

Systems for supporting children’s learning and development (0-18 years)¹

Partner	Agency for Social Development “Vision”
Country	Bulgaria
Background info to the educational system (e.g. https://www.european-agency.org/)	<p>In Bulgaria, children are entitled to free and compulsory education until the age of 16. However, children with disabilities are often challenged to exercise this statutory right, or face obstacles to receiving a quality and inclusive education. The National Programme for Development of School Education and Pre-School Education and Training (2006-2015) reports a worrying high percentage of children who are excluded from the system of education, the majority being children from risk groups (including those with disabilities) and of Roma origin. The following main barriers hinder the access to education of children with disabilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the socio-economic status of the family; - the inaccessible architectural environment and transport; - the lack of extensive training for teachers in the area of special educational needs; - the negative attitudes of some teachers and parents. <p>However, legislative changes in the last years introduced a favourable foundation for a change towards inclusion. The year 2002 marked a breakthrough as amendments to the Public Education Act 1991 (PEA) postulated that children with special educational needs and/or chronic illnesses were enrolled in mainstream kindergartens and schools. According to this Act (art. 27) children can be sent to special schools only if all opportunities for integration ‘have been exhausted’ and if the parents express such a wish in writing. In 2003, the National Plan for the Integration of Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Chronic Illnesses set as a main goal the ‘phased introduction of integrated education’, and determined the specific responsibilities of each state institution. Article 42 of the Anti-Discrimination Act 2004 (ADA) binds educational institutions to undertake appropriate measures in order to equalise the opportunities for effective exercising of the right for education and learning to persons with disabilities, except for the cases when the expenses for that are unjustifiably large and would present a serious difficulty for the institution. Article 17 (2) of the Act on the Integration of People with Disabilities 2004 (AIPD) postulated that the</p>

¹ The service for supporting children’s learning and development provided by Agency for Social Development “Vision” involves children from the age of 3 years until high school graduation, i.e. maximum until the age of 20 years.



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	<p>Ministry for Education and Science provided ‘supportive environment for integrated education of children with disabilities’. To facilitate the building of such a supportive environment, resource centres started playing a prominent role as mediators of the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. These state-funded institutions offered consultations to children, parents, classroom teachers, devised special teaching materials, and provided schools with special needs/resource teachers who instructed children together with the classroom teachers. However, the lack of enough professional adult support in the classrooms started being noted and one of the problems that resource centres’ staff started sharing was a lack of assistance in school for children who needed it, which either prevented them from enrollment or made it very difficult for them to attend classes.</p> <p>With regard to this, the so-called combined education system was introduced. An amendment to the Public Education Act was voted in September 2013, which allowed for pupils to be taught both in class and individually. The combined form of education in Bulgaria, where children with disabilities are only partially involved in learning and social interaction with their peers, is, however, considered a controversial step towards inclusion.²</p> <p>The issue of the integration of children with disabilities in the Bulgarian education system has not yet been solved nationwide due to various reasons. Nevertheless, in the Municipality of Varna, thanks to the efforts of Agency for Social Development “Vision”, the service “Social Assistant of Children with Special Educational Needs” enables more than 120 children to go to mainstream schools and kindergartens each year until they graduate or until the parents decide that their children have become capable of being on their own.</p>
<p>Methodological approach (Please give information about how you got the information provided below)</p>	<p>The information provided below is based on the views of the Social Service Specialist in charge of the service “Social Assistant of Children with Special Educational Needs” provided by Agency “Vision” as well as on answers given by the President of the Agency.</p> <p>Up to this point, there is no official document/methodology describing the way the service should be provided. Agency “Vision” has elaborated and follows its own programme for the delivery of the social service. Currently, there is no other similar service in Bulgaria and the Agency is the only</p>

² Blagovesta Troeva, „The path to inclusive education for children with disabilities in Bulgaria“, 13 October 2014 (<http://www.globi-observatory.org/the-path-to-inclusive-education-for-children-with-disabilities-in-bulgaria>)



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	organisation in charge of it.
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Please fill out the dimension boxes in a narrative way. (for example see: p2i)

GENERAL	
<p>Financial Framework of the services (Who is financing the service?)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i> The service “Social Assistant of Children with Special Educational Needs” is funded by the Social Programme of the Municipality of Varna.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<p>Organization/Admin of the service (Who is offering the service)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i> Agency for Social Development “Vision”</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i> Agency for Social Development “Vision” has been providing the service “Social Assistant of Children with Special Educational Needs” since 2007. The service aims at creating opportunities for personal development and social integration of children with special educational needs studying in comprehensive schools in the Municipality of Varna, integrating children with special needs into ordinary mainstream schools, deinstitutionalising and preventing child abandonment through the support of a Social Assistant, socialising and building knowledge and communication skills, developing self-attending skills and school time management skills, enhancing social inclusion and development. The service capacity includes more than 120 children and 96 Social Assistants.</p>
<p>Cooperation of the supporters with other staff (teachers, parents, therapists etc.)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i> A strong cooperation with teachers and parents on the one hand and Social Assistants on the other hand has been established in order that both sides support the children with special needs the best way possible.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/>



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	<p><i>Comments:</i></p> <p>One of the key priorities of the service is to build up a strong relationship between the Social Assistants and the other people, incl. family members, involved in the children’s daily life and development. This relationship is considered very important as it can determine the attitude of the rest of the children at school towards the children with special educational needs. If the parents and teachers are not supportive, it would be very difficult for the Social Assistant to perform his/her tasks to the maximum and help integrate the child with special needs in class.</p>
<p>Target groups of supporters (With whom they are working?)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i></p> <p>The Social Assistants work with children with special educational needs going to mainstream schools and kindergartens in the Municipality of Varna. The age range is from the age of 3 years until high school graduation, i.e. maximum until the age of 20 years.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p> <p>Children, especially those with disabilities, should be supported by all means in order that they grow up as independent, confident, well-educated and socially responsible people. Therefore, the service is aimed at that part of society represented by the most vulnerable and those who will one day determine the future of the country.</p>
<p>Qualification requirements (What are the official requirements that someone can work as a supporter?)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i></p> <p>The qualification requirements related to hiring a person as a Social Assistant of Children with Special Educational Needs are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - second and/or tertiary education degree in Psychology, Pedagogics or Social Work; - motivation to work with children with special educational needs; - empathy and skills to work in the social sector. <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p> <p>Unfortunately, as the state funding of social services in Bulgaria is extremely insufficient, hiring highly qualified staff remains very difficult to achieve.</p>
<p>Legal status (Which laws are affected?)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i></p> <p>The “Social Assistant of Children with Special Educational Needs” service is not legally regulated as it does not form part of the state-funded social services. However, the programme</p>



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	<p>describing its provision is partially based on the Methodology for the delivery of the community-based service “Social Assistant” elaborated by the State Agency for Social Assistance. This Methodology has been put together in accordance with the Law on Social Assistance. There is still no Law on Social Services in Bulgaria, however, the state is currently working on its elaboration.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
TASKS	
<p>Aims and Tasks of supporters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Principles/ official guidelines (What are they supposed to do?) 	<p><i>Current state:</i> The main tasks of the Social Assistants of Children with Special Educational Needs are related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supporting disabled children to participate in the educational activities at mainstream schools/kindergartens; - supporting children with disabilities to get involved in local community activities; - establishing a close relationship with parents, teachers, other social service specialists and interested stakeholders in order to provide a comprehensive support to the disabled children. <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Practical (What are they really doing?) 	<p><i>Current state:</i> The Social Assistants perform their tasks and do fulfill the above listed responsibilities in practice.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<p>Access to information (Which information they get?)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i> First, the Social Assistant becomes familiar with the health</p>



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	<p>situation of the child, and then, he/she meets the parents. If everything works out well and the Social Assistant is appointed to work with the child, he/she gets access to all relevant documents describing the child’s condition: medical documents, an assessment of its needs, etc.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<p>Hierarchy (Who is the boss?)</p>	<p><i>Current state:</i> The Social Assistants of Children with Special Educational Needs have to report their work to the Social Service Specialist in charge of the service as well as to the President of Agency for Social Development “Vision”.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<p>JOB SITUATION</p>	
<p>Status and Responsibilities in educational systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Formal 	<p><i>Current state:</i> The responsibilities of the Social Assistants of Children with Special Educational Needs in the educational system are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to accompany the children during classes; - to take part in the team of specialists who make a pedagogical and psychological assessment of the educational institution of the child with special needs; - to support the children during the planning and implementation of their study courses; - to report any problems to the school/kindergarten director. <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i> The Social Assistants are often excluded from the team meetings organised for the staff at the educational institutions of children with special needs. This happens due to the fact that they are not really regarded as full members of the educational personnel, and hence, their opinion on various matters related to the child development and performance in class is neglected.</p>



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Informal 	<p><i>Current state:</i> Due to the lack of information of the status and responsibilities of the Social Assistants in the educational system, the school/kindergarten principals sometimes engage the Assistants in activities which are out of their scope of work and which nor the Social Service Specialist nor the President of Agency “Vision” have agreed on.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<p>Continuing professional development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are the chances for career development? 	<p><i>Current state:</i> Agency for Social Development “Vision” provides a variety of social services, and hence, each Social Assistant who is interested could gain further experience within the structure of the Agency, e.g. work in an office, organise various events, support other specialists, etc.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i> The information provided above refers to a single employer – Agency for Social Development “Vision”. Additionally, the Social Assistants of Children with Special Educational Needs at the Agency are not engaged with any particular trainings and don’t have an opportunity to gain further knowledge in their particular field of work. They could develop on a horizontal level undertaking additional tasks, however, deepening their knowledge as Social Assistants is hardly possible at the moment.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How are supporters supported to deal with the challenges of the job? 	<p><i>Current state:</i> The Social Assistants receive full support by the Social Service Specialist in charge of the service as well as by other staff of the Agency if needed. The Social Service Specialist keeps in touch with the Social Assistants on a regular basis in order to guide and support them in difficult situations. Additionally, support groups with a Psychologist are organised by Agency “Vision” twice per year in order to assist the Social Assistants in dealing with the challenges of their daily work.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>



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	<p>There is a need of organising information meetings, trainings, seminars, etc. in order to provide a greater support to the Social Assistants. In this context, the training needs of the Social Assistants could be evaluated at least once per year and included in a programme for training and development of the social service staff.</p>
<p>Job security and career progressive description/profile of workforce</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Equality profile (gender, impairment, age, ethnicity, migrant status) 	<p><i>Current state:</i></p> <p>The majority of the Social Assistants of Children with Special Educational Needs at Agency “Vision” are females with a Bulgarian nationality at the age between 25 and 55 years.</p> <p>The level of job security is relatively high, however, the job position of a Social Assistant is not really attractive to young people due to the low salaries and the not particularly attractive working conditions.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Contractual situation 	<p><i>Current state:</i></p> <p>The Social Assistants at Agency for Social Development “Vision” are employed both under part-time and full-time labour contracts, and depending on the type of contract, they work either 4 or 8 hours per day.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sources:</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Comments:</i></p>

