



2019 PEER LEARNING ACTIVITIES OVERVIEW



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INTERNATIONAL STEP BY STEP ASSOCIATION

The **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)**, is a growing network and professional learning community encompassing over 90 organizations from 43 countries. Together we are dedicated to exploring and improving quality, equity, and access in early childhood education and care through pioneering initiatives and partnership projects.

ISSA's vision is of a society where families, communities and professionals work together to empower each child to reach her or his unique potential and embrace values of social justice and equity.

- **Do you share ISSA's this vision?**
- **Do you work in the field of Early Childhood Development?**
- **Can your organization benefit from being part of our community?**

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2019 Peer Learning Activities (PLA) in figures

7
PLAs

23
ISSA Member Organizations
from
12
countries

191
Participants

600
Indirect Beneficiaries

56,000 Eur
Investment





In 2019, as part of ISSA's core goal to ensure a rich learning environment for its Members, Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) continued to foster the exchange of experience and expertise among different organizations across Europe and Central Asia. ISSA is highly valued for its capability to bring together professionals from all contexts and backgrounds, professionals who

are deeply committed to delivering the best early childhood development services. In this regard, the PLAs represent a great opportunity to many professionals to validate and expand their knowledge and to co-create knowledge with peers from across different countries for collective benefit.

Ten years have passed since ISSA started to support these

cross-country activities, a decade in which more Members joined the association and cooperation between them increased significantly.

In total, around 51 PLAs have taken place within the ISSA network, benefiting more than 13,000 professionals. Every year, these events involve an increasing number of participants, from professionals working in ISSA Member

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Organizations, to policy makers and practitioners.

In 2019, several topics were addressed during the seven PLAs that took place throughout the year. These ranged from inspiring best practices on how to provide better care to children with special needs, to fruitful debates on the role of the teaching assistant and the tools to advocate for their recognition within the national education system. Participants found it valuable to exchange knowledge, and the eye-opening experiences will certainly impact their professional development in their short- and long-term careers.



The Peer Learning Activities are financially supported by ISSA with financial or in-kind contributions from its Members.

If you would like to participate, consider joining as a member of ISSA.

If you would like to learn more about our PLAs, contact us at membership@issa.nl.

Sharing good educational practices for the promotion of Roma inclusion in ECD

Through various field visits and a round table for a large number of participants, Serbia's Romani Early Years Network team office organized a complete event with a practical and theoretical approach.

Within the framework of the Romani Early Years Network (REYN) and its study visits to promote cross-country peer learning in early childhood development (ECD) practices, Serbia's **Association of Pedagogical Assistants of Serbia (APAS)**, the host of REYN Serbia, organized a two full-day program for its colleagues from REYN Bulgaria (**Trust for Social Achievement**). How do we foster good relationships and a culture of behavior in pre-school institutions? Which policies—at the local and national level—have a real impact on the social inclusion of Roma children? These are some of the many top-



ics which were effectively discussed by early education teachers, sociologists and pedagogical assistants with the 45 participants who attended the round table from both countries.

“During this event we had a dynamic discussion about local and national policies implemented in both countries in the field of social inclusion. For instance, we outlined our efforts to guarantee that current Serbian policies are more favorable towards Roma children when enrolling in kindergarten are actually respected and implemented. From our Bulgarian colleagues, we learned the pedagogical approaches which Bulgarian educators use to transcend cultural differences among children, and how they implement creative activities to get Roma parents involved, providing them with transportation and other facilities so that they can attend their programs without interruption. Getting Roma parents motivated so that their children can enjoy a full-day educational program is a common challenge we face in Serbia,” explains Slađana Miladinović, member of APAS and a primary-school pedagogical assistant.

After a fruitful debate, the group was invited to visit the Djurdjevdan preschool institution in Kragujevac where they got to know, in detail, the challenges and stimulating experiences that the professionals working there have encountered when working with Roma families. *“Our col-*

leagues appreciated the well-equipped and amount of space in the center as well as the fact that it is close to Roma settlements and always accessible to the Roma families,” states Slađana. The peer learning activity concluded with a visit to the TOY Library at Romaničen and a meeting with members of APAS. All participants emphasized the importance for pre-school groups, including Roma children, of visiting the library regularly as a way to playfully introduce Roma culture to them all, slowly contributing to the erosion of stereotypes that non-Roma children often learn from their peers or family relatives. Lastly, they were able to share their views on the essential role that pedagogical assistants play when it comes to supporting the integration and inclusion of Roma children.

In this way, the Serbian education system has recognized such a position since 2002 although its responsibilities remain too broad and require a better definition. *“Thanks to this Peer Learning Activity, I think REYN Bulgaria learnt about the relevance of establishing a professional network at the local, regional and national levels, as the only way to reach sustainable solutions for the social inclusion of Roma children. From them, we also learnt how essential it is to build networks and connect professionals, and we were highly inspired by their remarkable commitment, creative solutions, and motivation to find—within the framework available—the most fruitful ways of overcoming the challenges that the education of Roma children brings them at all levels, especially at an early age.”*

Participants: 45
Member Involved: Trust for Social Achievement – Bulgaria
Guest Organization: Association of Pedagogical Assistants of Serbia (APAS) – Host of REYN Serbia

TRUST
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ACHIEVEMENT



Advocating for the better regulation of teacher assistant position in Ukraine

The Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation welcomed colleagues from Serbia, Slovakia and other national NGOs and institutions to discuss national policies around equal education for children with special educational needs, as well as the role of the teacher's assistant within the Ukrainian education system.

More than 300 participants from Ukraine attended the event organized within the Peer Learning Activity by **The Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation** in 2019, where colleagues from Serbia and Slovakia contributed. One of the key topics was how to build a barrier-free learning environment, in which Ukrainian schools are more inclusive towards children who find the mainstream comprehensive education system challenging. Participants shared their stories on the mechanisms which



best support the transition from pre-school education to primary school for these children.

Most importantly, the event focused on the regulatory framework and institutionalization of the position of teaching assistant in Ukraine. Working conditions, description of the duties and training requirements were some of the issues that professionals from Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine discussed. *“Nowadays, there is a strong discussion in our country on how pedagogical requirements for teacher assistants should be defined. The assistant has been seen as someone who cares for the physical needs of a specific child in the class. By recognizing them as teacher assistants, as is being done in Serbia with practitioners who work with Roma children, Ukraine’s education system could empower this workforce in a more efficient way,”* explains Olena Hloba, member of the Step by Step Foundation in Ukraine. For Olena, this PLA activity provided its participants with a deep insight into the issue and has inspired policy makers, university teachers and regional government representatives, showing them that such a change is possible. *“There may be many challenges, but if others have been able to overcome them, so can we: this is the main lesson we all learnt,”* she concluded. Having received feedback, the Step by Step Foundation is aiming to advocate for the develop-

Participants:	15 directly funded by the PLA out of an event of 300
Indirect Beneficiaries:	± 200 children with special needs and 100 Romani families
Members Involved:	Step by Step Foundation – Ukraine Wide Open School – Slovakia
Guest Organization:	Association of Pedagogical Assistants of Serbia (APAS)

ment of policies at national level that better define the role of the teaching assistant in the Ukrainian education system. *“This PLA creates new opportunities for further cooperation between Ukraine and other European countries, and it strengthens an evidence-based approach to ensure quality, safety and inclusiveness in the education system of our country,”* concludes the organizer. As Erika Szaboova, one of the participants, described, *“I was amazed at how fierce we all were, how productive and eager to learn from each other and, most of all, how supportive and welcoming our colleagues from Ukraine were. Seeing so many people fighting for an*

inclusive environment for all remains a great inspiration for me, and will, for many months to come.”

To the Serbian participants, from the **Association of Pedagogical Assistants** and the Slovakian representative, from The **Wide Open School** (Skola Dokoran), the forum not only provided insight on a pedagogical regulation framework, but it also allowed them to visit the many inclusive resource centers that the SbS Foundation is running in Ukraine: *“something they were very surprised about and will try to replicate in their country,”* added Olena.



Everyone on the floor to play!

A team from Soft Tulip Netherlands visited the For Our Children Foundation in Bulgaria and shared a new methodology that stimulates family play with special-needs children.

What if a toilet paper roll could turn into a great toy for playing with colors? And if a handful of fry macaroni could help children develop their motor skills? These are some of the tips shared during the peer-learning activity organized by the Bulgarian foundation, **For Our Children**, in Sofia. A team of three experts from the Dutch organization **Soft Tulip** was invited to introduce FloorPlay, a new methodology that encourages parents and caregivers to play simple but inspiring games



everyday home objects, right on the floor, with children who have special needs. In exchange, the Dutch practitioners had the chance to visit the social services of community support, foster care and family-type placement for babies that For Our Children runs in Sofia. *"The enormous motivation of the professionals working in these centers impressed us very much,"* says Soft Tulip director Eric Bloemkolk, *"especially those at the baby center. The diligent process through which these children are transferred to their adoptive parents, in a very gradual manner, to develop a good family attachment...it was amazing. We work with Ukrainian partners who run such centers and we will certainly try to promote this practice there as well,"* he concludes.

Practitioners attending the two-day activity got to know the particularities of the Dutch and the Bulgarian social-service system when it comes to children with special needs. More importantly, they learnt successful hand-on practices from their peers that help build a holistic approach to the family care of these special children, through real cases involving ECD professionals, parents and their children. *"Our colleagues were very enthusiastic with the way the Dutch team taught us about this new methodology because they are care givers, too. So instead of training from an expert level they related to us in a down-*

to-earth manner, so that we were all speaking the same language. It was a true peer-learning activity, in its most pure sense," adds Dimitar Ivanchev, For Our Children Project Coordinator. This session will help his foundation develop a working methodology for a new ECD center for children with special needs that is planned to open in the coming months. *"This is why we looked for an organization with experience in this field. We liked Soft Tulip's holistic approach, involving the child's parents in the playing sessions,*

and with such basic materials as shaving cream to stimulate kids with sensorial deficiencies," specifies Dimitar. In the words of Raya Tsvetanova, Senior Early Childhood Intervention Specialist and one of the participants, *"in today's fast-paced world, parents are overloaded and have less time to play with their children. Through fun and play, the child learns, and also builds trusting relationships and an emotional bond with the caregiver. Parents are our most valuable partners and they are the best therapists for our children."*

Participants:	20
Targeted to:	Children with special needs from birth to 7 years old
Members Involved:	For Our Children – Bulgaria Soft Tulip – the Netherlands



Working for a stronger collaboration between parents and ECD practitioners

From the daily work of education professionals to its approach at academic level, members of United Aid for Azerbaijan (UAFA) had the chance to learn the best practices developed by the Child Development Institute in Tbilisi, Georgia.

“My son is six years old and he suffers from cerebral palsy (permanent movement disorders that appear in early childhood). This daycare center has given him the most remarkable gift a parent could give: human qualities.” One of the parents attending the activity continues to describe how his child, who uses a wheelchair, has markedly improved his social skills and his ability to better understand what he reads. “He even teaches me how to communicate properly with other children like him,” he con-



cludes. His story is one of the many shared among practitioners from Georgia and Azerbaijan with parents during the two-day peer-learning activity organized in the Georgian capital. Welcomed by the Head of the Center for Early Inclusive Education, Khatuna Dolidze, they all visited the different facilities the **Child Development Institute** counts with at Ilia State University. Parents from the Georgian Down Syndrome Association accompanied the group and told them about the Babale NGO, a self-ran location where children are stimulated through craft activities and are encouraged to become financially independent. *"Each child's individuality is embraced and valued,"* declares Vusala Ahmad, from **UAFA**, *"I liked seeing how Georgian specialists work closely with parents, showing them how important inclusive settings are for children with special needs in order to grow and learn together."* A visit to one of the kindergartens in the capital allowed the Azeri team to observe and experience the benefits of greater parental involvement in inclusive education practices, a very challenging step that they are trying to make in the Early Intervention and Inclusive Preschool Centers they run back home: *"We work with parents from the most vulnerable groups living in remote villages. For this reason, we wanted to learn more from the Georgian team*

Participants: 8
Indirect Beneficiaries: ± 200 families and 60 practitioners from 14 communities
Members Involved: United Aid for Azerbaijan (UAFA) – Azerbaijan
 Child Development Institute – Georgia

about their experiences in order to find ways of raising awareness of inclusion among these parents. We will soon do this through a library with up-to-date resources which they and our staff can use," explains Vusala.

A better awareness was raised about the role of parenting, the importance of group play and group learning during this fruitful two-day event, marking a great advancement in the communication relationship between the two Georgian and Azeri organizations. Both teams will meet again in Baku in 2020, when members from the Georgian Child Development Institute will get to visit the centers managed by the UAFA in Azerbaijan.



Reflecting together on a reform of the childcare system in Tajikistan

The IRODA organization from Tajikistan was able to learn from the successful experience of the Bulgarian organization For Our Children (FOCF) to advocate on the deinstitutionalization of child care.

During this three-day peer-learning event, **FOCF** Executive Director Ivanka Shalapatova, led a seminar organized by **IRODA**, an association of parents whose children suffer from autism in Tajikistan. *“I met FOCF members at another event in Zagreb [ISSA 2018 Thematic Meeting] and we thought their experience could be very useful for us, since the deinstitutionalization of care in Tajikistan is a topical issue they know a lot about,”* explains Lola Nasriddinova, director and founder of IRODA. Ivanka Shalapatova provided IRODA with the most important lessons learnt from their national context, after



more than 28 years' experience working in child-care reform in Bulgaria. *"This was an exceptional opportunity for me and my team to analyze the context in which our colleagues, now friends, from IRODA, operate to fulfill their mission in Tajikistan,"* explained Ivanka, who described how moving it was for her to be able to talk to a child who had left the institution and was receiving family care at the IRODA center in Dushanbe. The three main topics addressed during the event were: the impact that institutional care has had on children's development; the main principles related to deinstitutionalization; and a road map, based on the Bulgarian experience. A great deal of knowledge was shared about the process of transforming an institutionally based care system into a family-centered one, exchanging quality standards, best practices and the theoretical background that would foster change. *"The main message I tried to convey was related to the right of the child: when we think on the sort of care we want to provide our children with, his/her rights must always prevail, because each child deserves to live in a loving family environment which allows them to develop their full potential,"* declares Ivanka.

Participants from IRODA, institutions, baby homes, local government and other social departments had the chance to discuss and reflect on

Participants: 68
Direct Beneficiaries: 29 teachers and practitioners
Members Involved: For Our Children Foundation – Bulgaria
 IRODA – Tajikistan

the main challenges such a reform of the national care system might imply, along with their fears and hopes, after knowing the experiences that Bulgaria had gone through. *"I believe someone is ready to make a change after learning from others who have experienced the same process: this is the knowledge that matters, the knowledge that comes from real life rather than from books,"* says Ivanka Shalapatova of the For Our Children Foundation.

As a result of this joint collaboration, IRODA's team will start using the materials provided to train institution staff and advocate strongly at the national level for a better understanding of family care. They currently run programs on attachment and parenting for all types of family, as well as providing day-care educational programs for children and teenagers with special needs. *"Our main inspira-*

tion from the Bulgarian case was how to create supportive programs and work together with maternity homes, and we wish to take further steps in two regions in our country," concludes Lola Nasriddinova.



Training to boost innovative, life-long learning capabilities of the ECEC workforce

For the first time since the LIFT method was developed by Belgian Artevelde University College and University College Hasselt, three experts from Gent have had the chance to train professional facilitators from abroad.

During a three-day session, colleagues and partners from **Partners Hungary Foundation** and colleagues from **Open Academy Step by Step** Croatia were able to learn the eight competences defined by the LIFT method for ensuring professional growth when dealing with new, global forces of change in the field of Early Childhood Development. *“The role of the teacher has changed from information gate keeper to that of a mentor, a coach. This change of paradigm affects the way*



teaching and learning are seen today,” declares Sofie Vastmans, Head of International Policy at the **Artevelde University College of Applied Sciences** in Belgium. In this regard, her team has developed the LIFT method, implemented in different kindergartens in their country. During this peer-learning activity, they had the chance to transmit it to facilitators in a totally different context, such as Hungary, for the first time.

Based on a non-hierarchical concept of team building, in which the group is formed of professionals from all positions within a school or pre-school center, the sessions train the participants to develop useful skills for facing current challenges, such as communication skills or how to learn from peer feedback. *“From someone working in the administration, or the school kitchen, to teachers and educators, the team comprises people who don’t usually work together, in a bottom-up approach in which each member can grow at their own pace,”* explains Sofie. The experience with Hungarian colleagues has been a very positive one: *“it has shown us that in other settings, such as the one in Budapest, we cannot take the non-hierarchical working environment for granted,”* recalls Sofie. She believes that this PLA has been a great chance to *“get out of the Flemish context, and challenge ourselves to find ways to commu-*

Participants: 15
Members Involved: Artevelde University College – Belgium
 Partners Hungary Foundation – Hungary
 Open Academy Step by Step – Croatia

nicate universally in the field of ECEC.”

After the training session, each participant felt a higher sense of community: relevant members of a group who felt that they were taken seriously and listened to.

This PLA will hold a second session in 2020 in order to assess the implementation of the method. *“I find it useful to have the chance to meet the team again after a few months and see the impact of our training. It progresses very well,”* concludes Sofie Vestmans from the Artevelde University College of Applied Sciences.

“Sustaining an NGO in Hungary is difficult on many levels:

we are not visible enough to the wider public, and fundraising and advocacy is complicated.

Thanks to the LIFT process, we have been able to identify the most salient points in our cooperation and discuss solutions in a logical and safe framework. This brings us closer to each other and helps us towards our vision: creating dialogues and connections within communities.”

— Participant



Children's moral development and how to strengthen their inner compass

The Romanian Neohumanist Education Association (NEA) and Dutch daycare center Zonnelicht have organized a seven-day peer learning activity split into two phases aiming to provide other ISSA Members with a new model of teaching based on children's moral development.

In 2019, Didi A. Devapriya, director of the **Neohumanist Education Association** had the chance to visit the **Zonnelicht** daycare center in the Netherlands in order to observe the intuitive practices that they are implementing to foster each child's inner development. After years of discussions and reflecting on the issue, extensively observing children's behavior and collecting evidence-based scientific data, Dutch director, Yolande Koning, and Didi A. Devapriya developed a model based on stages that facilitate the moral development of children in an increasingly complex global context.

The second and latest phase of this PLA took place in Bucharest, where NEA hosted an inspiring two-day event with 11 ISSA Members from many different countries, comprising 35 practitioners and ECD experts. Within the "school of values" framework, in which many ISSA Members have actively worked on, such as the leader on the topic—the Center for Educa-



tion Initiatives Step by Step in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Didi A. Devapriya outlined what it means to educate from the inside out, nurturing intrinsic morality instead of imposing it as an external dimension. *“How can we support children to be equipped with a reliable inner compass in order to successfully navigate this changing world and become good, self-aware, fulfilled and confident human beings?”* asked Didi. This PLA looked into ways of implementing this challenging model in situations of adversity, in which children are exposed on a daily basis to poverty, corruption and/or crime. Inventare Insieme, an Italian organization working in the suburbs of Palermo shared their experience of educating children in such a difficult environment. *“It is our duty to show that there are other paths in life they can take,”* it was concluded. Didi herself runs a foster home near Bucharest where 11 orphan children aged 7–18 live. *“Getting to know some of these first-generation children, volunteering during this event, as young adults full of good values and strength, was a truly inspiring experience,”* expresses Liana Ghent, ISSA Executive Director, who had the opportunity to attend this PLA.

Other Members also presented their vision on how to nurture the inner goodness of a child in an ECD setting, such as Nedim Krajišnik, Bosnia

Participants: Over 35

Members Involved:

Neohumanist Education Association – Romania
 Zonnelicht – the Netherlands
 Center for Educational Initiatives – Bosnia and Herzegovina
 For Our Children Foundation – Bulgaria
 Inventare Insieme – Italy
 Center for Education Initiatives – Latvia
 NGO “KHAM” – North Macedonia
 Comenius Foundation – Poland
 Impreuna Agency for Community Development – Romania
 CIP – Center for Interactive Pedagogy – Serbia
 Group for Children and Youth “Indigo” – Serbia

and Herzegovina representative of the SbS Center for Educational Initiatives, who declared that “even in a less than perfect society, we try to inspire children by making the school an oasis”. The PLA, which has received the highest number of ISSA Members registrations so far, brought together pas-

sionate ECD practitioners concerned about the huge challenge of talking about virtues and individual strength in such difficult contexts, contexts which are often affected by post-conflict disruption, ethnic discrimination, poverty and violence.



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