs (Vonta, 2011). Below we emphasize some most significant features for designing a successful Network.

1. At the kindergarten level, the design predicted establishing one or more SbS professional teams, which are now called professional learning communities. These teams connect ECEC professionals, counsellors and kindergarten management, who meet regularly (at least once a month). Each professional community is led by a coordinator/facilitator of the learning community.

2. Professional learning communities (hereafter PLCs) are members of the SbS Network. This inter-institutional level offers an exchange of knowledge and experience between practitioners and institutions and at the same time enables an insight into practice of others, which is enriching for hearing other's points of view. The network is led by the SbS Centre, which has the role of a coordinator and pedagogical supporter, it monitors and evaluates the achieved changes in the quality of practice. The Centre plans, organizes and facilitates meetings of the Network's members. Furthermore, it connects members through conducting workshops and trainings. The Centre also provides consultations, monitoring and mentoring to PLC coordinators as well as to the management of the Network member kindergartens. The SbS centre is also involved in developing professional materials, in it cooperates with other relevant organisation in designing tools and other professional publications at the international level. At the same time, the SbS Centre cooperates with ECEC professionals in developing new approaches to support the professionals' continuous professional development, it acts as a model in implementing changes and is in charge of evaluation (e.g. identification of strengths and weaknesses of an individual's practice; preparation of a professional development plan; observation of practice, which is followed by a reflective discussion etc.). The SbS Centre also organizes professional events (study visits, expert conferences) and initiates research projects at the international level. And lastly, it is in charge of the promotion and expansion of the Network's work.

3. Within the Network, quality educational processes comprehends the following areas: interactions; partnership with families and community; diversity, inclusion and democratic values; planning the work based on monitoring the child's development and learning; learning strategies; environment for learning and professional development. Each area is defined by pedagogical principles of quality and these by examples of quality indicators. Together they represent the conceptual direction of change and development of the educational process, which is based on humanistic and democratic approaches. The designed conceptual and substantive framework is based on practically identified and scientifically defined areas and pedagogical principles that contribute to the quality of the educational process and their indicators. Principles and indicators were identified, co-designed and developed based on the experience of ECEC professionals, who implemented the SbS approach within the framework of the International Step by Step Association and in cooperation with international experts. The development of the principles of process quality has been ongoing since 2000, and has included verification and testing in practice, international evaluation and development studies (Howard, Vonta, 2010). In the last ten years, the work was also focused on the development of supporting materials, handbooks, instruments and tools that provide professionals a variety of options for changing the quality of processes (Ionesco et al., 2018).

4. Within the Network, several trainings are offered to encourage a deeper understanding and better implementation of pedagogical processes (observation and analysis of one's own and others' practice; monitoring the presence or absence

of quality indicators; self-reflection and group reflection; decision-making and choosing the focus of change, teamwork and implementation as growth of PLCs etc.).

5. The network is distinguished by its sustainable development, which is based on considering the dimensions of professionalism. Content-wise it is aimed at acquiring and in-depth understanding of specific knowledge, skills and professional values. These represent defined focal points, within which the members of the Network choose those they wish to develop, thus ensuring the autonomy of professionals. The key principle of the Network's operation is also inclusivity, with the inclusion of all professionals who implement child-centred approaches (kindergarten teachers and their assistants) in the learning community and thus in all phases of quality change. This establishes collegial communication based on trust and incentives and develops a culture of risk, initiative, creativity and active participation of each member in planning, implementing and developing new approaches. Kindergarten counsellors and management are also involved in these processes. The management is also responsible for the quality of the educational process in kindergartens. Only their in-depth understanding of pedagogical principles enables them to understand and ensure the conditions for changing practice and thereby ensuring quality. Finally, the design of the Network also foresees processes and initiatives that contribute to the reputation of the profession and enable the individual to advance in their professional ambitions (professional meetings and conferences on the national and international level, certificate of excellence, trainings for mentors, trainings for trainers of other practitioners, participation in research projects).

6. Finally, the sustainability of the Network also relies on the principle of financing. In our case, member kindergartens and primary schools pay for the services that the Centre offers to members. In the initial phase, the services were unified for all, but we later differentiated them due to the growing differences in the needs of the involved professionals. The members of the Network choose appropriate support based on their needs and finance it from funds for professional development, which are given to each educational institution in Slovenia. However, the funds obtained in this way do not cover all the costs of the Network's operation, which is why the Centre is involved in other projects as well. This puts a heavy burden on the Centre's umbrella team, which is in principle represented by three to five female researchers with a smaller share of obligations in the Network.

The SbS Network definitely stands out in terms of the number of involved professionals and its sustainability. The data show that by 2007 around 500-600 practitioners were included in the Network. The implementation spread mainly in the same kindergartens (around 35). Even in later years, we can observe a relatively constant number of kindergartens included in the Network (from 34 to 36), which has slightly decreased in recent years (to 30). The number of practitioners within

these kindergartens increased to more than 1,000 after 2008 (Vonta, 2011) and to more than 2,000 by 2016 (Ionescu et.al., 2018).

With its structure, method and content of operation, the Network made a significant contribution to the development of democratic approaches in the educational process. The support system for practitioners, which we developed and which includes various system levels (individual, institution, inter-institutional and international cooperation, as well as the level of pedagogical leadership, management and evaluation) contributed to this, and helps and contributes to the research of various strategies for ensuring and changing process quality with the participation of all stakeholders. In doing so, the design also pursues all the dimensions that define professionalism: 1) specific knowledge, skills, values, 2) autonomy, 3) participation and 4) reputation. At the level of practice in all participating kindergartens, the Network strengthened the quality of the process and the innovation of the professionals. Furthermore, it made it possible to connect research work and practice; to translate and verify theory in practice and vice versa; to maintain and deepen the achieved changes and secure the initial investment in the project; to place domestic knowledge of the Network in the development of preschool education policies and strategies on the international level, which could not have been achieved without the sincere dedication of all the individuals who participated in it. It should be emphasized, however, that the process is not over, as the concept of the quality of the educational process will also have to change in the future, and the approaches and strategies of the [Step by Step Network will also respond to this.](#)

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