



**Sarah Klaus describes an international programme which works to promote child-centred practice and community involvement in early childhood services.**

## Step by Step to community involvement

The former communist system built on Eastern Europe's rich history of innovation in child development, establishing an enviable infrastructure of centre-based early childhood services, staffed by highly educated professionals. There was an emphasis on learning through didactic whole-class instruction, reflecting the values of the political system. But, at the same time, teachers' expertise in child development served as a valuable resource in education reform. A regional decline in social services and funding followed the collapse of the communist system. In the countries of the former Soviet Union, factories and other enterprises going through the painful process of privatisation closed affiliated services, including nurseries and kindergartens. Funding for the running costs of other centres was reduced. Many trained workers lost their jobs. But although under-resourced and buffeted by political change, the extensive infrastructure of early childhood services survived. It was into this situation that the Step by Step Programme was introduced.

### A new initiative

The Step by Step Programme, created by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Soros Foundation network in 1994, began as a two-year initiative to introduce child-centred teaching methods and family participation into the early childhood services of 15 former Soviet Bloc countries. Programme development began in 1993, by assessing the impact on young children and their education of the

break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the velvet revolutions in Central Europe. It made sense for the OSI to support children and families by strengthening the services provided through the remaining early childhood centres. Eleven years on, the programme has developed into the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), a 30-country network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in large-scale national reform and regional advocacy not only in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, but also in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Mongolia, Haiti, and most recently, Argentina. Serving children from birth to ten years, ISSA implements innovative education reform based on child-centred learning and direct community engagement.

### A methodology not a curriculum

Implementation requires each country to integrate Step by Step pedagogy with existing national curricula and community contexts. Step by Step is a compilation of best international child-

centred practices, drawing from diverse influences such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson and Dewey. Step by Step classroom practice is guided by two core beliefs:

- children create their own knowledge from experience and interaction with the world around them.
- teachers and parents facilitate learning through play, fostering children's development by building on their interests, needs, and strengths.

Using a thematic approach, classrooms are organised around developmentally appropriate activities, tailored to the learning level of each age group, and resourced with materials to meet the needs of individual children. Teachers build a community of learners that values intellectual curiosity, creativity, enthusiasm, empathy and caring. Parents are encouraged to join in classroom activities, share their talents, create learning materials, attend parent meetings, and engage in programme governance.

The **Open Society Institute (OSI)** is a private foundation that aims to promote democratic governance, human rights, and economic, legal, and social reform. The OSI was created in 1993 by investor and philanthropist George Soros to support his foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which were set up to help countries make the transition from Communism. The International Step By Step Association (ISSA) is a non-governmental membership organisation established in the Netherlands in 1999. It provides early childhood professionals with opportunities for ongoing growth, develops educational resources, and implements programmes based on child-centred approaches, active parent and community involvement, and current research. Its members share a vision of an open society where the entire community helps all children reach their full potential.

[www.soros.org](http://www.soros.org) and [www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl)



In Moldova, Step by Step began for pre-school children in 1994 and offers higher education training, and support for middle school teachers.

Step by Step focuses on the OSI's core mission, the strengthening of civil society, by engaging families and communities in the education process and by introducing methodologies that develop critical thinking, responsibility, choice, and respect for differences. The programme improves opportunities for minority, at-risk, impoverished and disabled children and their families, through anti-bias initiatives and educational interventions that promote inclusive, integrated settings that value diversity. Training undertaken by Step by Step promotes teachers' creativity, freedom and responsibility by providing a solid foundation in the principles of child-centred teaching and examples of activities and child-initiated thematic units, rather than prescribing ready-made plans. Step by Step's Child Assessment forms assist teachers in tracking children's development and individualising instruction in co-operation with parents.

In each country where Step by Step is implemented, a team of early childhood experts adapts the programme to cultural contexts, and develops an implementation strategy. Step by Step first pilots programmes in some public early childhood centres and primary schools, and then creates training centres

in the best of these. Simultaneously, the programme actively engages in the reform of teacher training systems and national policies. Emphasis is placed on the development of professional capacity at all levels.

#### Quality and excellence

In 1999, ISSA launched its Early Childhood Quality Initiative, to promote ongoing professional development and recognise excellence in early childhood teaching. A task force of experts from 11 countries designed standards that ensure quality in the scale-up of country programmes. The resulting publication, *ISSA Pedagogical Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades*, defines standards and indicators that provide a common framework for teachers to develop and measure professional growth with the support of trained mentors.

Teachers can apply for certification. This process-based assessment is supported by standards-based training and manuals

for teachers, mentors and certifiers. ISSA Standards are not intended only for use with Step by Step programmes, but can be used as a basis for evaluating child-centred teaching more broadly. They are also adaptable to national and cultural contexts.

Studies consistently show children in Step by Step reaching or exceeding average test scores in academic subjects and that the programmes promote social and emotional development. Children in Step by Step score high on tests measuring co-operation, leadership, self-esteem, problem solving, and perseverance.

The recent enlargement of Europe creates a strong impetus for close collaboration on early childhood issues within the region. ISSA helps connect the strong regional history in child development with new advances in pedagogy. In so doing, ISSA creates a dynamic forum for trans-European professional dialogue. ■

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