Children with Special Needs

Barriers and Opportunities in Serbia

By Emily Nolan
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The armed conflict in Serbia in the 1990s had a particularly detrimental effect on access to quality education for children with special needs. International sanctions and isolation from the global community between 1992 and 2000 severely impacted Serbia’s already fragile infrastructure and economy (Radoman et al. 2006). The violence had many negative effects on children with disabilities. These included: the inability of displaced families to obtain support (medical and educational) for their special-needs children; the severing of contact between institutionalized children and families during the conflict; and the drain of medical and education professionals who left the country to avoid the military draft, or were in fact recruited by the military and consequently not delivering services to special-needs children. Many of these professionals did not return after the violence ended (Radoman et al. 2006), thereby complicating Serbia’s efforts to improve its education system, especially for special-needs students. It was during this period of isolation from the world community that the Salamanca Statement (1994), which supports inclusive schooling as the most effective way to ensure the fundamental rights to a quality education for children with special needs, and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), which reaffirmed the global community’s commitment to education for all, were ratified. While Serbia has made significant steps in its improvement of equal education for all children since the adoption of a democratic government in 2000, children with special needs persist in not having adequate and equal educational opportunities as children without special needs.

1. OUTLINE

In the first part of the paper, the problem of inadequate educational opportunities for students with special needs is defined. In Part 2, the causes of both the exclusion of a large percentage of special-needs children from the education system, and the causes for the inadequacy and inequality of the education that some special-needs children are experiencing in mainstream schools, are identified. Initiatives that Serbia is starting are included, where appropriate. In Part 3, the relevant literature on improving educational opportunities for children with special needs is reviewed. The paper concludes in Part 4 by making recommendations to Serbia’s Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) aimed at providing equal educational opportunities for all children of Serbia.

2. PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATIONS

Throughout this paper, the term ‘special needs’ utilizes the definition of Serbia’s Expert Group for the Reform of Education of Children with Special Needs, established in 2002. The Expert Group identifies children with special needs as ‘children who require special social support’; this reflects the reality that these children have the fewest opportunities to develop and maintain age-appropriate levels of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development without additional
social services (OECD 2006, 339). In the following analysis, the term ‘special-needs children’ includes children with developmental problems and children whose problems are the result of unfavourable sociocultural and economic conditions. Discriminated groups such as the Roma would fall into the latter category.

Similar exclusionary practices affect all children with disabilities throughout Serbia, regardless of a child’s particular special need. As such, in describing the problem of unequal access to equal education, ‘special-needs children’ are defined generally, without differentiation by disability. Furthermore, available data pertains to ‘special-needs’ students in general, and the data regarding the different services provided to children with diverse special needs is largely unavailable. Where appropriate, the nature of a particular special need is identified.

2.1 The Roma population

A complete analysis of the problems of exclusion from education experienced by the Roma population goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, the overrepresentation of Roma in schools for children with disabilities warrants some attention. UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children 2006 reports that over 76 per cent of Roma children in Central and Eastern Europe are placed in schools for the mentally handicapped, for reasons other than appropriate diagnoses. UNICEF reports that Roma parents may place children in these schools because of financial reasons, as special schools may provide food subsidies, transportation, and room and board. Roma parents may do so because they do not fully understand the long-term consequences of special schooling, and if they do, they may feel that economic pressure and extreme poverty leave them with few alternatives in caring for their children (UNICEF 2006). In Serbia specifically, only 66 per cent of Roma children enter primary school on time, and attendance for Roma children in primary school (74 per cent) is reported to be significantly lower than the national average (98 per cent) for the non-Roma population (based on net primary school enrolment rates as reported by UNESCO/UIS, and from national household survey reports of attendance at primary school).

These large discrepancies may be due to a number of different factors, the analysis of which is beyond this paper’s breadth. However, while the Expert Group’s definition of ‘special needs’ is meant to encompass both Roma and non-Roma alike, the unique discriminatory factors influencing the Roma population may not be fully taken into account by this definition. The Roma population may need unique support services that are different from those given to children with special needs, as their exclusion correlates not with a specific physical or mental impairment, but with both poverty and their belonging to an ethnic group.

2.2 Children with severe disabilities

The data represented here include all children with disabilities, from mild to severe. Children with severe disabilities, however, are perhaps the most at risk out of all groups of special-needs children. Along with orphaned children, children with severe disabilities are often placed in large institutions with very little attention given to their physical or emotional care (Save the Children 2006). A 2007 report by Mental Disabilities Rights International (MDRI) uncovers the appalling conditions faced by children with severe disabilities in Serbia. According to MDRI, “Filthy conditions, contagious diseases, lack of medical care and rehabilitation, and a failure to provide oversight renders placement in a Serbian institution life-threatening” (Ahern & Rosenthal, 2007). One commentator on disability rights explains, “Disabilities are a source of deep shame in Serbia and parents are urged to put [children with disabilities] away in remote government institutions or risk financial ruin” (Bauer 2008). Parents
may put children into these institutions without ever having seen them, demonstrating the depth of the shame that parents and communities feel towards disabled children. While government officials acknowledge the terrible conditions of these institutions, they assert that they do not have the resources to close them at this time (Bauer 2008). The protection and assurance of fundamental human rights of this group is of the utmost concern and deserves the undivided attention of both the Serbian government and the world community at large.

3. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The inequality of educational opportunities for special-needs students in Serbia may be defined from two perspectives: access and quality. First, many special-needs students are outside of the education system entirely. Secondly, those special-needs students who do attend some form of schooling are receiving an inferior education.

3.1 Problematic data on special-needs children

The Serbian MoES claims that a higher percentage of children with disabilities is included in the education system rather than excluded (OECD 2006). However, a UNICEF study from 2001 estimates that around 85 per cent of children with special needs are outside of the education system entirely, never having attended school, while 98 per cent of the overall population of primary-school-age children are attending primary school (UNICEF 2005). This huge discrepancy demonstrates the unreliability of available data on special-needs children in Serbia. Furthermore, many parents fail to report their special-needs children, due to feelings of shame and a lack of community support (Save the Children 2006), which also results in incomplete and potentially inaccurate data.

Impeding efforts to improve the education of children with special needs is the Serbian education system’s lack of inclusion indicators and evaluation or monitoring mechanisms to ensure that children with special needs are in school (OECD 2006). The OECD reports that in-country data show that about 1 per cent of the entire elementary-school-age population is attending special schools, and data about special-needs children is not collected in mainstream schools (2006).

3.2 Excluded students

According to the OECD, most researchers in Serbia and internationally believe that the number of pupils who need continual help as a result of disabilities is about 7 to 10 per cent of the overall population. However, only 10 per cent of these children are actually included in some of the official educational and rehabilitation programmes, including those in preschool institutions, elementary and secondary education, day-care institutions, and institutions for the accommodation of children with multiple developmental disorders (OECD 2006). Thus, about 90 per cent of the children who need additional services on account of special needs are without these services.

3.3 Below average success rates for special-needs students who attend school

As explained above, a large portion of the students with special needs are excluded entirely from the education system in Serbia. Even when these students are included in some type of education in Serbia, their results show that they are under-performing. While research in the area of special-
in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States

needs students is limited, available data show that success rates for students with special needs are below average for the country. According to a 2001 UNICEF study, a sample of 1,500 students in 32 regular elementary schools showed that 13 per cent of students with disabilities repeated a class in mainstream school, compared to only 0.6 per cent of students not showing developmental problems, and only 4.5 per cent of students in special schools (OECD 2006). This would imply that students with disabilities in mainstream schools are doing significantly worse than their counterparts in special schools, and much worse (in terms of rates of repetition) than students without disabilities in mainstream schools. All of this highlights the inferior education that children with special needs are receiving in mainstream schools.

Furthermore, special-needs students are under-represented in higher levels of education; less than one fifth of special-school students go on to secondary education (Colin and Markovic 2004, cited in Radoman et al. 2006), compared to 84 per cent of the secondary school-age population who attend secondary school (UNICEF 2005). Thus, not only are special-needs students found to repeat classes at a higher rate than non-special-needs students, they also attend secondary school at much lower rates.

4. CAUSES

The causes identified below for the inequality in educational opportunity for special-needs students encompass both aspects of this problem – namely, the large percentage of children who are left outside of the education system altogether, and the inferior education available in mainstream schools and special schools for special-needs students.

4.1 Problematic classification process

Children do not have the opportunity to be screened for special needs or other disabilities until they enter their first year of school. When a child enters first grade, the school principal may send the child to one of 76 regionally organized Boards for Classifying Children with Development Problems. The Board is composed of a team of experts including doctors, medical specialists, psychologists, and disability specialists who evaluate the child to decide the best educational options, whether this be sending the child to a special school tailored towards that child’s special needs, or whether the child can remain in the mainstream education system. After the Board decides what type of special needs the student has, the child is then sent to one of a number of different schools tailored towards the student’s disability, such as a school for the cognitively disabled, a school for pupils with disturbances in social behaviour, or a school for a student with physical disabilities. Unfortunately, these support services are not available until the child is around six or seven, despite the fact that special needs may be suspected before this time. Consequently, children do not have targeted services that they should have at an early age if they are to minimize the effects of their special needs and prepare them for mainstream schooling.

The classification process is both late and potentially inaccurate, thus leading to inappropriate education for children with special needs (OECD 2006). Complaints about this classification system were first registered in 1986; the complaints claimed that the Board’s limited interaction with the child resulted in an uninformed decision on classification. If a child is classified incorrectly as a result of one insufficient interaction with the Board, the education that she or he receives will not adequately address his or her needs. Furthermore, sociocultural, environmental, and other influences that
may account for perceived special needs are not explored by the Board during this one interaction, potentially rendering classification erroneous or incomplete (OECD 2006).

Serbia has only four ‘Boards of the Second Instance’ where children may be taken if it is believed (by parents or educators) that the child’s classification was incorrect. This comparatively limited number of these Boards is a barrier to reassessing children’s special needs. These Boards may be far away from many children who need to be reassessed, and the offices may be overwhelmed by requests for reassessment, potentially resulting in a lengthy period of inadequate education as the child waits to be reassessed.

4.2 Absence of legal framework

The absence of complete legislation protecting and ensuring the rights of people with disabilities in Serbia is one factor that leads to unequal educational opportunities. Parents are not legally obligated to act on the recommendations of principals who believe that a child should be screened for special needs (OECD 2006), thus the child may remain in the mainstream education system without the necessary support to aid in academic and social success.

While the Law on the Basis of the Education System guarantees equal educational opportunities for children with developmental problems, regulations enforcing the Law’s implementation have yet to be developed (OECD 2006). Consequently, the Law does not have the necessary enforcement mechanisms to ensure ‘equal’ education. Furthermore, the right to inclusive education for people with special needs is not explicitly mentioned (OECD 2006). As a result, though the Serbian government is required to provide educational opportunities for students with special needs, regulations thus far do not require that these students have access to equal, if not mainstream, education.

The absence of a legal basis for equal education or inclusion has two main negative effects. First, while Serbia is required to provide education for students with special needs, there are no further quality standards that this education must meet, potentially resulting in an inferior education in separate, special schools or low-quality education in mainstream schools. Furthermore, because the Law on the Basis of the Education System does not require an inclusive form of education, there is no legal basis for financing schools that are interested in inclusion (OECD 2006). The implication is that schools that want to adopt more inclusive education policies do not necessarily obtain more funding and resources that would allow them to adapt the education environment to special-needs children through the use of teaching aids, assistants, and other adaptive tools. Thus, in order to provide teaching aids and other resources to special-needs students, funding may come at the cost of other school budgets and programmes that are already under-resourced.

Serbia has made some progress in terms of improving its legislation for special-needs students, such as the adoption by the Serbian Education Council in February of 2004 of ‘The General Basis of the Educational Programme’. This document proposes ways of adapting education programmes for students with development problems, such as the inclusion in education programmes of definitions of optimum achievements, and the attainment of age-appropriate outcomes (OECD 2006).

4.3 Location of special schools

The high percentage of special-needs students who are not in school may be attributable to the uneven geographic distribution of special schools throughout Serbia. Special schools are not evenly distributed throughout the country, as most of them are concentrated around the larger cities. The number of primary schools in Serbia during the 2004–2005 school year was reported to be 3,578,
while the number of special schools was only 249 (UNESCO 2008). The majority of special schools are for children with intellectual impairments (OECD 2006).

This huge difference in the number of mainstream schools compared to the number of special schools means that children who are classified as having a certain special need may be sent to a school far away from their home, forcing the parents to board the children at these schools from a very early age (OECD 2006). While children enrol in mainstream schools based on the school’s location and typically attend the school that is closest to home, special-needs children enrol in special schools based on decisions by the Board for Classifying Children with Developmental Problems, as schools are organized according to the type of developmental problem of the school population (OECD 2006).

Parents may be reluctant to have their children classified out of fear of sending young children away from home, thus children may not receive the education and support services that they need. Parents are not legally obligated to have their children screened for special needs (even if the principal of the child’s school recommends it), thus the parent may choose to keep the child in a mainstream classroom without any additional services, or parents may keep children out of school altogether. While approximately 15 per cent of children with disabilities are enrolled in special schools, the other 85 per cent are in mainstream schools without support, or are not attending school at all (OECD 2006).

4.4 Lack of coordination and flexibility between mainstream and special schools

The absence of a coordinated system between mainstream schools and special schools results in limited educational attainment for special-needs students. It is rare and complicated for children in special schools to transfer to mainstream schools with higher levels of educational instruction. Schools for children with special needs have a tendency to keep children within this framework, even though doing so may be unjustified. The OECD reports that in regular primary schools in Serbia, educational advancement towards secondary, advanced, and higher education is dependent on achievements, whereas in special schools, “any [academic] movement is drastically limited” and graduation from special schools to higher education is “practically nonexistent” (OECD 2006).

4.5 Lack of preschool preparation programmes

According to UNICEF (2005), 89 per cent of the overall population of first-grade children were attending preschool the previous year. However, at the preschool level, there are no plans or programmes that exist to enable children with special needs to be more adequately prepared for inclusion in the regular education system (OECD 2006), despite the importance of preschool in an organized learning environment for preparing the child for school (UNICEF 2005). Thus, the special-needs students who are included in the mainstream education system are ill-prepared for their educational environment.

4.6 Lack of teacher training

Both students who attend special schools, and special-needs students who attend mainstream schools without additional support, have inadequate support from teachers that would allow them to optimize their learning and combat discrimination and poor treatment that special-needs students often experience. In special schools, disability specialists work as head teachers in lower grades and legislation allows them to teach subject-specialized classes at both the primary and
secondary levels, despite the fact that the disability specialists may not have studied the specific subject matter in university. Academic subjects, such as Serbian language and mathematics, are not taught to disability specialists attending the Faculty of Defectology, the university programme that they attend (OECD 2006).

Teachers in mainstream schools have little to no training in working with students with special needs, even though they may encounter these students in their classes (OECD 2006). According to the OECD, “many faculties where teachers are trained present little or no possibility for even superficial instruction about issues related to children with special needs” (2006, 264). Thus, when teachers encounter special-needs students in their classrooms, they may not know how to adapt teaching to the individual needs of the students, and may be apprehensive and even negative about the inclusion of special-needs students in their classrooms. Special-needs students report that instructors do not have adapted approaches towards teaching them, that they experience discrimination in school from instructors and other school personnel, and that the school materials are not adapted to their unique ways of learning (OSI 2007b). Basic teacher education to raise awareness about children with special needs is severely lacking.

The Expert Group has begun to implement some pre-service training programmes for teachers, both teachers from mainstream schools and disability specialists teaching in special schools. The Group has organized professional conferences for preschool teachers, though these efforts are only the beginning of the reform process (OECD 2006). While these are positive first steps, the training has not been institutionalized into university training for teachers.

4.7 Other initiatives in progress

Though Serbia has much work to do in terms of ensuring equality of educational opportunities for students with special needs, the country’s establishment of the Expert Group for the Reform of Education of Children with Special Needs (established in 2002) has made significant progress. Among its many steps towards reform, the Expert Group has produced an analysis of the pre-reform situation of education for children with special needs, it has outlined strategic directions for reform and has produced a timeline of short-, medium- and long-term goals for improving education for special-needs students (OECD 2006).

5. BEST PRACTICES

In this section, studies and practices relevant to the causes of educational inequality for children with special needs are reviewed. Changes to the screening procedure and early detection, as well as improvements to the legislation protecting people with special needs and ensuring their rights, are prerequisites for the effective implementation of any changes to the academic structure. The next category of best practices, ‘Full Inclusion’, addresses the relevant causes of exclusion and educational inadequacy. These best practices provide a research basis for the final recommendations. The implications of this review for Serbia are discussed in the final section on recommendations.

5.1 Changes to screening procedure and early detection

Children should be tested for special needs at an earlier age than they currently are under the Serbian education system, in which children are not screened until their first year of school, at age six or seven. A researcher in early detection for children with autism confirms, “Early detection leads
to earlier intervention. If we intervene by age 3, children do far better than if you wait until age five” (Geddes 2008). The study claims that early intervention (even as early as 12 months) may influence the brain so much that children do not develop autism symptoms at all.

A different study on children with developmental challenges confirms the need to screen early, and asserts the need to screen repeatedly, as opposed to the current system in Serbia whereby children are usually screened once (and rarely twice) for a particular developmental disorder. This study claims that early screening, and as a consequence, early intervention, may have a significant positive impact on children’s development, behaviour, and subsequent school performance. The study further asserts that children must be repeatedly re-screened in order to monitor changes in developmental status and to continually evaluate changes in developmental problems as children age (Glascoe 2005). The results of this study point to the trade-off between cost of reassessment and the potential loss of a lifetime of learning for children who are screened incorrectly, thus reaffirming the need for continual screening in order to obtain the most accurate picture of a child’s unique developmental issues.

Costa Rica has developed an innovative way to offer screening and diagnosis services to children with special needs. As a country where financial resources are scarce, Costa Rica’s initiatives demonstrate how limited resources can be distributed to benefit students with special needs. The multidisciplinary ‘Itinerant Teams’, which include a psychologist, social worker, and general and special educators, offer assessment and diagnostic services to children at schools within designated regions (Stough 2003). The teams travel to schools within their designated regions, providing support services to children with special needs (see Box 3).

5.2 Improvements to legislation

Romania offers a good example of legislation that ensures the rights of special-needs students. Romania has extensive legislation concerning students with special needs. Its legislation details the length of compulsory education for special-needs students, and the structure and content of special education (including the curriculum, syllabi, teacher guidebooks and textbooks). Romanian law also ensures specialized schooling and “psycho-pedagogical support for children with physical, mental, sensorial or associated deficiencies” (OECD 2006, 5). Unlike the Serbian legislation, Romanian legislation concerning children with special needs is detailed and clear in its requirement for support of special-needs students.

Romanian law also stipulates that “children with light and medium mental deficiencies are integrated into the mainstream school near their home” (OECD 2006, 5); by contrast, Serbian law makes no provision for special-needs students to attend mainstream schools. Romania is also planning in the near future on modifying regulations concerning the organization and operation of education services for special-needs children who are in mainstream schools, including the provision of support teachers, and curriculum frameworks adapted to the ten-year compulsory education.

5.3 Full inclusion

Inclusion models, whereby the diversity of education needs is supported in the mainstream classroom, is found to be more effective for students, both academically and in terms of other social factors (see Box 2 for a description of full inclusion). A study compared the academic and social effects of pulling eighth-grade students with learning disabilities out of the mainstream classroom for certain classes, and full inclusion (as reviewed by Lindsay 2007; Rea, McLaughlan and
Walther-Thomas 2004). The inclusive education group was found to have “achieved significantly higher levels on a number of academic measures and equivalent scores on others.” The children included in the mainstream classroom also had better attendance records and equivalent levels of school suspensions (Lindsay 2007), showing that inclusion is not only beneficial in terms of achieving higher academic results, but also better for social outcomes.

A Norwegian study of 592 students with general learning difficulties in the three upper years of secondary school also revealed positive academic results for inclusion (Myklebust 2002). This study compared learning-challenged students who were taught in small groups outside the general classroom, receiving adapted teaching during their initial year of upper secondary schooling, to special-needs students taught in ordinary classes. Forty per cent of the group taught in ordinary classes were reported to be academically on schedule, compared to 10 per cent of those students who were taught outside the classroom (Lindsay 2007).

According to a study done in Albania, a country similar to Serbia in its history of transitioning from a centralized government, the cost of sending a special-needs child to a mainstream school is significantly less than the cost of sending a child to a special-needs school. Specifically, the cost associated with educating every integrated student was 16.2 times less than the average cost of the education of students with special needs in separate schools and institutions (Albanian Disability Rights Foundation 2006). In addition to the academic and social benefits of sending a child to an inclusive school, there is the potential for economic benefit. Furthermore, the inclusion of special-needs individuals in mainstream schools can decrease the chronic poverty often experienced by this group, giving these individuals the necessary tools to become self-sufficient, productive members of society (Yeo and Moore 2003).

As Figure 1 shows, disability has a tendency to lead to many discriminatory practices in society, one of the most basic of which is the exclusion from formal and informal education and employment, which leads to fewer skills, and fewer income-generating opportunities. This, in turn, leads to chronic poverty, and continues the cycle of impairment. Societies may be able to break this cycle through the successful inclusion of individuals in mainstream schooling.
Serbia can look to Aceh, Indonesia to see the results of gradually introducing inclusive schooling. In a partnership with Save the Children, seven schools were selected to be inclusive-education (‘IE’) pilot schools in Aceh. Decisions about which schools to choose were made based on school enrolments of children with special needs, involvement of the community in school activities, and the commitment by school officials to promote IE. In June 2007, Aceh’s IE pilot schools were involved in a four-day training programme delivered by national experts in various special needs, including experts in visual, auditory, physical, and mental impairments. The training took a holistic approach, involving whole school communities, and training teachers, parents, principals, school supervisors and sub-district heads of education. Additionally, teachers and principals from certain special-needs schools also participated in order to build relationships with and offer support to the IE pilot schools.

It is reported that the workshop deepened knowledge about the importance of IE, and taught new teaching methodologies to make class material adaptive to children with special needs. At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to create a three-month action plan for making their school an IE school. In the future, participants will gather together to reflect on their experiences, assessing and determining the continued capacity-building needed to become a “successful and truly inclusive school” (Save the Children 2007). Rather than attempt to introduce inclusive schooling across the country at the same time, Serbia may opt to take a more gradual approach to introducing pilot schools as the country transitions to inclusive schooling.

Box 1. Inclusive education practices in Serbia

Current efforts at inclusive schooling in Serbia show great promise and should be continued and expanded. The Education Support Program of the Fund for an Open Society–Serbia, launched the initiative, ‘Inclusive Education, from Practice to Policy’, in 2005. The aim of the initiative was to promote better access to quality education, especially for children and students who experience marginalization, discrimination, and segregation as a result of ethnic background, social status, or physical or mental disabilities. A coalition made up of 10 non-governmental and governmental organizations was set up to promote both better access to education as well as flexible, needs-based, child-centred, and measurable educational practice. This initiative led to the development of an Inclusive Education Network of 150 teachers engaged in the exchange of ideas, experiences, and good practices, and offered teachers the opportunity for mutual psychological and professional support. (OSI 2007b).

The Service for Inclusive Education Facilitation was established in September 2007 as an advisory support for both teachers and parents. Thirty advisors in 10 Serbian cities supply information on inclusive education on a daily basis. The Service receives calls and advises on education support for children with special needs, including recommending that some children be included in mainstream education. Since the Service’s beginning – and as a result of its efforts – 10 children have been included in mainstream education. Furthermore, teachers have been able to develop 35 individual education plans with Service support.

The Initiative was also responsible for the development of the Practical Guide for Improving Inclusive Education practice for teachers and other participants in teaching. The guide, which was to be published at the end of 2007, was to be comprised of examples of best practices and include a list of criteria for the advancement of inclusive education practice. It was piloted in 31 educational institutions, 5 preschools and 26 primary schools, and will provide new information concerning the current level of inclusive practices in educational institutions.
The Initiative established the Network of Local Inclusive Teams in 10 Serbian cities with the goal of mobilizing local community support for improving conditions for better access to education. The advocacy activities of the Network were responsible for the organization of several events. These events generated significant media attention, and were responsible for leading to the Declaration on Access to Education for All in one city, the Strategy for Social Policy Development in another city, and the Guide for Parents in 10 cities.

5.4 Location of special schools

As discussed above, special schools are not equally distributed throughout Serbia and there are comparatively fewer special schools than mainstream schools. Research indicates that distance to the nearest school significantly and negatively influences the educational attainment of students. In a study that measured the determinants of school completion in Pakistan, distance to middle and secondary schools was significantly greater. Thus, distance to middle and secondary school was found to “significantly and negatively affect the educational attainment” of students (Holmes 2002). As the time and transportation costs of attending school increase, school demand decreases. While this study was conducted in Pakistan, which is very different from Serbia, the negative effects of time and transportation would be similar for parents faced with bringing their special-needs child to a school that is far away from their home. Parents of special-needs students specifically feel that proximity to services can be a factor that either promotes or discourages access (Steward et al. 2004).

In Romania, NGO and governmental partnerships have begun programmes to ensure that children from isolated rural communities, including both students with and without special needs, have transportation to school (OECD 2006). Recognizing the burden that distance from school can have on educational attainment, the government (which is similar to Serbia in that it is transitioning from having been a communist government) is making positive steps towards removing this barrier.

Box 2. Full inclusion

Full inclusion has been described in many different ways. The description below of inclusion is modelled after an inclusive environment that was determined to be successful in its incorporation of special-needs and non-special-needs students (Flem et al. 2004).

In a fully inclusive environment, classes at the same grade level would be organized such that the number of special-needs children would be approximately equal in each class. The physical classroom itself should be open in order to foster collaboration between the classes at the same grade level. Each class should have its own teacher and the classes should share the special-needs resources. These resources include: a special education teacher, a support teacher, and assistants. The open classrooms foster the flexible use of these personnel resources. In addition to the classroom resources, the school would have psychiatrists and medical personnel to both advise teachers and assist students who need support and rehabilitation outside of the classroom.

The pedagogy itself should be conducive to the learning styles of different students. Rather than lecture and rote memorization, students should be encouraged to practice the ideas and themes that they are learning. In a math lesson, for example, the teacher should put a problem on the board and work through the problem with students as a group, encouraging both the special-needs and the non-special-needs students to provide answers during the various steps of the

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1 While this study was not conducted on special-needs students in particular, the situation does demonstrate that students are more likely to attend schools that are located in close proximity to their homes.
problem solving. The teacher should verbally guide students to correct answers and constantly provide positive reinforcement. The special-needs resources should be available if students are having trouble understanding a particular idea or concept. Students, both special needs and non-special needs, must be active learners in order to internalize the material that they are learning. Support should be available where needed.

Inclusive education does not have to mean identical learning programs for all students. Rather, the student’s education environment needs to be adaptive to student needs. Special-needs students may have their own unique learning programs, whereby they have an adapted curriculum based on their particular special need. An important element of the adapted learning program is that the student participates in its creation, along with specialists and instructors. In this way, the student takes ownership of her own learning outcomes.

The learning program should be flexible, such that the student may decide to work inside or outside the classroom during particular activities. Students who have behavioural or emotional problems, for example, may decide to work outside the classroom for some activities. In such situations, assistants go outside the classroom with the student and work with him or her individually until the student is ready to return to the classroom. Rather than special-needs students leaving the class for certain designated activities, the students themselves choose whether or not they want to leave the classroom, and assistants are available to provide the specialized learning that these students need, both in and outside the ‘normal’ classroom.

5.5 Preschool preparation

Early, targeted intervention in an organized preschool setting for children with special needs may be effective in preparing them for the mainstream environment. In a study conducted in England on Nurture Groups, a preschool intervention for children with emotional and behavioural disorders that attempts to supply children with the appropriate models of behaviour that they would normally experience in a home environment, 87 per cent of the children who received this intervention were able to return to mainstream classrooms, with 84 per cent needing no additional special-needs services, and only 3 per cent needing services outside the ordinary classroom resources (Iszatt and Wasilewska 1997, as reported in Cooper and Lovey 1999). This study demonstrates that an early intervention may prepare a special-needs child so significantly for mainstream education that the child no longer needs resources outside those provided by the ‘normal’ classroom (see Box 4).

Box 3. Inclusive practices in Costa Rica

Education Assistance Committees are appointed at the beginning of each academic school year and are organized at each school. Their purpose is to make decisions about the educational needs of all students. The teams are comprised of a school administrator (usually the principal), a special-needs educator, two general educators, and a parent at the primary school level. At the high school level, counsellors, students with special needs, and other special educators are added to these committees. The committees determine the special services needed by students at each school and recommend supportive educational services or accessibility modifications to the school administrators and to the teaching staff. The committees are also responsible for providing some

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2 The type of preparation that students need will heavily depend on their particular special need. The literature presented below is not meant to be an exhaustive review of all effective early interventions. It is simply intended to demonstrate that early interventions for the special needs discussed here (but not limited to these) can be effective and beneficial.
technical training to general education teachers whose classrooms include students with mild disabilities, and for supervising the quality of the education received by these students. Committees meet with teachers, parents, and students with disabilities to explain available educational support services.

Itinerant Teams are key in the creation and oversight of support services for students with disabilities, particularly severe disabilities. Itinerant Teams consist of a psychologist (either a school or educational psychologist), social worker, general education teacher, and a special education teacher. The multidisciplinary teams provide assessment and diagnostic services to students with disabilities, and supply technical assistance to educators working with children with disabilities. The teams travel around to schools within a designated region. Students with severe disabilities receive focused attention from itinerant teams, and the teams assist the school’s educational assistance teams in designing appropriate educational programs for these students. These teams may be particularly efficient service providers in areas where educational specialists are scarce. The teams may develop workshops and organize continuous professional training for teachers aimed at adapting the state curriculum for students with severe disabilities. Itinerant Teams also increase the opportunity that children have to attend the school closest to their homes by improving special needs services at these schools.

Resource centres were created to supply assistance to individuals with special needs in order to increase their level of autonomy and to guarantee equal opportunities. The Centre provides technical support to general education schools in order to prepare them to meet the needs of students with special needs in the mainstream classrooms. They supply information, consultation, and training on special-needs-related issues to special and general education teachers, parents, researchers, students and the community. The Centre is staffed with an interdisciplinary team of special-needs educators, a preschool educator, a general educator, an occupational therapist, a teacher trainer, a pedagogical materials specialist and a librarian. Eventually, these centres will be located throughout regions across the country, and will facilitate the inclusion of all students – such as those with special needs, those of a low SES, and minority-language learners – in the mainstream classroom.

An especially innovative aspect of the Centre is its plan for a mediation centre to support parents and teachers who are having difficulty including students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. Staff may operate as intermediaries in conflicts involving students with special educational needs, and will train parents and school staff in conflict resolution (Stough 2003).

A different study conducted in England on children with Down’s syndrome confirmed positive results of preschool preparation for special-needs children. The study compared 60 children with Down’s syndrome who did not receive targeted services in preschool, to 60 children with Down’s syndrome who did receive targeted services. While 43 per cent of the children who received targeted services were reported to be prepared for a mainstream school environment, only 25 per cent of the children who did not receive these specialized services were prepared for the mainstream environment (Cunningham et al. 1998). These two studies are examples of targeted services for different special need groups having a positive impact in preparing children for the mainstream classroom.

Serbia may also consider looking towards a similar country as a model of preschool provision legislation for special-needs students. Romanian legislation requires that preschool classes provide for competent and efficient specialty services for special-needs children, unlike Serbian legislation that makes no such provision (OECD 2006).
5.6 Teacher training

Exposure to special-needs students in pre-service education is necessary to improve teachers’ perception of the mainstream classroom’s ability to support special-needs students. This analysis operates under the assumption that improved perception of the ability to support special-needs students will in fact lead to a positive teaching environment, and thus, better learning on the part of both special-needs and non-special-needs students. A study examining the effects of including special-education instruction into general, pre-service education for U.S. teachers demonstrated that “embedded instruction significantly increased teacher candidate’s knowledge of inclusion terminology…and improved confidence levels in meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities by 60 per cent over the control group” (Brown et al. 2008, 2087). Conversely, teachers in Uganda referenced their lack of skills and competence in dealing with the situation in classrooms where special-needs students were included. These feelings are reported as being “closely linked with the teachers’ confidence regarding their particular skills and competencies’ (Arbeiter and Hartley 2002, 69). The teachers in Uganda were aware and concerned about the quality of education for special-needs students in light of their lack of skills in this area.

These feelings are confirmed by a study conducted in England. Researchers found that student teachers reported that they would have responded more positively to inclusion had they had more knowledge of disabilities and strategies for addressing the needs of special-needs students (60.14 per cent of respondents); more exposure to special-needs students in the training phase (56.2 per cent of respondents); and more training in dealing with the behaviour of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (32.59 per cent of respondents) (Avramidis and Bayliss 2000). Despite the significant differences between the economic, educational, and cultural contexts of the above studies (which took place in the United States, Uganda and England), they show the importance of exposure and training in improving perceptions of full inclusion among mainstream teachers.

Disability specialists who will be working closely with special-needs students in mainstream and special schools should have subject-specific training, especially at the higher levels of education, such as middle and high school. It is reported that there is a strong link between student achievement and the instructor’s subject-specific knowledge (Mullens et al. 1996). A study conducted on student achievement on a eighth-grade math exam in Belize found that on average, students who had teachers who themselves had scored ‘D’ on an eighth-grade math exam (on a scale of A through E, A being the highest, and E being the lowest) achieved four points more than students who had teachers who had scored an ‘E’ on the same eighth-grade math exam. In this same study, students who had teachers who had scored an ‘A’ on the eighth-grade math exam scored 8 points more than students who had teachers who had scored a ‘B’ (Mullens et al. 1996). A comprehensive review of five U.S. studies found that teacher completion of an undergraduate or graduate degree in mathematics is associated with higher achievement on the part of students at the middle and high school levels (Goe and Stickler 2008). Subject-matter knowledge appears to be more influential as students reach higher levels of education. While special-needs students should be in the mainstream classroom, presumably with a classroom teacher who has had subject-specific training, the disability specialist working with these students may be better able to help the students reach their academic potential if they have some form of subject-matter training.

Costa Rica’s initiatives provide models for in-service teacher training. Their Education Assistance Teams, Itinerant Teams, and Resource Centres all provide opportunities for in-service teacher training (Stough 2003). Both the Education Assistance Teams and the Itinerant Teams are multidisciplinary, offering broad perspectives on the educational services that students with special needs require.
Resource Centres are direct sources for community members, parents, and education officials where information, training, and consultation on special education issues may be accessed. Box 3 provides further details.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Changes to the screening process

Serbia must make changes to its screening process for children with disabilities. Currently, screening is only possible at the recommendation of school officials when the child enters first grade. This late screening, however, denies a child the opportunity to improve his or her condition at a young age. As research demonstrates, early screening leads to early intervention, which in some circumstances results in a child being completely rehabilitated. As such, repeated screening for potential disabilities should be part of children’s regular wellness visits from an early age. Even in situations where a disability is identified at an early age, children should continually be re-evaluated by medical personnel in order to determine if their developmental trajectory has changed. In this way, children will have a better chance of receiving the targeted support services for their unique needs, as opposed to the current system in which children may have one or two limited interactions at the age of six with the group responsible for their classification. Serbia could instead model its screening procedures after Costa Rica, where Itinerant Teams alleviate problems associated with bringing children to the classification board, resulting in more frequent screening than the current Serbian system. The Expert Group could play a key role in developing these itinerant teams, thereby providing more frequent and more accurate screening processes for children with potential disabilities.

6.2 Improvements to legal framework and improved data collection

The Serbian MoES needs to develop regulations that enforce quality education for children with special needs. Such legislation needs to protect the right of students with special needs to receive quality education. In the same way that Romanian law requires mainstream schools to have support services for special-needs students, similar legislative mechanisms must be developed in Serbia. Such legislation should provide support to schools, allowing them to become accessible to children with special needs. It should also continue to support schools that are already accommodating special-needs and non-special-needs children. As a corollary, recognizing the lack of quality and complete data regarding children with special needs, local governments should be legally obligated to register and supply education and rehabilitation to every person with special needs living within the region of the local community (OECD 2006). These regulations and mechanisms, while they are not sufficient to provide equal education for all, lay the necessary groundwork for the enforcement of quality education for all students.

6.3 Inclusive education

Inclusive education, as described by the OECD (2006), would be the complete inclusion of students with special needs into mainstream classes, with additional support in the form of assistants, disability specialists who provide occasional one-on-one work, and rehabilitation treatments. This is different than integration, which places special-needs students in the mainstream classroom without additional support. Inclusive education, with the appropriate classroom support of teaching
aids, would enable children with developmental problems to exercise their right to education along with all other children, attending a neighborhood school that they would normally attend if they did not have developmental problems (OECD 2006). Serbia’s MoES must make inclusive education a priority. Serbia should continue to expand efforts at inclusive education already undertaken by the Open Society Institute, as explained in Box 1.

Serbia may look towards the pilot programme in Aceh, Indonesia, as a model for the gradual introduction of inclusive schooling. Rather than adopting widespread inclusive schooling all at once – which could overwhelm an already under-resourced education system – Serbia may experiment with inclusive schooling in selected pilot schools, as is happening in Aceh. While Indonesia and Serbia are very different, both contexts suffer from a recent catastrophe and disruption of infrastructure (the 2004 tsunami in Aceh, and civil war in Serbia in the 1990s). The Expert Group could play a key role in assessing what additional support mechanisms (such as assistants, special education specialists, changes to curriculum, and material resources) are necessary in inclusive school environments.

6.4 Location

The inclusion of special-needs students into mainstream schools would address the problematic location of special-needs schools throughout Serbia. If special-needs students were able to attend mainstream schools with the necessary support services, parents would feel confident that their children’s needs were being addressed without the burden of having to bring children far away from home for support services. Furthermore, parents who may have been reluctant to have children classified because of a fear of being told that the child should be sent to a distant special school would no longer have this fear. Consequently, the instances of parents taking children to be screened may increase. The increased (and improved, as discussed above) screening would hopefully lead to better support services for children with special needs. Serbia may look towards Romania for programmes that would help both non-special-needs and special-needs students from isolated communities reach schools.

6.5 Preschool preparation

In order to be adequately prepared for the mainstream classroom, special-needs students in Serbia must have targeted, organized preschool programmes. As the research indicates, both children with behavioural disorders and children with intellectual disorders may benefit from these focused services, allowing these children to adapt better to a mainstream classroom environment.

6.6 Teacher training

As discussed above, mainstream teachers must have some exposure and instruction in the area of special needs in their pre-service and in-service training. This fosters a more positive learning environment, giving mainstream teachers greater confidence to support special-needs students in the mainstream classroom. Teachers need not be expected to become disability specialists, though they should have some general knowledge of the unique requirements of special-needs students. Disability specialists, along with additional support resources, can provide targeted (according to the special need) support for special-needs students, though mainstream teachers maintain a key role in removing the stigma attached to special-needs students through their positive interaction.

Furthermore, in the inclusive model, disability specialists should be present in various academic classes in mainstream schools, and these specialists should have specialized training in the corresponding
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academic discipline. This is especially important for those teachers who are assisting in higher levels of education, such as middle and secondary schools. Research in different contexts indicates that students achieve better results if teachers have had subject-specific training. Thus, teachers who are trained at the Faculty of Defectology should have both disability training as well as subject-specific training in order to help special-needs students reach their full academic potential.

Costa Rica’s Itinerant and Education Assistance Teams (see Box 3) provide valuable models of how to deliver in-service training. In recognition of potential gaps in pre-service training, Serbia should use these teams to deliver specialized training on special-needs issues to in-service teachers. The Resource Centres should be established in Serbia to provide teachers with the expertise that they may have missed out on in their university training.

6.7 Existing special schools

Existing special schools may be dealt with in two different ways. Some of these schools should be closed entirely. As discussed at the beginning of the paper, some special-needs children are sent to large institutions where they receive little to no physical, emotional or educational development. Such institutions are the source of serious human rights violations, and they should be shut down immediately. The medical personnel at these institutions may be incorporated into mainstream schools to provide support to classes with special-needs students.

Existing special schools that do not fall into the above category may be converted into preschool facilities for both special-needs and non-special-needs students. These preschools should have specialized services to prepare special-needs students for mainstream classrooms. The existing special schools may also be converted into resource centres for individuals concerned about special educational needs, as described in Box 3. Personnel from special schools should be incorporated into mainstream schools as experts in working with special-needs students.

However, such facilities need to be more evenly distributed throughout the country, in contrast to the current situation whereby most of the schools are concentrated near the larger cities and children in rural communities have little access to them. More preschool facilities and resource centres may need to be built in rural communities in order to ensure the equality of educational opportunities for all children. The Expert Group may play a significant role in deciding the fate of the existing special schools, whether they should be shut down entirely or be converted to other support facilities.

Box 4. Preschool interventions: Nurture groups

Nurture Groups are comprised of between 10 and 12 students in a separate class group. Children are usually four or five years old. The class includes a teacher and a specially trained ‘Nurture Group Learning Support Assistant’, and may be located in a mainstream primary or preschool.

The objective of the Nurture Group is to supply children with the types of experiences that they would receive in a normal home environment; thus, many of the qualities that one would normally associate with a family context are applied to the educational context of the Nurture Group. The atmosphere of the class looks similar to a home, furnished with comfortable chairs and couches and decorative curtains, rather than the desks and chairs of a traditional classroom. The class also includes a kitchen and dining area where the students have breakfast and other meals.

The education provided by the Nurture Group includes the cognitive content that is the foundation of the curriculum for all children, along with the social and emotional content. As such, time
between formal lessons (including breakfast, lunch, and break times) are viewed as situations where important social, emotional and cognitive learning takes place. Nurture Groups enable children to value themselves through being valued and cared for by others. Staff are trained to use mealtimes and periods of social contact to give the students a sense of being valued and cared for. Staff act warmly towards pupils and show a willingness to listen to them, in addition to making learning and social interaction rewarding for the students. As a result, children are motivated to express their individual perspectives and concerns with others, both staff and other students. Nurture Groups promote opportunities several times a day for staff and students to communicate in groups or subgroups in order to share ideas and understandings, and promote cohesion and personal validation.

Another aspect of Nurture Groups is that they encourage children to develop initiative and confidence by initiating conversation, activities, and introducing ideas. In this way, the students develop rules of conduct collaboratively with other students. Students become increasingly aware of the meaning and consequences of their own actions in relation to themselves and to others. A central objective of Nurture Groups is to assist children in developing a sense of being a valued member of the class, and to learn that personal reward (in the form of confidence and validation) can result from active and constructive participation in community life. Nurture Groups focus particularly on the development of expressive language in order to give children a voice to make themselves heard (Cooper and Lovey 1999).

7. CONCLUSION

Serbia has significant barriers to overcome in its implementation of reform of the educational opportunities offered children with special needs. Despite these significant barriers, Serbia has made some necessary first steps in the reform process, including the formation of the Expert Group. Inclusive education is considered the best means of creating equal education possibilities for all children, with or without special needs. According to a 2007 UNESCO report on inclusive education, “Building a truly inclusive society, where all people learn together and participate equally, hinges on providing a quality education for all” (p. 7). Serbia cannot expect to meet the requirements of Education for All without making education equal and available to all students, including those with special needs.

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