

Latvia experience of the parents involvement in Step by Step classrooms.

I have been working in Step by Step (SbS) program just a half year. But today I can confess - I love this program. And I'll explain you why - I never have seen before children, who are so carried by learning, educators – who are so excited about their work, and parents, who with such a joy take responsibility to be real partners for teachers in education of their children. But the best thing what they all have in common, despite personal, age and status differences, is shine in their eyes.

The implementation of Step by Step (SbS) program in Latvia started in 1997. Now it is wild spread over the country, involving more than 6700 children of age 1-10 in 78 pre-schools and 75 primary schools. More than 800 teachers have been trained in the SbS methodology since 1997. It was possible by inestimable financial and moral support from Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation - Latvia.

To maintain the SbS program and current network of schools and pre-schools which were involved in the SbS project, non-profit organisation Centre for Education Initiatives is established in the beginning of this year.

Implementation of the SbS program changes traditional attitudes towards family part in the education that is based on the soviet experience. During soviet times classroom's doors were closed for families. Parents said good - bye to their children in front of the doors, and only rarely they were invited to classrooms as guests or technical helpers. Everyday life in the classrooms had nothing to do with families. Unfortunately, such experience lasted for very long period of time and influenced ages. It is still a most common way of communication between school and family in our society.

SbS program is the first educational program in Latvia that considers respects and improves family role in the early childhood education. It is based on the belief that parents are the primary educators of their children and that family involvement is the cornerstone of a successful early childhood education program. SpS starts with very simple thing - it opens doors for parents - they are always welcome in the classroom, they may participate, they may know everything about child life at school.

In the same time parents become more responsible for education of their children, because they are involved in the carrying out the concrete tasks of child development.

Successful partnership is based on the consistent, clear communication and different ways of co-operation. Methods of the co-operation and family involvement are different depending on place, family, personal and social situation. Each method is very important. It is impossible to choose one as the most significant, because only all of them together make co-operation successful.

For example, every day benevolent communication with parents or family members, when they bring children to kindergarten or school. It could seem unimportant, but SbS appreciate it as short sharing of thoughts about things that are matter of current interest in child's life. It helps parents and teachers better understand children's mood and behaviour and learning.

More specific are individual conversation/ conference with parents. It is confidential meeting in a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere with cup of coffee or tea where parents with educators discuss questions about child development, his/her successes and problems. The aim of these meetings is to develop communication between educator and family in finding the best ways for helping child to reach full potential of his/ her development.

One of the traditional forms of co-operation with families is a parents meeting, but SbS program has changed stereotypes about it, where meeting was very formal, boring and accepted by parents as a meaningless duty. Purpose of the meeting is to inform parents about urgent issues on children's education, but ways how it is done can be very different. In the beginning of the implementation of the SbS program in schools or pre-schools, we practice meetings organised as a play - parents had a chance to experience by themselves how daily life in school or pre-school has changed. They have everything - morning circle, division to activity centres, explanation of the tasks, and work in the centres. Parents are very satisfied with such meetings. Active exploration of classroom environment, trying out activities in which their children are involved is the best way to explain what is really going on in the SbS classrooms. It helps parents get full impression about duties and tasks of their children.

As the most different from traditional forms of co-operation I see family member's participation in a variety of activities in SbS classrooms. Of course, in the beginning only few parents were ready to participate - others were afraid or thought that there is no need for that. Parents had been used that the only connections with school were parents` meetings and marks, which their children had for their knowledge, but which actually said nothing about real life in the school. It was hard to understand their new role - partnership with teacher in development of their children - when they are welcome to become an active part of the education process. Participation in classroom activities gives opportunity for parents to see how their child work in a group, communicate with other children, what he/she is doing well, or where he has no luck.

We believe that each parent can teach something to children and it does not matter is it something scientific or simply the best way how to clean floor. Any participation is highly appreciated. Also, it helps parents to discover in themselves different talents and skills, which have been forgotten, hidden or unknown before. And family members volunteer, bringing these special skills and talents that enrich the curriculum, such as cooking, music, art, or woodworking. They tell about their professions and hobbies. They assist the teacher in individualising instruction by reading, writing down child's comments on their drawings or playing math games with small groups of children. Before parents start to work in a classroom teachers introduce them with daily timetable, theme which the children explore and tasks in the concrete activity centres. This democratic form of co-operation helps to increase authority of teachers, because parents can better appraise teacher's efforts and creativity through their own practical participation

And another aspect what I'd like to stress on. Latvia has a very high percentage of the divorced families. Mostly children stay to live with mother, often they meet father very seldom, or even they lose connections with father at all. Majority of teachers at schools and pre-schools are women. That is why it is especially significant that fathers, grandfathers or elder brothers participate in the educational process. It gives opportunity for other children to have communication with men - for some children it could be the sole chance.

Another way of co-operation is practical help. Family members help maintain the program facilities by painting, building classroom and outdoor equipment, making new toys and learning materials or digging gardens and making repairs. Parents are

different, and we pay special attention to these differences. Our teachers respect that each mother or father has a special field of activities where she or he feels strong and competent, so, they ask for help straight in this sphere. Also teachers consider that each parent has different time limit, different resources and opportunities. One example, which I like very much, because it shows, how different can be help - father who works in a mill presented kindergarten with bag of a flour. This present caused so many opportunities to enrich activities in the classroom – children baked different cookies, used flavour for gluing, and even made candleholders from it. Every practical help is highly valued, but, of course, the best appreciation is children's pride about their family members' contribution.

Very special form of co-operation is a correspondence between parents and children. On Fridays children write a letter for parent and bring it home, but parent responsibility is to write answer till Monday, when children bring it back to school and read together with teacher. The correspondence has many goals, as developing skills of reading, writing and expressing of thoughts. But invaluable is its impact to the mutual relations. Bought sides - children and parent feel important and heard.

New feature implemented by SbS in school and pre-schools is Parents' room. It is place where family members can relax after hard working day and right before they take children home. There parents can meet teachers, to have conversations and discuss different questions with each other, or to spend time together with their child. Also parents can find and read literature about child's education and care.

Experience of the implementing SbS program shows that parents have become more active. They participate in advisory committees that influence school policies and they help with fund-raising in different ways. Conviction, that everything what they do is for their children future, helps them to dare. I'll mention an example when in a small rural village was kindergarten with SbS program, but local school used traditional approach to education. And there was one mother. Her kids attended kindergarten. When the mother experienced how important is SBS program for her kids development, she become so dedicated supporter of the SBS, that finally convinced director of the local school to start train teachers for implementing SbS program in their school too. So, thanks to just one mother, now in this village are more happy pupils, teachers and parents.

Through their involvement with the program, parents have experienced firsthand the responsibility and freedom that comes with co-operative, democratic education, where all who are interested are invited to express their opinions and views. So parents, as well as their children have learned a lot. As a result of this new experience Step by Step Parents Association was initiated and registered in 2000. The goal of the Association is to promote and support the introduction of democratic educational reforms based on the wish of Latvia to become part of the European educational context. It is growing organisation - now they are more than 240 members. Step by Step Parents Association is unique, because of its geography - all Latvia regions are represented in the board of Parents Association. But the best thing is that parents become friends. It is real example of building parents community - with united aims, wishes and strength.

We are happy that Step by Step Parents Association has become the best popularizer of SbS. They understand the importance of influencing decision-making process regarding early childhood education. No one speaks more effectively for children than their own family members. Step by Step Parents Association organises meetings with parents, educators, school administrators and other specialists in all around Latvia and publishes articles in regional and local newspapers to raise public awareness about early childhood education and care, to offer SbS program and promote ideas of child-centred education. We appreciate importance of this work, because to whom else can society and decision-makers trust more than parents who are really involved in this program.

Step by Step Parents Association is one of the first good examples of parents' advocacy, which need to be developed broader in Latvia's society. Therefore CEI is preparing training course for encouraging parents to speak out, argue and stand up for issues that affect their children at home, at school and in their communities. It is supposed to help more and more families become effective advocates for their children and feel strong and competent exercising their rights as democratic citizens.

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