# TOY for Inclusion: access to all

## Research study on the inclusion of children with special needs in ECEC and primary education in Slovakia

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# 1 Introduction

TOY for Inclusion[1] is a European project and an approach which aims to promote inclusive community-based early childhood education and care and bring services for children and their families to where they are needed. TOY for inclusion is implemented in 8 countries and all activities take place in locally established *Play Hubs*. These are safe, non-formal, high-quality, Early Childhood Education and Care spaces where relationships between young children (0 to 10 years) and families from all backgrounds are built.

Play Hubs are also inclusive spaces where:

- Children and adults of all ages and background meet, spend quality time together and play with each other.
- Children can borrow toys and educational materials to bring home.
- Parents, grandparents, and practitioners can informally learn and exchange information about child health, early learning, and development.

Play-based activities are organized in the Play Hubs to support creativity, increase confidence, develop social, emotional and verbal skills and unlock each child's potential. This helps children in their transition to formal education and is particularly relevant for families from a Roma, migrant or socially disadvantaged background, to whom the Play Hubs give extra attention.

Importantly, Play Hubs are a flexible solution that offer educational opportunities for all those children who are often excluded from formal educational services.

There are two Play Hubs in Slovakia: one in Spišský Hrhov, which opened in December 2017, and one in Roškovce, which opened in October 2019. Both Play Hubs are situated in the village primary schools and have been successful in bringing young children from Roma and non-Roma communities together in a playful environment. In November 2019, Wide Open School – Škola dokorán (WOS)[2], the organisation implementing TOY for Inclusion in Slovakia, received support from the Kahane Foundation for the pilot project 'TOY for Inclusion: Access to All' to promote inclusivity for children with special needs in the local Play Hub and in the community's other educational services. The project aims to test an innovative best practice approach which integrates Roma children with and without disabilities in non-formal education. One of the outputs will be the development of a free training toolkit for teachers, other educators, and community members to support them in inclusive practice. The outcomes will create a basis for other communities and Play Hubs in other countries to do the same and eventually instigate policy change.

## 1.1 *Purpose of research*

The first stage of the 'TOY for Inclusion: Access for All' project consisted of desk research and local field work. This study, which was conducted by ICDI[3] researchers in collaboration with WOS staff in Slovakia, comprised:

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[1] www.toy4inclusion.eu

[2] http://www.skoladokoran.sk/en/

[3] International Child Development Initiatives – ICDI, international coordinator of TOY for Inclusion.

1) A policy analysis regarding current situation of inclusion of children with children with special education needs (SEN) in Slovakian Education also with reference to key EU and international policies and instruments.
2) A consultation with a) parents of children with special needs; b) children with special needs; and c) practitioners in Spišský Hrhov and Roškovce via focus group discussions.
3) A review and revision of the stakeholder mapping and local needs analysis already conducted in 2019 in Spišský Hrhov and Roškovce with the focus on inclusion of children with special needs.

The rationale for the research was to ensure strategic alignment of the project activities with current national, regional and EU policy, with respect to the inclusion of children with SEN. It was also important that the manual and training Toolkit and development activities would build upon the TOY for Inclusion project's achievements in Spišský Hrhov and Roškovce. Also, this report is informed by best international practice and research with respect to inclusion in the early years and address the needs expressed by children, parents, and practitioners. Furthermore, the report seeks to contribute to the knowledge and practices of local and national policymakers, school principals, education specialists and NGOs. This report wants to provide a deeper understanding and analysis of the Slovak inclusive education policy and practice in relation to the broader international context and aims to provide recommendations for future policy development and practice improvement in ECEC, not only relevant for the TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs, but for all formal and non-formal ECEC services.

The research was conducted by ICDI in cooperation with WOS and staff of the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica in Slovakia between September and December 2020.

**Research questions:**

- What is the national policy context regarding inclusive ECEC and primary education, and what are the main obstacles and opportunities in its implementation?
- What aspects (and which findings) of international policy and research about inclusive ECEC and primary education are most relevant for developments in Slovakia?
- How is disability perceived by children, parents, and practitioners, especially among Roma communities?
- What are the supportive and hindering factors in formal and non-formal education provisions that influence the level of inclusion of young children?
- What needs to change in the Play Hubs so that they are inclusive of children with disabilities?

The report is organized as follows: Chapter 1 describes the problems to which this study and the activities of the project 'TOY for Inclusion: Access for All' try to better understand and provide answers to. Chapter 2 illustrates the most recent developments in inclusive education policy in Slovakia and highlights the main challenges and opportunities for change. Chapter 3 presents international research and policy with regards to inclusive

ECEC and provides some examples and recommendations from practice. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research conducted in Roškovce village regarding the perception and understanding of disabilities and the factors that hinder or support the inclusion of young children with special needs in nonformal and formal education. Finally, Chapter 5 introduces the key recommendations for the development of a manual and toolkit that can help support inclusive non formal education in Roškovce, by enhancing the already prominent role of the local Play Hub and its staff.

## 1.2 *Brief overview of problem*

In Slovakia, children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are defined as children with disabilities, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special talents. Slovakia has the fourth-highest share of pupils with SEN in Europe - 12.3% (Hapalová, 2019). Half of these children with SEN are educated separately in special schools. Furthermore, the share of children with SEN has increased by a third in the last 10 years. In Slovakia**,** 5% of children are diagnosed with mental disabilities, almost every 5th child within the Roma community. According to research, only 32% of children from marginalized Roma communities (MRC) attend preschools (The Educational Policy Institute, 2019). Consequentially, Roma children with disabilities are victims of double discrimination, for being Roma and for having special needs.

Currently, the Slovak education system does not provide sufficient assistance to children with SEN, nor support them in reaching their full potential (Hall, 2020). This is in contravention with Slovakia's signatory commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), according to which every child is entitled to the right to be educated together with their peers in a regular preschool or primary school class.

Government support for SEN focusses almost exclusively on formal education. Non-formal learning activities, which are central to the TOY for Inclusion project are typically less supported.

This is also evident in the measures and schemes being put into place during the global COVID-19 pandemic which began to affect Slovakia in March 2020 and currently (January 2021) continues to have a massive impact on how education and welfare services are being delivered. Some primary schools are only open for at risk groups and for children of staff working in vital sectors. From mid-January primary classes will also be open for Roma communities; a maximum of 5 Roma children per class. For the remainder of children, teachers are providing online lessons and support for children who are being home schooled. Additionally, the Government, in cooperation with internet providers, has made provision for free data and internet access to marginalised and disadvantaged families.

## 1.3 *Reasons for optimism*

However, the current policy context in Slovakia offers some reasons for optimism that provision for children with SEN will be improved. The 10-year **National Program for the Development of Education (NPRVV),** which was adopted in 2018 aims to reduce segmentation and segregation and increase integration and inclusion. The program places a special emphasis on the integration of children living in extreme poverty in marginalized communities and socially excluded communities (mostly, but not limited to, the Roma), as well as on improving the quality of their education. Since March 2020, there is a new government in Slovakia, which has declared its interest in facilitating positive changes in this area, evidence of this commitment includes the first-time appointment of a State Secretary with specific responsibility for inclusive education. Furthermore, WOS, representing REYN, is a member of the Advisory Board on Inclusive Education, reporting to the Government. Some positive actions have already been taken. For example, there is now a free school-lunch programme for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (most of which are Roma children), the Education Ministry website has been translated into Romani language, and there is also a commitment to provide free schoolbooks in Romani for Roma children.

Whilst most of the proposed measures in the Programme focus on formal education, there is indication that the important role of non-formal education and extra-curricular activities in supporting children with SEN is now also being recognized by the government (see Section 2 for further information).

Furthermore, there are a number of recent EU funded initiatives which are supporting Slovakian authorities to improve inclusion and the educational outcomes of children with SEN in schools and preschools. These initiatives include: (i) The European Social Fund (ESF) funded project **'School open to all**' which aims for inclusive education and better competences of staff in primary schools and kindergartens as well as specialized institutions that offer pedagogical and psychological support to schools; (ii) The '**More successful in elementary school**' scheme, which aims for greater integration of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream education; and (iii) A project supporting extra-curricular activities in primary schools (Eurydice, 2018). Finally, in January 2019 the government approved an updated action plan which lasts up till 2020 and regards Roma integration aimed at raising the Roma population's education level to the national average (Eurydice, 2019).

Despite increased government commitment to improve provision and training for the inclusion of children with SEN, there are several challenges to be overcome. These challenges largely concern insufficient capacity in preschools, especially in large towns and cities, and lack of information about disability and SEN among Roma parents (see Chapter 2).

It is within this policy context that the 'TOY for Inclusion: Access for All' project, which takes place in Spišský Hrhov and Roškovce, in the Levoča district in the region of Prešov, was developed.

The project aims to expand the already existing and funded project 'TOY for Inclusion', adapting it to focus on Roma non-Roma early childhood education and integration by including young Roma and SEN children in the programme. A training manual and toolkit for the TOY for Inclusion Play Hub staff and volunteers to support parents and educators will be developed and tested. This research and the training manual will also be of interest to staff of other services for children and families in the community (e.g., kindergarten, school, health centre, etc.) as well as those involved in teacher education.

The outcomes of this pilot project will be used to transfer the approach to other Play Hubs in Europe (15 in total) and will be presented to professional organisations and state institutions in Slovakia.

# 2 Inclusive Early Childhood Education: National Policy

The introduction highlighted a reason for optimism in the fact that policy goals and measures concerning the inclusion of children with special educational needs in Slovakia have been incorporated in the 10-year **National Programme for the Development of Education (NPRVV),** adopted in 2018. Whilst the Programme aims to increase integration and inclusion, it **does not** foresee the complete abolishment of special schools or full integration of pupils and students with SEN. Rather, several general and specific measures are proposed, and a budget allocated. Those that are most relevant for the *TOY for Inclusion Accessibilities* project, which are applicable to the structures of TOY for Inclusion, i.e., ECEC Play Hub; Local Action Team[4]; local, national, cross-national peer learning, are summarized in the box below:

| General measures | Specific measures |
|---|---|
| • Strengthening funding and supporting activities of *school clubs*<br>• Introducing **compulsory preschool attendance** at least one year before starting primary school. **This is due to commence in January 2021.** | • The publication of teaching materials in Romani language<br>• Expanding the capacity of preschools and primary schools |

At a **regional level,** a strategy for a gradual development of inclusive education at all levels is envisaged. This will involve the **establishment of a permanent working group** composed of major education actors at all levels, practitioners and academics, experts from countries with advanced inclusive education and experience in successfully implementing pro-inclusive changes to the education system, and experts from all the relevant departments (education, health, culture, labour, and social affairs, interior, justice). As noted above WOS, representing REYN, is a member of this Working Group.

Specifically, it is planned to:

- **Increase the number of professional staff working in schools,** especially teaching assistants, social educators, school psychologists and special educators.
- **Improve the functioning of pedagogical counselling and prevention facilities** by providing appropriate testing and diagnosis tools and ensuring that these uses culturally neutral language.

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[4] In each community, a Local Action Team (LAT) is responsible for designing, running, and monitoring the Play Hub's activities. Keeping sustainability and social cohesion in mind, the LATs ensure a wide community representation, and can include, for example: ECEC practitioners, directors of preschools, teachers, health workers, social workers, members of municipal councils, parents, etc.

- Ensure **consistent methodological guidance** from all the state and private **Centres for Pedagogical and Psychological Counselling and Prevention (CPPPaP)** and Centres for Special Educational Counselling (CŠPP) and common software for all facilities.
- **Strengthen capacity of personnel** of CPPPaPs and CŠPPs.
- **Introduce a system whereby the verification of educational standards is organized in three cycles**, beginning in the third year of primary school, giving minority children enough time to catch up with their peers from the majority.

Finally, the two-shift operation in primary schools, especially in localities with a high concentration of MRC, will be eliminated.

## 2.1 Challenges in implementing the Programme

The current high proportion of children in special schools requires more permeability in the education system, to enable children from special schools to be transferred to mainstream preschool and primary schools. Preschool education or kindergarten is available for children aged 2 to 6 years. Currently children of preschool age with a disability either attend special schools in larger cities or towns, attend regular preschool or stay at home. In approximately 20% of primary schools there are special classes where a mix of Roma and Slovak children with SEN are taught in smaller groups by a specialized teacher. Depending on progress and assessment results, children may move to regular classes.

The aim is to gradually **transform special education** so that increasingly more children are educated together with their normally developing peers. To facilitate this, the State Pedagogical Institute (SPU) plans to **change diagnostic methods and the system of eligible support** for schools. It is also planned that some special schools will become specialist workplaces and provide support to mainstream schools.

However, a number of **challenges and obstacles in implementing these actions** and other actions of the National Program have already been identified. Those which are most relevant for current project are summarized below:

- ***Insufficient capacity in preschools***

In **large cities**, there is currently **insufficient capacity among** preschools as there are not enough places, rooms or qualified teachers. This is likely to mainly affect **children with SEN**, since they are not viewed as a priority when decisions are being made about who is eligible for a place in preschool.

- ***Lack of information about SEN amongst parents***

In less developed regions (i.e., rural areas, outskirts of towns, Eastern Slovakia), **poverty, parents' lack of information** about causes of disability, how some disabilities can be prevented, and the importance of early intervention in case of children with SEN are key challenges that need addressing. Also, there is **widespread mistrust of institutions amongst many Roma parents which complicates SEN education progress** (Vančíková et al., 2017). There are a multitude of reasons for this mistrust, including a history of segregation, racism and discrimination of Roma communities in schools and other institutions (Ives & Lee, 2018)

- ***Lack of tools/materials in languages other than Slovakian***

Another obstacle in implementing the National Program is that children with a different mother tongue are excluded from the support system; Roma children cannot be educated in Romani. A working group is currently working at ŠPU to develop support tools for children with a different mother tongue.

- ***Inability of preschools to avail of grants for special needs assistants***

The National Program stipulates that the current restriction of a maximum of 2 children with SEN in one preschool class is to be abolished. However, the lack of capacity of preschools to include (more) children with SEN is compounded by the fact that most kindergartens do not have a clear legal status, unless they are attached to a primary school. This means that they cannot apply for local government grants to finance special needs assistants, viewed as a critical support needed for inclusion (Fiorentini, 2015). In 2020, there is an average of 0.09 assistants per preschool and in primary schools? There is just one school psychologist for 1,500 children.

After this brief review of the current developments in inclusive education policy in Slovakia and having identified some key challenges and constraints for their implementation, we will now look at what it is possible to learn from international research and practice.

# 3 International Policy and Recommendations

## *3.1 Prevention of disability needs more attention*

In December 2020 ECDAN co-hosted an international Webinar[5] about Nurturing Care for Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities alongside UNICEF, Aga Khan Foundation and Lego Foundation. One of the key messages from this Webinar was that there tends to be a **disproportionate emphasis on diagnosis of disability**, and much **less emphasis** both **on prevention and coordinated support** following diagnosis of a disability or a developmental delay (ECDAN, December 2020). This Webinar also discussed the need **to destigmatize disability** at **every level (community, and service)**, and prevent situation where parents feel shame or guilt regarding having a child with SEN and being disempowered to ask for support.

Regarding prevention, **a key correlate of disability is poverty**. Poverty is related to poorer access to health care for children, and pre-natal care for expectant mothers, as well as poorer nutrition and living conditions, and higher rates of drug abuse. As noted by Ives & Lee (2018), all these issues, catalysed by poverty, may contribute to higher rates of cognitive and behavioural disabilities of both Roma and non-Roma children.

Clearly not all disabilities or diseases are preventable. However, many are. These include: foetal alcohol syndrome (linked to maternal alcohol use in pregnancy); miscarriage or premature birth or low birth weight linked complications (linked to maternal smoking during pregnancy); neural tube defects such as Spina Bifida (linked to folic acid deficiency in pregnancy, maternal smoking and exposure to second hand smoke) and congenital hearing loss (hearing loss present at birth). This hearing loss is linked to maternal infections during pregnancy, such as rubella or herpes simplex virus, premature birth, drug and alcohol use while pregnant or maternal diabetes.  Partial deafness can also be caused by infectious diseases such as measles and mumps which can be prevented through MMR vaccination.

Combating poverty, preventing disability through family support and early childhood education and care (ECEC) and intervening with necessary extra supports in case of specific has to start early i.e., already during pregnancy or even before pregnancy. Evidence-based research and multi-country experiences provide a strong rationale for investing in ECEC, especially for children at risk of developmental delay or with a disability. As noted earlier, both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities state that all children with disabilities have the right to develop "to the maximum extent possible".  These conventions recognize the **importance of addressing the child's health condition or impairment, but also focusing on the influence of the environment** as the cause of underdevelopment, disability and exclusion[6].

The realization that early intervention is vital in situations of SEN is not a new idea. However, ideas about how to intervene have changed. The authors of Inclusive Early

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[5] For recording of Webinar see: https://youtu.be/hNDZpaC23yw

[6] see https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/index_65317.html

Childhood Education, a study of inclusion in 32 countries in Europe, have traced a shift in both research and practice with children with SEN from **primarily working directly with the child in a rehabilitative way** (1st half 20th century), **to including the family in interventions** (2nd half 20th century); to a **holistic approach** focusing on the child, the family and the child's everyday environments. Such a holistic approach also includes a greater focus on inclusive educational provision (European Agency for Special Needs & Inclusive Education, 2017). It should also explicitly recognize the importance of non-formal education for all children to fulfil their rights to learn.

Accordingly, "access to universally available, high quality and inclusive ECE services is the first step of a long-term process towards inclusive education and equal opportunities for all in an inclusive society" (European Agency, 2010, p.37).

This recommendation for inclusive early childhood education (IECE) is currently the **main challenge regarding education access for policymakers and practitioners** not only in Slovakia (see Section above) but throughout Europe and the world. For example, it is estimated that a third of all primary-aged children who are not in school are children with disabilities (WHO & UNICEF, 2012).

There is now universal agreement amongst the major international organisations such as WHO, UNICEF, and the European Commission that a multi-level holistic approach is needed from the first years of life in order for all children to be able to fulfil their rights for education and development and access services.

The international **Nurturing Care Framework** (WHO et al, 2018) proposes a progressive universal model, which requires addressing inequities from the outset to ensure that no child is left behind. Within this, it recognizes incremental levels of needs and support for families and children who are at risk, have developmental difficulties or disabilities or are exposed to multiple deprivations.

## 3.2 *Self-perception of disability and the role of the environments*

Little is known about the way children with disabilities develop an understanding of their disability, especially regarding learning disabilities. A child's knowledge about what it means to have a disability may come from a variety of sources, with the information likely to vary in both its comprehensiveness and accuracy. The self-perception of one's disability describes the individual's understanding of the specific characteristics associated with having a disability and also influences their level of self-esteem (one's overall sense of well-being), and self-concept (perceptions of competence in specific domains) (Cosden. et al 2002).

Self-concept is a multidimensional concept which includes the individual's perception of competence in specific domains, as well as their sense of global self-worth. This explains how some children with disabilities maintain a positive self-concept despite academic difficulties (Ehm et al, 2014; Kloomok and Cosden, 1994).

Parental acceptance and the acceptance displayed by siblings, teachers, and peers are fundamental to the formation of a positive self-concept. Environments of acceptance and success raise an individuals' self-esteem, while environments of failure lower it (Lohbeck, 2020). The school environment plays an important role in self-concept formation, as it is the first occasion in which children act independently and measure themselves against others (Szumski and Karwowski, 2015; Bossaert et al, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to consider both the self-perception of children's disabilities as well as the role the environments (parents and family, peers, school and society) surrounding them can play to promote a positive self-concept and self-esteem. This is further reflected upon in the following section about inclusive education practice.

## *3.3 Inclusive early childhood education (IECE): from policy to practice*

But what does IECE mean in practice? The findings of the aforementioned **European IECE Project** which focusses primarily on provision for 3–6-year-olds, provides some direction. Firstly, the study found that high-quality services that benefitted all children were guided by an inclusive vision, 'As their primary outcome, they sought to ensure each child's belongingness, engagement and learning' (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017, p.26).

The key factors in enabling all children to participate were the following:

1. **Each child is enabled to attend IECE regularly in the setting and during the daily social and learning activities** (to 'be there'). This in turn is influenced by national and regional statutory provisions for accessible IECE such as entitlement to and availability of affordable (and for certain categories, free) IECE.
2. **Universal attendance is only possible if the local setting pro-actively reaches out to all parents in the community**. The setting must offer flexible arrangements to meet the various needs of every child and family.
3. **Children's participation and involvement in learning and social activities, as well as their belongingness to the group should have priority over performance targets**.
4. This means **closely monitoring each child's curiosity, interests and ambitions** to enable them to work towards their own goals.
5. Therefore, **inclusive policymakers and practitioners need to be wary of the emphasis on achievement**: i.e., testing, or scores on developmental targets, rather focusing on progress and learning across all areas, belonging to the peer community, and engaging positively with the physical and social world.

A welcoming and supportive learning community is fostered where everyone belongs and enjoys positive relationships with both the staff and their peers. According to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2017. P.29) within this welcoming atmosphere, children are then invited and enabled to:

- Use their strengths.
- Make choices, particularly in play.
- Exercise their curiosity and self-direction.
- Express interests and goals and engage in problem-solving accordingly.

- Be motivated for and engage in valued activities alongside and in interaction with their peer group, with guidance and relevant support as necessary.

Many studies have found that reflective practice enables practitioners and other stakeholders to constantly seek to improve the quality of their ECEC provision (SEED Project Consortium, 2019; Fiorentini, 2015). This observation was considered important also by the IECE project, which developed a Self-reflection tool with the following eight aspects or dimensions of quality IECE:

1. Overall welcoming environment
2. Inclusive social environment
3. Child-centred approach
4. Child-friendly physical environment
5. Materials for all children
6. Opportunities for communication for all
7. Inclusive teaching and learning environment
8. Family-friendly environment

Furthermore, inclusive structures inside the ECEC setting were further supported by **inclusive structures in the surrounding community outlined below**:

- The IECE setting's search for collaboration with the families.
- Opportunities for in-service training for IECE staff.
- Various other support from the surrounding community which was committed to providing a quality ECE to all its children.
- The co-operation of inter-disciplinary and inter-agency support services from outside the pre-school.
- Arrangements for the smooth transition of the children from the IECE setting to compulsory education settings.

Another relevant research project consulted for this study was a **PhD study titled, 'Exploring Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties: Using Children's, Parents', and Professionals' Perspectives to Support Inclusive Educational Experiences'** (Fiorentini, 2015). Emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) is an umbrella term encompassing a very wide range of difficulties including Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD or ADD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD). Whilst the fieldwork was conducted with children aged in primary schools in Ireland, it identified several **levers for change to support inclusive learning experiences**, many of which have relevance for the Slovakian context.

Some of the insights from both the literature reviewed and the findings of the in-depth interviews with children, parents and professionals carried out in this PhD research are summarized in the following section below.

The **factors** identified as being **supportive** of children's experiences were:

- Kind, listening and flexible teachers that understood children's difficulties
- Teachers that could have fun with children whilst still having effective classroom

management skills
- Consistency of teacher expectation, understanding and classroom experiences
- Practical strategies such as use of morning check-in, use of worry boxes and feelings diaries
- Establishing fair targets for behaviour and learning
- Consistency, familiarity, stability, and continuity in classroom routines
- Support of Special Needs Assistants (children valued their friendship and the emotional and practice support they offered)
- Explicit teaching of social and emotional skills to help children with relationships, and developing empathy with others (Fiorentini, 2015).

**Factors** identified in Fiorentini's study that **hindered** learning experiences were:

- Delays in having their needs detected and supported,
- Withdrawing the child regularly for intensive, additional supports; this added to the child's heightened sense of difference and created a significant barrier to successful inclusive practices
- Too narrow assessment focusing only on literacy and numeracy
- A resourcing system for additional teacher supports (Special Needs Assistants) based on diagnosis of disability, rather than on children's needs.

Fiorentini's research also emphasized that **strong school leadership** was required to promote inclusive practices and to encourage teachers to keep developing their classroom approaches. It was also recommended that **school inspectors evaluate the supports provided to pupils in terms of health and wellbeing**, in particular social, emotional and behavioural supports.

Finally, **parents need to be recognized as critical and respected partners**. Accepting "parents as experts on the child and teachers as experts on the curriculum," and having mutual respect for both will support parents and teachers in working together for the benefit of the children's social and emotional development and learning (Ashdown, 2010, p.92, cited in Fiorentini, 2015, p.123)

Another important resource for this research study has been the experience of a **disability rights and activist organization based in Sierra Leone called One Family People (OFP[7])**, a longstanding partner of ICDI. OFP are recognized internationally for their activism on behalf of children with disability and have had representation on international bodies such as UN Women, UNICEF and Department of Education in Sierra Leone. When asked about their most effective strategies in raising awareness with parents and the community level about the rights of children with a disability to an education, and changing negative mindsets about disability, their director of operations Hady Diallo highlighted five key strategies which are briefly outlined in the following section[8].

Firstly, **the parents' level of understanding regarding disabilities,** education and the rights of children must be taken into consideration when deciding which strategies are

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[7] https://onefamilypeople.org/

[8] Excerpt from personal communication with Hady Diallo, 21 Dec 2020

suitable to be used regarding raising awareness of how parents can support their children with disabilities. Secondly, once parents can recognize their children's difficulties or disabilities it is important that they have a network of similar parents with whom they can share ideas with and be supported by. The establishment of **parents support groups** which meet periodically to share their experiences and support each other in raising their children with disabilities has been very effective in providing this network. It has help parents (members of the groups) understand that they are not alone in this situation.

Thirdly, it is important to acknowledge that parents can harbour negative mindsets towards children with disabilities and the difficulty in taking care of them. **Music and participatory theatre** have also been very effective in **changing the negative mindset of parents** and getting them to see the potential, and ability of their children whilst encouraging them to accept and care for them. Furthermore, Diallo stated that another effective strategy is Role Modelling, as it is important for both parents and children to be able to identify successful persons with disabilities to show both parties that the only thing limiting their children is their mindsets and environment. "Once we create **an enabling environment** and we allow the children to see possibilities, dream and work towards it".

Finally, Developing the **artistic talents of children with disabilities** is key to **building their confidence and the confidence of their parents in their children**. It's also key for social inclusion and acceptance from other peers. (Hady Diallo, Director of Operations, OFP, personal communication, December 2020).

Many of the findings of international research and some of the good practice examples from international practice are also reflected in the findings of the focus group discussions conducted in Roškovce for this study. These findings and their interpretation are illustrated in the following chapter.

# 4 Findings of consultation with children, parents and practitioners

## *4.1 Perception of disability and factors influencing the level of inclusion of young children in formal and non-formal educational settings*

This study aimed to inform the development of a professional development pathway for practitioners alongside creating practical tools for parents and practitioners which can increase accessibility and inclusivity of the Play Hub in the community of Doľany – Roškovce, in Slovakia, and in turn also increase the access of children with special needs to regular education. To develop these resources in a way that is meaningful for the context where they will be piloted, focus groups were conducted with children with special needs, their parents, and practitioners in Doľany – Roškovce, to explore their perception of disability. These focus groups also sought to identify possible supportive and risk factors in the formal and non-formal education system that can influence the level of inclusion of young children aged 0 to 10.

Roškovce is a Roma settlement near the village of Doľany with altogether more than four hundred inhabitants, 70% of which are Roma. Most of the Roma inhabitants live on a hill above the village in conditions often found in developing countries (e.g., poor housing, extreme poverty, large families, high rates of unemployment, lack of access to water and electricity, poor hygienic conditions, low level of education). In the past, people belonging to the majority (non-Roma) also used to live in Roškovce, however, the last woman left nine years ago. Since then, the socio-economic conditions of the village have been decaying and Doľany has gradually been segregating into two parts – Roma and non-Roma.

**It is important to note that all parents interviewed are members of the Roma community, with low educational level, living in bad socio-economic conditions and dealing with segregation and marginalisation.** This gives context to their low level of awareness of disability and may explain the lack of proactive access to information and support and the sense of passivity about improving their children's well-being and their future opportunities.

### Children's perception

**From the answers of children, it is evident that their level of awareness and understanding of their disability is low**. Children did not recognize having any difficulties when asked independently, nor did they recognize difficulties when compared with other classmates, except for the cases of physical disability (e.g., hearing impairment). When asked how they feel about their difficulties, they denied having any (learning) disability and referred to themselves as being part of a minority (e.g., Roma) as the only difficulty they experience. **However, some of them reported having problem interacting with other children**, because these other children make fun of them or are too noisy.

### Parents’ perception

Parents, on the other hand, recognized that their children have special needs, but those are perceived as an **inescapable fate affecting some children and accepted passively**:

*"Sometimes children are healthy, sometimes not, we take them from God like that."*

Most parents interviewed in this study reported that all information and support they received regarding the needs of their special needs’ children came from the primary school. It is extremely rare that parents seek the help of other professionals and specialists. **This is due to a general lack of awareness and acceptance of disability but also because the percentage of children with special needs in Roškovce is so high** (approx. 45% among children from 7 years old and above according to the school‘s unofficial data) that **having a disability is almost becoming the norm**. The invisibility of disability is also the result of the isolation and segregation of the mono-etnhic (Roma) community of Roškovce from the other towns nearby. The lack of access to health services must also be put in context considering the general mistrust minority groups have towards institutions and services. These are seen as a threat to family unity (i.e.: social services removing children from families because of poverty, abuse, etc.). Only one parent reported consulting with a paediatrician when she first noticed signs of difficulties in her child, yet she received no follow up. **Parents seemed to agree that disabilities are what they are, not much can be done to improve the quality of life of their children and expressed the attitude that those children „will have to work harder as adults“.**

### Practitioners‘ perception

The focus group with practitioners (teachers, Roma assistant and Play Hub staff) shows a more comprehensive and complex picture of the life of children with special needs in Doľany – Roškovce, as well as important insights into the relationship the parents and children have with the practitioners in the school and in the Play Hub.

The community of Doľany – Roškovce is a segregated Roma community with a local (pre)primary school, which is a satellite school of the one in the near city of Spišský Hrhov. **In the satellite school, all the children are of Roma origin, 25% of them have special needs which is double the amount at the school in Spišský Hrhov**. The majority this 25% have ADHD, dyslexia and emotional and behavioural problems. Other common disabilities displayed by these children include low IQ and sensory disabilities such as deafness and eye-sight problems. All children only interact and play with other children from the same ethnic group.

The school has special classes for children with disabilities. This is a specific choice of the school, who wants to offer the local children with special needs the opportunity to attend a regular school and interact with children without special needs at least in some moments during the day. The possibility to open special classes for children with disabilities in regular schools is an option offered by the national legal framework and wants to promote inclusivity. **However, these special classes, although they represent an improvement**

**compared to separate special schools, are still a form of segregation in an already segregated school.**

Teachers and the other staff (e.g., paediatricians, psychologists, etc.) come mostly from the Slovak community, except for Roma mediators or assistants, and live very different lives compared to the ones of the local Roma families. All practitioners are qualified for their jobs and showed a high level of awareness of the disabilities of the children they work with and for. Teachers working in the special need classes have a university degree with a focus on children with special needs and receive a higher salary; they participate in training, seminars, and continuously work on improving their skills and knowledge, also thanks to the numerous training courses offered by NGOs.

**Practitioners reported families' poor living conditions and socio-economic situations, their lack of awareness of the importance of education, their low understanding of disability and their lack of ambition for their children as the main challenges of their work and their efforts to support children with special needs in school**. All children living in Doľany – Roškovce live in an excluded community, they lack role models and contact with the majority population. This results in the fact that most children do not practice the Slovak language outside school, and only speak Romani at home, which makes their participation to school even harder and communication between families and services almost non-existent. Their families are large, sometimes with more than 10 members, living in small houses and often with only a few members with a regular job. According to the practitioners, parents do not show interest in school or their children's results, **parents also do not realize that some children have disabilities, especially if they are learning disabilities, and consequently they do not look for ways to help them and educate them according to their needs.** Finally, practitioners mentioned that when given the opportunity to register their children in a non-segregated school or to participate in activities outside the community, **parents often refuse it and prefer to keep their children in their known environment, despite the lack of prospects it offers them.** The primary school in Roškovce only offers education until grade 5 and older children must necessarily go to the school in Spišský Hrhov to continue their education. Only the special classes in Roškovce are open to children older than 10 years old. This results in the fact that many Roma children from Roškovce drop out of school after grade 5, unless they are in the special classes, but in this case their prospect for future education is anyway very narrow if non-existent.

When asked about the perception of disabilities among parents, practitioners said: "No one in the community is aware of children with special needs unless they have a physical disability, which exposed them to high risk of being bullied and excluded". Children with learning difficulties and no obvious physical disability on the other hand, do not seem to be seen and do not receive appropriate support at home, where in general the attention toward education and results is very low. At school, on the other hand, according to the practitioners, the approach is much better: qualified teachers work with special needs children according to their type of their disability and in smaller groups; the school psychologist and special pedagogue prepare the curriculum in detail and monitor children's progress regularly. In special cases, teachers can also request assistance from the paediatricians, which is evaluated as very effective.

## *4.2 Factors that hinder and support the inclusion of young children in formal and non-formal educational settings*

Children reported that they were generally happy at school, as this is the place where they can spend time with their friends and feel loved by teachers. Both parents and children appreciated that teachers care about them and that the school is beautiful, clean and provides warm food to the children every day.

Reading, writing, and counting are considered boring and difficult activities which generate frustration or disinterest. Some children also complained about the lessons being too long, the classrooms being too noisy, the lack of a gym and computers, and the time for free play indoors and outdoors being too short.

When asked what would help them learn better, all children mentioned playful learning, physical movement, contact with nature and the loving support of their teachers. The place where these can be found and where children prefer to spend their free time and feel more at ease and welcome is the local Play Hub. They see the time spent in the Play Hub as the only time that is truly theirs. The Hub is the only place for children in the community and children see it as their institution. **They also reported that they prefer the Play Hub to school, and that they respect the staff of the Play Hub more than the school staff.** The attention, love and support offered in the Hub along with the attractive fact that parents can also go there with their children, makes it very successful for special need children. This is also the space where they can more easily interact with children without special needs **without fear of bullying, exclusion, or discrimination**.

Parents, in most cases mothers, reported not seeking help or support for their children (with and without special needs) and for themselves as parents through doctors, psychologists, or other specialists. **If they have a problem, they go to the women in the Play Hub such as staff, volunteers, and other mothers**. The Hub is a safe space where trust between families and services is strong, compared to the mistrust characterizing the relationship with other services, and it is also the only place where parents happily go to receive information about education and health. It is considered a safe space. The informality and cosiness of the Play Hub and the attention staff and volunteers put in organising the activities, workshops, and seminars for parents is well appreciated and rewarded in terms of **attendance and trust**. Another promising factor is that the composition of the Local Action Team who runs the Play Hub in Roškovce has recently changed to welcome new members with more expertise in special need education, who could support the design of new inclusive activities in the Hub and the development of a tailor-made out-reach programme towards families of children with disabilities. This could open a dialogue which could bring services and families closer and in time encourage more children with special needs to attend regular education.

Most children interviewed reported missing their mothers and their homes while at school, but also said that their parents do not have a lot of time or will to play and read with them, nor support them with their homework. They also mentioned that they do not have toys and books at home. The school, on the contrary, offers many educational and playful materials, but the time children have to use them is limited due to a very formal approach to learning. **The only place where they feel they have the time and resources to play is the Play Hub**. What makes this place special is that parents also play with them and receive support from the Play Hub staff.

Practitioners lamented over the lack of support children receive at home with regards to their education (homework) and the lack of interest parents show towards children's results at school.

Parents recognize the teachers as their main point of reference when it comes to their children's education, they respect and trust them. But it seems that parents do not consider themselves in a partnership with teachers when it comes to the education of their children: education happens in school and it is a responsibility of teachers. This also results in the fact that when teachers try to talk with parents about the disability of their children, they do not feel heard or understood by the parents.

From the responses of both parents and practitioners, it seems that the home and the school are two separate worlds that do not necessarily support each other, and that parents and teachers do not form a fruitful partnership in the best interest of the children.

The big efforts teachers conduct at school to support children with special needs is confined to the special classes, which have the advantage of being small in group size, but don't allow contact between children with and without social needs in an inclusive environment. This is probably determined also by the national policy context, which doesn't support the transformation of primary schools into inclusive learning environments, where children with special needs are placed in regular classes but receive ad-hoc support for their difficulties strongly enough.

Even in the special classes, and despite the high level of training, teachers complained about the lack of materials to use with children with special needs (lessons and activities). They reported that the workbooks produced by the national government are too demanding and not tailored to the needs of every individual child. This means that teachers need to spend a lot of extra time preparing materials for their students.

Segregation has an impact on the children without special needs as well, as they are not used to interacting with diversity, and demonstrate a lack of social and emotional skills (e.g., empathy) needed to interact with special needs children. In fact, everything described here happens in an already segregated context, where most of the children in the school are of Roma origin who come from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds and must face exclusion and discrimination, no matter whether they have special needs or not.

Despite the efforts of the school principal and staff to invite Roma families to move their children to the near central location of the school in the city of Spišský Hrhov, which is more mixed compared to the satellite school in Doľany – Roškovce, hardly any families accept to do it. This is particularly true for the Roma families with children with special needs, who feel their children are safer and more protected in the local community school. Such segregation has an impact on the future perspective of children, who often do not continue their education after primary school or are placed in low level secondary schools.

Considering these findings, we make several recommendations to inspire positive change in ECEC practice in the project locations. These recommendations will also inform the next phase of the project, which is to develop a manual and toolkit for TOY for Inclusion Play Hub staff and volunteers so that they can support parents and educators in the context of the ‘TOY for Inclusion: Access to All’ project.

# 5 Play Hubs as supportive and inclusive environments: recommendations for practice

The overall goal of this study was to analyse the current policy framework regarding inclusive ECEC and primary education in Slovakia and understand the needs and desires of children with special needs, their parents, and practitioners in the village of Roškovce. The study also aimed to develop concrete recommendations for the development of a manual and toolkit that can help support inclusive non formal education in this context, by enhancing the already prominent role of the local Play Hub and its staff. Finally, this report is also meant for local and national policymakers, school principals, education specialists and NGOs. It provides a deeper understanding and analysis of the Slovak inclusive education policy and practice in relation to the broader international context and provides recommendations for future policy development and practice improvement in ECEC. These research-based recommendations are not only relevant for the TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs, but for all formal and non-formal ECEC services.

A review of the current policies and frameworks has been conducted, together with a review to relevant national and international projects that promote inclusive ECEC. Based on the analysis, it is possible to state that although the Slovakian government's intention is to make education more inclusive, many steps still need to be taken to transform this intention into action and practice. Currently, several projects, mostly funded by EU grants, are piloting innovative approaches and methodologies in inclusive education, which in the future could be scaled up and replicated at national level with government (and donor) support. International research can also provide useful input for making the Slovak education system more inclusive towards children with special needs and those coming from minority groups (e.g., Roma). Leaving behind the institution of segregated special schools for children with disabilities in favour of inclusive classes in regular schools, where all children are supported based on their needs and talents, remains a priority.

## *5.1 Providing appropriate supports and pedagogy in inclusive ECEC centres and schools*

**It is recommended that specialized special needs teachers and assistants work alongside regular teachers in both inclusive schools and ECEC centres/kindergartens.** Their role will be to support the participation and learning effort of children with special needs as well as the creation of an inclusive environment in the whole class and among all children. They can also have an advisory role in the Play Hub.

The application of a holistic approach to child development and education, the creation of a strong partnership between (educational) services, parents, and communities, as well as the promotion of intersectoral cooperation and non-formal education are essential elements for the creation of more inclusive educational provision. Playful learning remains pivotal for all children, and especially for those with special needs. **It is recommended that ECEC centres and schools be child-centred and be able to facilitate and promote every child's curiosity, self-direction, and talents**.

## *5.2 Paying more attention to prevention of disability*

Another important finding, which is particularly relevant to the community of Roškovce is that regarding prevention, a key correlate of disability is poverty and its subsequent factors such as poorer access to health care for children, and pre-natal care for expectant mothers. The socio-economic conditions in which most of the Roma families live in Roškovce, as well as in many other towns in Slovakia, in Europe and in the world, are extremely poor. This is reflected in an extremely high number of children with special needs in this community.

On the other hand, the low level of education of parents and their lack of awareness and acceptance of disability means that very few families with a child/ren with disability recognize the additional needs of their child(ren) nor do they seek specialized medical or educational support or intervention. The (pre) primary school is the only institution these families interact with in this segregated, 100% Roma village. Teachers are adequately qualified to work with and support children with special needs, but they lament the lack of high quality, flexible and adaptable educational materials they can use in their classes.

On the positive side, the local Play Hub is reported by both children and parents as a focal community point and a place which they enjoy visiting.

**It is recommended that the role that the Play Hub already plays in sharing information about child development, parenting, health, nutrition, and education be further strengthened and supported to bring up issues gradually and informally such as sexuality, healthy pregnancy, and childbirth and how disability can be linked to family planning and prenatal care in the community** (if desirable, teenage girls, mothers and grandmothers and teenage boys, fathers, grandfathers separately). (See also recommendation about Parent Support Groups below)

## *5.3 Improving the link between home, Play Hub and school (informal, non-formal and formal education)*

The Play Hub, the experience of its staff, their approach to communicating with families and children, their ability to simplify complex information, and their expertise to use play as the main drive of learning could become a catalyst for positive transformation in the village of Roškovce. This project has the potential to lead to a smooth transition between the informal environment of the home and community and the formal environment of the school, whilst subsequently increasing cooperation and partnership between families and educational institutions.

**It is recommended that a stronger and more structured cooperation be built between the school and the Play Hub, to harness the trust created in the Play Hub, and the advantages of non-formal education, and stronger links between home, Play Hub and school leading to better outcomes for children.**

This will mean **strengthening the cooperation between the school and the Play Hub**, i.e., not seeing them as two separate spaces, one for formal learning and one for playing. The introduction of **more playful learning activities in the school** could bring positive results for children with and without special needs. The school could also get inspired by the physical environment of Play Hub and **change the layout of the classrooms to allow more peer-interaction, self-directed learning, group work and choice** for children.

Teachers will need to be able to access **easy-to-use and easy-to-adapt materials** (lessons and activities) for their classwork with children with special needs. It is important to also consider the **use of art, music and theatre** etc. to promote inclusion and nurture the talents of children of all abilities, firstly in the Play Hub and preschool and, in time, in the school as well.

**More communication and interaction between school and families** is needed, to encourage both parts to understand each other's roles and perspectives better. This could happen in an informal way, through **home visits** which would allow the teachers to gain insight into where and how children are growing up, get to know their environments better and allow the parents to build a more direct and less institutional relationship with the teacher.

Dr Margy Whalley (2013), former director of the Pen Green Centre for Children and Families in Corby in the UK - a unique integrated service for young children and families, stated that the school should develop a trusting critical friendship with parents. **Parents need to become advocates for their children**. Even if they did not have a good experience in the school system, parents can still advocate for their children's rights, needs and desires so that their children can do better and achieve in school.

**Early detection of special needs and adequate support** (including awareness raising) should be offered to parents, without stigma. A collaborative partnership between school and the other services in the community should be established. An **out-reach programme** which does not require parents to look for help, should be considered. Help, information and support should reach the families who need them in informal, non-threatening ways (e.g., through the Play Hub).

## *5.4 Facilitating peer to peer support via parents support groups*

The mothers interviewed in this study confirm that the peer-support they receive from the women in the Play Hub is highly valued and, in most cases, they see the Play Hub as the only place where they can seek help and exchange their experiences.

**The establishment of parents support groups (for mothers and fathers together, or separate mothers' and fathers' groups) which meet periodically to share their experiences and support each other in raising their children with disabilities can be very effective to raise awareness, share experiences and seek for support.**

Through collaboration with experts and specialists these informal periodic meetings could also be used to raise awareness about prevention of disabilities and the support available to children and families living with them. The special relationship between the Play Hub and the families can offer the perfect platform to convey new messages and increase the level of awareness on disability. The Play Hub also offers parents and services a safe space where they can familiarize and build trust, which can result in a smoother transition to primary school and better cooperation between families and services.

## *5.5 The role of the municipality*

Part of the current **National Program for the Development of Education (NPRVV)** involves the introduction of compulsory preschools. This provides an incentive for municipalities (as overall responsible for preschools) to formalize a cooperative agreement with Play Hubs, given their success to date in improving access and inclusion in the project areas and engaging with Roma parents.

The experience and expertise of the Play Hub staff could also support parents in becoming more involved in their children's education. They could develop specific **resources and provide inspiration about playful learning for parents to use at home**. These could be disseminated through a short home visiting programme organized by the Play Hub's staff.

**It is recommended that Municipalities support the Play Hubs by providing space, funding for materials and contribute to staffing costs of Play Hub employees.**

It is our goal and dream that a stronger cooperation between informal (the family), nonformal (the Play Hub) and formal (the school) education environments will in turn create a more **inclusive community** for all children. The goal of inclusive education is also for preschool and primary school employees, children, and their families to co-create a unified community, to solve problems together and to educate their children together. This is still rare in the Slovak education system, and the Play Hub could be the place where it happens and act as a catalyst for communities to build inclusive environments.

When all this happens, the primary school of Roškovce will no longer need separate special classes for children with special needs. Furthermore, children with and without special needs from the Roma community of Roškovce and their families will feel confident and strong enough to register in non-segregated primary schools and to continue education to secondary school and universities.

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# 7 Appendix 1 – Research guidelines and tools

Three components of the research:

1. Policy context in Slovakia
2. Revisit stakeholder mapping and local needs analysis with the focus on inclusion of children with special needs.
3. Consultation with a) parents of children with special needs; b) children with special needs; and c) practitioners

## Methodology

### 1. Policy context in Slovakia

Consult researchers and senior policy makers (e.g., the Mayor, etc.) to answer the following, through telephone conversations, meetings, or emails, and desk research:

- What is the policy vision, goals, and priorities (also financial) in relation to children with special needs in Slovakia in 2020? Both at national and municipal levels.
- Can we link this project to a specific initiative, policy, or framework?
- What government and municipal resources are available to support (financial, educational, psychosocial, practical, etc.) children with special needs and their families *at home*, and in *formal* and *non-formal* educational settings.

**Please, collect information and write up max 2 pages in English with key information, clear references/links and names and positions of sources.**

### 2. Revisit stakeholder mapping, local needs analysis, and LAT membership with the focus on inclusion of children with special needs.

- Review the latest version of your stakeholder mapping and local needs assessment with the focus on inclusion of children with special needs. What changes will you need to make to ensure that children with special needs are sufficiently represented on the LAT? Are their needs and interests sufficiently acknowledged and addressed in the analysis? **Update document accordingly and send it to us.**
- Ask LAT members what is their vision regarding inclusion of children with special needs in the Play Hub. What are the current strengths of Play Hub in this regard? **Write up details in a 1-page document.**
- Review LAT membership to include new members that support inclusion of children with special need. **Send us proposed new members if you feel this is required.**

### 3. Consultation with a) parents of children with special needs; b) children with special needs; and c) practitioners

Implementation science and our experience with TOY for Inclusion up to now, shows that parental involvement in services and capacity building will only work if there is genuine consultation with parents on what they want and need. Therefore, we suggest that you organize 3 focus group discussions, one with parents, one with children and one with practitioners.

**Guidelines for focus groups (FG)**

**a. Group size and participants**

FG with parents: should consist of 8 – 10 participants plus the facilitator and the notetaker. We advise you to get a good balance of mothers and fathers. If necessary, you can organize two FGs, one for each group.

FG with practitioners should consist of 8 – 10 participants plus the facilitator and the notetaker. We suggest you try to include a range of practitioners, e.g. teachers of kindergarten and primary school, practitioners from the Play Hub, health workers, social workers. Peter cannot be one of them, and we also suggest he is not the facilitator (see note below about selecting facilitator).

For the FG with children, 2-4 children with special needs (physical and/or learning disability or emotional/behavioural difficulties) aged 5 to 10 years old. You could organize 2 or 3 groups. In case you cannot find children in this age group with special needs, we suggest you select older children with special needs and ask them to reflect on their memories of being a young child at school.

### b. Facilitators

Each FG needs 1) a facilitator and 2) a note taker. Both need to be experienced in group facilitation, prepare in advance and have a very good knowledge of the questions that will be discussed during the FG.

To avoid bias, select a facilitator and notetaker who are neutral and not directly involved, although trusted.

It is also advisable to record the FG with a voice recorder. Do ask permission of participants to record explaining that 1) discussion is being recorded only as a research aid 2) only the research team will listen to recording, and 3) participants' names will not be used in the research report.

We do not require you to write a detailed transcript of the FB, given the short time at our disposal for this research.

### c. Permissions

Everybody, including children, should receive a written invitation to participate in the FG. This should explain the purpose of the discussion, where it will take place, what it will involve, confidentiality and use of data. Do not forget to make this attractive, by also mentioning food, drinks, arts, etc.

In case you need help, we can share some examples.

### d. Duration of the FG

The FG should last a maximum of 2 hours including short breaks during the discussion.

The FG with children will be also 2 hours and also involve the use of arts.

It is also important that participants feel relaxed - it is helpful to offer some small refreshments such as coffee, tea and snacks.

Think carefully about the venue, make participants feel welcome and comfortable.

Participants need to be told the purpose and the duration of the FG when they are being invited to participate. They also need to be thanked for their participation and be told how they will be kept informed about the research and the project.

Good preparation, time management and communication/interpersonal skills of the facilitator and note-taker are a key success factor for the FG.

A special, creative/interactive approach is needed for FG with children (see below)

### e. Questions for FG

*This list of questions is tentative. We will review them after receiving your feedback and reading the information gathered for components 1 and 2.*

**For parents:**

1. What do you identify as factors that support your child's learning at home?
2. What do you identify as factors that support your child's learning at school?
3. What are the challenges for your child in his/her classroom and the wider school including the playground?
4. What are the challenges for your child when he/she is playing outside school?
5. How aware is your child of his/her difficulties? How does he / she feel about having difficulties?
6. Do you, as a parent, have opportunities to discuss your child's learning with his/her teachers? Do you feel listened to?
7. Do you think that teachers take on board your child's views about his/her learning and general school experiences?
8. Where do you get advice / support to help you with your child's learning and socializing (playing, making friends)?
9. How can the Play Hub offer you this support?
10. Any questions that you consider should be asked to inform this study further…

**For practitioners:**

1. What are the challenges (in learning, socializing - making friends, feeling included, expressing their feelings, expressing their expectations for the future) for children with special needs you work with?
2. How do you think the special needs label impacts the child and their experience of education?
3. What support do children with special needs and their families have at home and at school?
4. How do you become aware of children with special needs' individual likes and dislikes; what they find supportive of learning and what they consider inhibit learning?
5. Is the children's voice included in planning, implementation, and evaluation of activities?
6. How sufficiently prepared do you feel to work with children with special needs and their families?
7. How are you supported in your day-to-day work with children with special needs?
8. How do you practically support inclusion of children with special needs in your daily practice?

9. What could the Play Hub do to enhance inclusion of all children, including those with special needs?
10. What would practitioners like you (teachers, health workers, social workers, etc.) need to improve their knowledge and skills in relation to inclusion of children with special needs?
11. Any questions that you consider should be asked to inform the study further?

**For children:**

Activity 1: Artwork (1.5 hour)

*IMPORTANT: If a child does not wish to take part, he/she can say "stop" and stop at any time. Use a bell to mark starting and end time.*

Example of how session could be introduced:

After some fun warm up activities, that will help us get to know each other and the purpose of our activities, we will work together for about 1 hour to make pictures, using paint, markers and other materials to tell the story of your playing and learning.

We will think about:

1. What you like about school and learning
2. What you like to do in your free time
3. What you find difficult
4. What teachers might do to help you
5. What parents might do to help you
6. What you would like to do in the Play Hub

The facilitator will take photographs of children's pictures so they can take their pictures home.

Activity 2: Discussion group (30 minutes)

*IMPORTANT: if a child does not want to answer, they can say 'pass'. Inform them about what you will do with the information they share with you, and that you will keep their names confidential.*

1. What do you like about school?
2. What do you find difficult?
3. What could teachers do that might help you further?
4. What could your parents do to help you?
5. What would you change in your classroom that would help you learn better?
6. Do you have chances to discuss your concerns or worries with your teachers?
7. Do you think you get on well with the other children in your class/school?
8. How do you feel about having difficulties?
9. Do you think your classmates understand your difficulties?
10. What do you do in your free time?
11. Do you go to the Play Hub?
12. What would you like to do in the Play Hub?
13. How can the Play Hub staff help you to enjoy the activities and the company of other children?

**Report of the FG**

It is advisable to write a short report of each FG in English as soon as possible after the FG is completed. The facilitator and note-taker should compile this report together.

The report should include:

<u>FG with parents</u>:

1. number of male participants, number of female participants
2. For each question addressed: a summary of the main points and opinions expressed by the participants. Pay particular attention to points that are frequently mentioned – and issues where there are differences of opinions. Please try and include one or two direct quotations for each question.

<u>FG with practitioners</u>:

1) number of male participants, number of female participants and their job titles
2) For each question addressed: a summary of the main points and opinions expressed by the participants. Pay particular attention to points that are frequently mentioned – and issues where there are differences of opinions. Please try and include one or two direct quotations for each question.

<u>FG with children:</u>

1) number of male participants, number of female participants, their ages and type of special need
2) For each question addressed: a summary of the main points and opinions expressed by the participants. Pay particular attention to points that are frequently mentioned – and issues where there are differences of opinions. Please try and include one or two direct quotations for each question.
3) Send a selection of the pictures made by children (scanned/photographed) and your interpretation of them.

**One person is responsible for combining all workshop reports into one combined report. This combined report should be sent to ICDI.**