



“SPECIAL NEEDS”: EDUCATION, PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Report of the Study Session held by
**Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions
(OBESSU)**
in co-operation with the
European Youth Centre
of the Council of Europe

European Youth Centre Budapest
04/03/2012 – 11/03/2012



This report gives an account of various aspects of the Study Session. It has been produced by and is the responsibility of the educational team of the Study Session. It does not represent the official point of view of the Council of Europe.

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Executive Summary

The Study Session “*Special Needs*”: *education, participation and social inclusion*, gathered more than 30 school student activists, with different abilities, from all over Europe at the European Youth Centre in Budapest from the 4th to 11th March 2012.

The aim of the Study Session was to explore and further develop tools and methods for social inclusion for school students with special needs in youth projects. It aimed at establishing a common ground and developing a shared understanding on the topic of special needs among the participants, explore the different levels and definitions of inclusion in Europe, make participants self-reflect about their organisations’ work on the topic, share best practices, encourage networking and develop follow-up plans.

The Study Session used non-formal methods focusing on peer education and experiential learning.

For one week, the participants worked together to deepen their knowledge into the topic of special needs, disability, education, participation and social inclusion. In addition they also learned how to work in mixed ability and international teams, developing follow-up projects and strengthening their skills and competences.

Dedicated sessions provided inputs from experts as well as participants of the Study Session who live every day following the principles of human rights. OBESSU’s team wanted to create a safe space for participants to learn, communicate and develop throughout the week.

The two most important messages of the Study Session “*Special Needs*”: *education, participation and social inclusion* are:

- ❖ "Different Abilities, Same Opportunities", and
- ❖ “Nothing about us, without us”.

Introduction

In recent years, OBESSU has focused a lot of its work on inclusion and access to education and through its work noticed that school student unions in Europe, while claiming to represent all school students and fighting for education for all and equal access to education, are not as inclusive as they would want to be and lack direct experience with disabilities issues. It is against this backdrop that it was decided to organise a Study Session focusing specifically on this issue.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the Study Session was to explore and further develop tools and methods for social inclusion for school students with special needs in youth project.

The main objectives pursued by the Study Session were:

- ❖ to establish a common ground and develop a shared understanding on the topic of special needs;
- ❖ to explore the different levels and definitions of inclusion around Europe;
- ❖ to make participants self-reflect about their organisations work on inclusion and share their personal experiences;
- ❖ to encourage networking amongst participants and develop effective follow-up plans.

To be able to stand up for your human rights and be an active part of a democratic system, individuals have to be able to participate actively in society. This then goes hand in hand with the factor of inclusion and empowerment of individuals of all ability groups. Therefore the priorities: “Human rights and democracy: youth policy and youth work promoting the Council of Europe’s core values” as well as the “Living together in diverse societies: youth policy and youth work promoting intercultural dialogue” and “Social inclusion of young people” were key parts of the programme.

Participant’s profile

The participants of the Study Session were selected through an open call, which was disseminated among the OBESSU member, observer and contact organisations as well as through partner organisations such as EUDY (European Union of the Deaf Students) and IFHOHYP (The International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People) who had been contacted. The call was also circulated through their contacts, such as the EDF (European Disability Forum) youth lists.

The applicants were thus a diverse group and came from different countries and backgrounds. The participants from the OBESSU member and observer organisations were all active in school student organisations at national level. The participants came from very different organisational backgrounds, where some had regularly facilitated activities for mixed abilities groups and others who have never worked on the topic. Some had personal

experience through relatives or friends with special needs. Others had experience in working with a specific disability, though not with mixed-ability groups.

Thirty-one participants attended the Study Session coming from twenty-one different organisations. The age of the participants ranged between 16 and 27, although the average age was around 19. The geographical composition of the group was also very spread out, where there were people living in 19 different countries present, ranging from Iceland, to Romania, from Spain to Finland, and Kosovo¹ to Belgium.

The group was also very diverse when it came to abilities, for instance, there were persons with dyslexia, deaf persons, hard-or-hearing persons, one participant was in a wheelchair and was only able to move three fingers, a person who had a mild form of Asperger's Syndrome and persons not legally categorized with any specific ability.

The programme

The programme was developed around the following phases:

1. Introduction and foundation
2. Definitions and exploring levels of social inclusion
3. Old and new experience
4. How to multiply
5. Reflection and follow-up

The first phase served the purpose of introducing the topic to the participants and laying the foundations for the rest of the week. It was essential to find a common language and understanding of the topic in order to ensure that everyone had the same starting point and a chance to familiarise themselves with the subject area of the Study Session. Since everyone came from such different backgrounds, geographical, organisational settings, and not only had very different levels awareness of the topic, but also different preconceived notions, the concepts of 'disability' and 'special needs' were explored. The differences between the two concepts, the social and medical definitions and how the notions have changed over time were put into focus. Participants' initial experience and knowledge was mapped out which was also the first element of the intercultural learning.

The second phase consisted of exploring the meaning of inclusion and exclusion and the different levels of inclusion, which was a good stepping-stone to the topic of accessibility and how to be accessible. These discussions were essential for the participants to identify the attitudes and knowledge necessary in order to truly be accessible and inclusive. Moreover, participants also had the chance to share experiences and best practices, as well as explore projects that had been done so far. Not only could the participants see what projects have been done within the group but also they had a chance to research innovative projects done

¹ All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

by other organisations. This facilitated the process of connecting abstract concepts to reality, and demonstrated how to implement them.

The last phase consisted of empowering participants to take that final leap themselves, as well as to develop follow-up projects and action plans. Furthermore, throughout the week the participants had had the chance for evaluation and self-reflection. This was brought to a close in the last phase where participants had reflected over their experiences during the Study Session and how to bring them to the home organisations.

The entire programme was based on principles of non-formal education with the aim of fostering interactivity and participants' creativity. The programme alternated between plenary sessions and group work in order to ensure that everyone felt comfortable and to create good dynamics among participants and effective exchange between them. The entire programme was designed in a way to be accessible for all always.

The two most important messages of the Study Session "*Special Needs*": *education, participation and social inclusion* are:

- ❖ "Different Abilities, Same Opportunities", and
- ❖ "Nothing about us, without us".

Inputs and Discussions: New Ideas and Conclusions emerging from the discussions:

Special Needs and Disability

The Preparatory Team (prep-team) had organised sessions at the beginning of the Study Session in order to set the common ground for everyone, exploring the definitions of the concepts to be dealt with throughout the week. Both to start the reflecting process and critical thinking about the concepts, but also to establish the level of knowledge and experience within the group.

Most of the participants found it very hard to talk about the definitions of 'disability' and 'special needs' since the topics are so broad, and one automatically ends up grouping everyone together despite the fact that there are big differences between various types of disability. Most participants felt that this was even more the case with the concept of 'special needs'. During one of the discussions, a participant pointed out that it was interesting to see how on the one hand it was difficult to talk about this topic when grouping everyone together, but on the other hand that we wanted to treat everybody equally and by the same principles.

Historically, disability was viewed from a medical perspective and seen as people with something "missing", nowadays society is starting to look at things from more of a social perspective and slowly moving away from the medicalised discourse.

Due to the fact that the participants come from so many different countries, naturally the different realities came up in the discussions and it was interesting to explore the different levels of support given to persons with disabilities in different countries across Europe. Sadly, many participants felt that in their country educational systems most often did not cater to the needs of everybody and that schools were either not equipped or teachers lacked the adequate training to adapt to everyone's needs.

Different perceptions across Europe regarding the definitions also emerged in the debate. Some participants felt that it was negative to use the notion of *people with disabilities*, as if they are 'less able' than others. In contrast, the participant from Romania expressed that for her it was actually a positive change to use the politically correct term *people with disabilities* rather than other more derogatory terms, for example calling someone with a physical disability a *cripple*, which had previously been commonly used in Romania and thus also heavily influenced the general populations' notions and perceptions. The participant from Serbia pointed out that in his country 'special needs' was seen as negative, whilst 'disability' as neutral.

The use of conscious language was an important discussion. Participants agreed that it is important to see individuals for who they are and not for any disability or any other attribute they may have. Moreover, they felt that there is no such thing as a "normal" person. One participant in particular expressed that the idea of normal actually causes more problems than anything, because how can you aspire to be something that does not exist? It is like setting everyone up to fail.

The issue of stereotyping and labelling was greatly explored throughout the Study Session. Participants agreed that we should not attach labels on people and judge them by the exterior. Understanding is key: not categorizing people, but seeing the person 'behind' the disability and encouraging everyone to go beyond the stereotype. Though, one also has to accept that it is a natural process to categorize people, and that this is ok as long as we do not attach judgement to this. Moreover, if one realized this fact, it is possible to be conscious of it and always challenge oneself to see a person for who they are. Disability does not make the person less valuable, and society should learn to accept disability and treat people with disabilities with equal dignity.

The participants questioned the preconceived notions about 'disability' as a whole in the discussions. The question of whether the disability lies within the person or in the environment was brought up at the very beginning of the Study Session: Is it the person who is disabled or is it the environment that is since it does not cater for everyone's needs? This concept was explored in greater depth later on in the week when the Educational Advisor, Micah, explained *Crip Theory*. This is a scholarly theory interlinked with *Queer Theory*, where the name is intentionally provocative, and uses a derogatory term about its own group proudly and defying the labels attached to it. Rather than examining the group which is excluded, it 'flips' the question and looks at what are the underlying problems with the society in which the group lives. Who decides who is disabled? Who decides what this particular group can do? It questions preconceptions, stereotypes and challenges general beliefs.

“As a deaf person I don’t see myself as a disabled person or one with special needs. When a hearing person comes into the deaf community they are the person with ‘special needs’”.

One of the deaf participants introduced a project which she had been involved with. It tackled the negative connotations around the word ‘disabled’, and the implication that there is a category of people who are less able than others. The project had therefore come up with a new word: *Difability*. This word wants to convey that everyone is equal but simply have different abilities to one another. *Different + Ability = Difability*. This concept was adopted by the participants of the Study Session, who much preferred it to the word ‘disability’, and became a general philosophy of the Study Session.

Social Inclusion and Accessibility

Social Inclusion and Accessibility were core themes of the Study Session, and discussed at length and many different sessions and looked at from many angles.

When talking about exclusion, the participants came to the conclusion that there are many types of exclusion, it takes many shapes and it is not necessarily deliberate. Nonetheless it happens all the time. It was noted that if you are an excluded group, it does not mean that you yourself do not exclude others. In addition, some people may not want to be included – for example minorities that want to keep speaking their own language and have their own separate schools – sometimes they do not want to be included. A participant deliberated that one could view exclusion in two different ways: in a group of people it can happen when someone considers someone else less than they themselves, but that there is also social exclusion where society itself is split and diversity is not valued, and where society does not cater for the needs of people who can be considered “different”.

What is Inclusion?

“Where you have a place to be”.

When looking at inclusion, many interesting points were brought up, and reiterated throughout the week. Different systems in society can help everyone reach an equal level: we all begin from different starting points – in such a case inclusion means providing for the various needs in order to get everyone on the same level. We must understand the differences and needs of others, inclusion does not mean everyone being the same, or living in the same way; we are enriched by differences. The participants also considered their own responsibilities: everyone is responsible for letting others in, but also to let oneself in.

“As persons with disabilities it is important to cooperate with non-disabled persons. People who do not have a disability might be curious about how it is to be disabled, ask about that and it is ok”.

The participants agreed that it is important to start with young people in society. If young people are assimilated differently, and exposed to people with differences from a young age, they will automatically adapt to the needs of others, and it will be a regular part of their lives.

Society will then follow. If you teach children that diversity is a resource and that it is “normal”, then people will not exclude others.

Accessibility is one half of the same coin as inclusion: with access you can “access your rights” and thus live to your fullest potential, and live your life equally to everyone else. The participants of the Study Session agreed that accessibility is key: things must be accessible to everyone, whether it be audio-traffic lights, Braille texts, or accessible transport to everyone. If you do not have the tools of the access then it becomes difficult to achieve inclusion. However, in order to achieve accessibility there is also the need for understanding and knowledge.

Having said that, the participants with disabilities shared some experiences from their own life. The participant from Romania mentioned that throughout her life, it helped her to be in a mixed ability environment; she became part of the community. Moreover, since the people in the community had direct daily contact with her, they overcame their worries about how to behave around her and were natural with her. One of the deaf participants explained that in his mixed ability class, people got used to him and learned how to communicate with him even if they did not know how to sign. Moreover, he had also met one of his classmates recently who now works in a hospital. The friend had told him that if a deaf person came in he was automatically chosen to be the doctor treating them since he was able to communicate with deaf people, even if he does not know how to sign. It is all about expressing yourself through body language.

One of the participants explained the challenges that Hard-of-Hearing persons face in Poland. She said that Hard-of-Hearing people are often seen as ‘belonging’ to the deaf community but this is not the case because the two groups have completely different cultures and different needs. Hard-of-Hearing people use hearing aids, loops, lip-reading and they can speak. However, at the same time they are often treated as hearing people, resulting in exclusion and not recognised needs. One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of knowledge and understanding, and that people do not know what it means to be Hard-of-Hearing, so not know how to behave, and what needs there are. In education, this often leads to the needs of Hard-of-Hearing students not being met and consequently the Hard-of-Hearing students have trouble following the lessons fully.

From Rhetoric to Reality

During the Study Session, the prep-team did not only want the participants to gain knowledge and reflect on the topics, but also to gain the attitudes, skills and competences to apply what they learned when going back home and be able to both do something in their everyday life but also do projects. Therefore several sessions were aimed at empowering the participants that everyone can make a difference, but also at gaining practical skills, looking at how to develop accessible projects and at examples of projects already done.

Many of the participants felt that the simulation activities had a profound impact on them and that they really were an eye opener. Specifically the Forum Theatre session, many participants noted that this truly helped to show what they can practically do in their schools and organisations to foster social inclusion.

“We can find solutions and can do something about it when we come home.”

It was said that there is often a perceived barrier between people with different abilities and people feel uncomfortable since they do not know how to act, and therefore avoid interacting altogether. However, through the Forum Theatre exercise participants had the opportunity to find out that solutions might be easier than we think. In addition, one of the realisations was that often problems exist because one is trying to get the “best” for someone without seeing that person’s perspective. This is done without the needed information or asking the person what they would need or want. Actions based on assumptions and wild guesses often result in uncomfortable situations. Such obstacles can be overcome by simply communicating to one another.

A scene which made a big impression on the group was one where a school student council had to see how they could include a blind student in their annual football game. The solution in the end was open communication with the student and asking him how it could work, the solution being using a ball which contains bearings so it is audible. Many people at the Study Session did not even know that such a thing existed, and the same can be said for society as a whole.

The notion of ‘helping’ persons with disability was greatly opposed at the Study Session. Though in general many people want to ‘help’ persons with disability, to protect them, the participants at the Study Session tried to stop using the word ‘help’ but rather working together trying to lessen inequality. The simulation activities also had an impact because many participants noticed that even though they agreed on many of the principles that had been discussed and were convinced that one should communicate, work together and reach a common solution when they were acting scenes, they fell back on the “previous” notions, thus not putting the rhetoric into practice. Noting this in a simulation had a profound impact on the participants’ actions and behaviours throughout the rest of the Study Session.

In order to fully understand the discussed concepts and what happens in reality, the participants at the Study Session brought up examples from their own lives, of things they had noticed or experienced.

Here are three examples:

- ❖ “The scene with the boy in a wheelchair reminded me of my own life since I face similar problems. People, when they see me, want to protect me too much. Even my parents do it, and I know they do it for me. But it is very frustrating for me. I am able to make my own decisions and I’d like to be treated like an adult. My need for support does not mean that I cannot make decisions for myself. It is also my fault though, because I let it happen. I should make sure to speak up more and to ask for help when needed, but make sure that I take my own decisions”.
- ❖ “I feel uncomfortable around blind people. I don’t know how to interact with them. I don’t understand how to behave with other disabled people: if you are just disabled, and you are not a part of the disabled community. I felt uncomfortable with blind people. However, after meeting blind people, seeing they are comfortable with themselves, it made it easier since I feel the same way being deaf. I had dinner with this blind person in a restaurant, we tried to break this barrier, I asked hundreds of

questions, he explained them all. It felt good. The blind person knew I was deaf. How we built up the communication, was great. It can happen to anyone of us. It is a learning curve, you have to experience it, not talk about it only”.

- ❖ “Once in my school we unintentionally excluded a girl from a school activity because we didn’t know about her needs. We were organising the school party for our high-school, and on the night of the party we noticed that she did not come. When we saw her in school the next day we asked her why she didn’t come, and she said that she is epileptic and could not come because of the disco lights. If we had known we would have changed the plans so that she could have come. We felt horrible afterwards, but we didn’t know”.

The participants at the Study Session decided that they should all promote what they called ‘active inclusion’ – meaning that we all take responsibility for including. It should not only be the responsibility of the ‘majority’ group, but each individual must take responsibility for including oneself. Sometimes you have to be the person to approach a group in order to be included.

The project sharing session was also very beneficial and successful since it gave concrete examples of initiatives and projects which have already been done. The *Difability* project was a great success, and as previously mentioned the philosophy was adopted by the participants. Participants also researched projects which other organisations had done, and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) [Exchangeability](http://exchangeability.esn.org/content/what-exchangeability)² project inspired many participants to adopt some of the initiatives made there in their own home organisations.

A slogan from the disability movement was shared at the Study Session: “Nothing about us, without us”, meaning that nothing should be decided on or discussed for people with disabilities without them being part of the discussion. This is a slogan which the participants all identified with, especially because OBESSU says the same thing: nothing should be decided about secondary school education without all the stakeholders (including secondary school students) being at the table.

“Nothing about us, without us”. All of us live that phrase! All of us are activists, we try to make something for our people. We are fighting for our own rights. This slogan applies to everyone the same way. What do we do in school student politics? We tell people what we know.

This phrase was adopted as the slogan of the Study Session.

A session was also about how to do inclusive projects which empowered the participants and equipped them with the practical knowledge of what they need to think about when doing projects that are inclusive for everyone. Elements that must be thought about are the physical access, how to communicate with one another, visual and space aspects respecting everyone’s needs, rest – do we get enough sleep and breaks, eat – where do you eat, when? and social time as well as enjoying yourself. Micah, our educational advisor explained it very well: “We need to think about all those elements at the same time during each activity. They all interact with each other and influence each other. It doesn’t matter if we can

² <http://exchangeability.esn.org/content/what-exchangeability>

communicate with each other, if they cannot access the room. We cannot function, if we do not get the food or rest we need". The participants had to think about these elements as well as the preparation process, the accommodation and food, the conference facilities, the workshops/lectures/presentations and games/energizers/free activities which go into an event. This was a very practical exercise where the participants got to plan a realistic event.

External Speaker

On the 5th day of the Study Session, Karina Chupina – the President of IFHOHYP (the International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People) – held sessions in the morning for our participants.

There were two parts to Karina's session. One, more theoretical, providing information about the concepts of impairment, disability, disablism, and empowerment. The other part was a simulation exercise where everyone was given a disability and then they had to cooperate in a group to build a tower with papers, competing with the other groups. This exercise had a great impact on the participants, since they experienced how it feels to have a disability, for a little while and had to try to adapt to their new abilities and to the needs of others. The discussion after this simulation was very interesting. Many of the participants who were deaf (in the simulation) commented that they felt that things were peaceful, less stressful and that they easily got lost in their thoughts. This demonstrated how hearing persons rely on their hearing for their attention span, and how they easily "turn the world off" without it. Many participants were very impressed with how one of the deaf participants, who was made blind during the simulation, communicated much better than most of the participants who had been made blind or deaf during the activity. He explained that he has a friend who has Usher Syndrome³ and that he therefore sometimes has to practice tactile communication and actually manage to communicate. Another participant commented that what surprised him was that you can always find totally new ways of communicating with people and it works – all you have to do is try. A further comment was that during the previous days at the Study Session they kept reiterating that one always has to communicate and ask each person what they can contribute with, but during this activity she realized that most groups just assigned tasks which were deemed appropriate according to the disability – this disappointed her, but also motivated her to always remind herself about how important it is to communicate and that everyone makes their voice heard.

These points were also highlighted during this session:

- ❖ Knowledge: know your rights, what they are, and ask for them;
- ❖ Needs: make sure people know about your needs, and ask for them and pay attention to others' needs;
- ❖ Enable yourself: self-advocacy and ability to speak out about your needs;
- ❖ Learn about other organisations, and other disability organisations;

³ Usher syndrome/Usher's syndrome is a genetic disorder which affect both hearing and vision resulting in a combination of hearing loss and visual impairment and is a leading cause of deafblindness. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usher_syndrome

- ❖ Have a platform together to lobby together;
- ❖ Communication skills;
- ❖ Motivate diverse NGOs to work together with youth with different abilities – go and meet them, and find the common points, and then you can cooperate ;
- ❖ Focus on inclusion rather than disability itself;
- ❖ Raise awareness.

Reflection and Evaluation

At the end of each day, participants were invited to reflect and evaluate the day. They were divided into small groups, and every evening at the end of the day they met together with their prep-team member to go through the day. This moment was a very important part of the programme, and served the purpose of reflecting over the activities of the day, and relate them to the participants' realities. The prep-team members were using different methods of evaluation and reflection which was also to show participants various ways to make people reflect through non-formal methods.

In addition, the participants were each given a notebook which they could personalise and which was meant for them to be able to write their impressions, thoughts and what they had learned. At various stages of the Study Session the participants were given the time to write in them fostering personal reflection and was a way for the participants to bring home what they had learned.

The prep-team had also organised a group midterm evaluation, which took place in the middle of the Study Session. This gave the group a chance to look at their aims and expectations, and think about whether these had been met, if they felt the Study Session was going in the right direction and see what other people's feelings were. It also gave the prep-team and idea of what the group felt or needed more of and could adjust accordingly and take on the feedback. As with all activities, the prep-team had ensured to make the evaluation accessible to all. They made an "expect-barometer" where participants were made to think of their original expectations and "measure" these. In addition participants had specific aspects to think about and were asked to mould a piece of play-dough into a shape which they felt represented their viewpoint. The prep-team chose to use play-dough so that this evaluation would have been accessible for a blind person as well, and it also gave a very good visual image for participants relying on sight more. In order to make everyone in the group able and involved in the process, the participants were working in pairs – moulding and discussing.

A large part of the last day was dedicated to final reflection and evaluation. This was both done as a whole group as well as individually.

Here is a collection of statements from the final evaluation:

- ❖ "For me the learning outcome of the Study Session is that that everyone is equal, there are no disabled people, only people with different abilities".

- ❖ “I have never felt so safe in a group of people. I am so happy everyone is so friendly”.
- ❖ “It was extremely good, it was amazing how people discussed the topic outside the session and how tolerant and inclusive everyone was”.
- ❖ “It was not easy at all to process everything and often you get really off inside your thoughts, which is good and at this point there's really a lot left to explore and think about”.
- ❖ “It was really a group-learning but the prep-team members really helped in wrapping up and filtering, in order to stay focused on the point of a particular session”.

Social and fun

Participants were asked to create “peer-books” at the beginning of the Study Session. These were personalised pages with some basic information about oneself and with an envelope on them as well. These were all put up on the wall as a way of introducing oneself and getting to know others, but also a space where participants could share information and write each other messages throughout the week, and take home with them after the Study Session.

At the Study Session, icebreakers, energizers, contact and cooperation games were played. These were organised by the prep-team and were games that were adapted to be accessible for all so that everyone could actively participate. This added to the learning of new games, sharing of new experiences that could be repeated again once back home. This also proved that one does not have to create new games from scratch but needs to look at the group that they work with and make changes, which will provide to that specific group. In this way the possibilities of accessible games are almost endless.

Throughout the Study Session the preparatory team had set up a “Circus Theme” through which they presented guests, outcomes were presented, and different activities were organised around the theme. This created an informal and creative atmosphere for the participants. Throughout the circus theme many topics were brought up, such as the participants’ learning outcomes at the end of the day about the topics addressed.

The participants also took a lot of initiative in organising social games, and adapting energizers so that everyone could join in. For example during social evenings, such as the Intercultural Evening and the Farewell party, many games were played that had been self-organised by the participants and they always ensured to make them accessible for all. Moreover, during social times, there was not a palantypist available so the participants took it in turn to type on a screen what was being said so that the hard-of-hearing participants could actively participate. During the sessions everyone learned to speak more slowly and make pauses to ensure that the palantypist and interpreters were following and the communication was happening at the same time for everyone.

The difference from the first social evening and the development throughout to the last was significant. For example, the participants made an effort to find music with videos where they also used sign language, and were subtitled. Another example was a successful cooperation game called “Amazeball”, which was created by participants of another Study Session

organised by ENGSO Youth and focusing on sport and disabilities. All participants would stand in a formation, essentially making a “maze”. The aim was for two participants to have to cooperate with each other to firstly, find a ball and then get it from one end of the maze to the other. For example, the participant who had to push the ball was blindfolded, and the other could not speak. This was a very successful activity which all the participants enjoyed and they took an active part in finding new variations. One of the deaf participants decided that he wanted to be blindfolded and be led by another. This was an incredible display of trust on his part towards the group. It was one of the variations of the game that the prep-team would not have proposed in order to respect potential personal boundaries of the participants and not to deprive the participants of another sense. It, however, was absolutely legitimate coming from the participants themselves. The participant in the wheelchair expressed that for her it was an amazing feeling to be somebody else’s eyes, and that it was something she had never experienced before.

Since we had three deaf participants at the Study Session and three interpreters there was a lot of discussion and fascination about sign-language. Many of the participants learned basic signing and learned about a whole new language and culture that they previously did not know much about. In addition the deaf participants gave a sign-name to all participants at the Study Session which helped the group bond and the participants feel that they were taking part in a new culture and feel very motivated to work together to raise awareness about sign-language, its recognition and fight for the same issues that EUDY fights for.

The participants also took part in writing a few articles and impression that they had about the Study Session which were published on Social Media and OBESSU’s website. In addition, during the free-afternoon, the prep-team and participants organised a [Flashmob](#)⁴ in the centre of Budapest to raise awareness about the topics. Their message was: “Different Abilities, Same Opportunities!”

Methodologies

The Study Session mainly used non-formal education methods to enhance active participation and interaction among the participants. Peer-to-peer learning, experiential learning and informal learning were all learning methods used.

The sessions varied between plenary sessions, smaller group work, individual reflection, presentations and active research. By alternating the methods everyone was able to participate and feel comfortable.

Examples of methods used are American Debate, World Café, Open Space, Forum Theatre, Simulation games, and other. The methodologies used are also an important learning point for the participants, as they therefore learn new methodologies which they can implement in their home organisations.

⁴ <http://youtu.be/cUy6P3VdHlg>

Main Outcomes of the Study Session

The outcomes of the Study Session have been varied and numerous.

OBESSU and its member organisations had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and expertise about the topic of special needs, how to be inclusive and ensure accessibility and to actively contribute to this. Moreover, the event helped strengthen the relation among school student unions in Europe, as well as with partner organisations such as EUDY, thus increasing cooperation in the future.

The event was also a beneficial learning space for further development and involvement of the organisation in aspects related both to logistics and content, which will be useful to future projects.

The preparatory team also learned a lot from the Study Session: the members further developed their training and facilitation skills, deepened their knowledge in the topics addressed, increased their ability to work both in multicultural teams, but mostly in mixed ability teams and learned how to truly be inclusive at all times. In addition, the members of the prep-team also learned how to discuss challenging concepts and how to overcome disagreements. When designing and preparing a Study Session as a team, conflicts and disagreements do arise, and the team learned how to confront and resolve these together. It was an experience which was very enriching and allowed for personal growth and development.

The participants learned a lot both personally as well as for their organisation. For a week they lived in a mixed ability reality, addressing the topic every day, thus constantly learning from each other and challenging themselves. By working in a mixed ability group, moreover, most participants had to deal with an entirely new and different working style and be mindful of things that they might never have thought of before – such as where you stand in a space, who do you look at when you are talking – and learned to adapt to their new environment in order to work as one united group together in order to reach common objectives. By working in a mixed ability group for the entire week, the participants were exposed to a constant experiential learning which was invaluable for their development regarding the topic. The participants also acquired new tools and ideas to implement after the event, especially through the sessions devoted to developing accessible and inclusive projects and action plans, they increased their skills as multipliers, which will also have an impact on their organisations at a national level. In addition, another session helped the participants acquire the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge and provided them with methods to approach the topic of special needs, participation and social inclusion in their everyday lives and in their home organisations.

Follow-up Activities

Both, the participants and OBESSU committed themselves to different follow-up activities.

Most importantly, since it translates into a truly multiplying experience, at the Study Session the participants had the opportunity to explore and improve their competences, skills and

attitudes related to the topic and committed to use their expertise once back in their home organisations.

The participants committed to report back to their home organisations and to share the knowledge learned and the best practices gathered. Some participants planned concrete actions they would implement in their home organisation where they could apply and implement their new skills. These were actions such as adapting their website to different needs and making it accessible for all; organising trainings and workshops; sharing what was learned with friends and family; improve the accessibility within their home organisation, in their schools and in their group of friends; contact disability organisations at national level and start partnerships/cooperation to raise awareness; write articles about the Study Session; ensure that future projects are accessible for all; propose a project of visiting schools and holding workshops on the topic and develop the system for disabled people in schools.

OBESSU saw this Study Session as a beginning to a deeper commitment and engagement in the issues related to special needs and social inclusion, as well as strengthening the platform and its members regarding these topics. Building on this experience the participants at the Study Session proposed a campaign on Social Inclusion for the 2013-14 workplan of OBESSU which was adopted at the General Assembly in May 2012. This campaign will begin in 2013, and OBESSU hopes to continue cooperating with the other organisations present at the Study Session as well as building new partnerships. OBESSU and its member organisations also continue promoting the *Difability* movement and “Nothing about us, without us”.

Final Conclusions and Recommendations

This Study Session was a great learning experience for the participants and the prep-team, where everyone gained the attitudes, skills and knowledge to take action on the topics of “*Special Needs*”: *education, participation, and social inclusion*.

The participants concluded that it is essential to start educating and raising awareness about these topics with children and young people. By starting young, these perceived differences, barriers and preconceived notions will be eroded away and mixed abilities and diversity will become the norm.

Furthermore, it is essential to have a direct experience and meet people. If this does not happen, interacting with people who are “different” from oneself can be daunting, people feel uncomfortable because they do not know how to behave. This brings about exclusion, even though it may not be on purpose. Direct experience enables people to overcome these barriers and learn how to interact with persons who have different abilities to oneself.

The Study Session would like to move away from the notion of *disability* and towards that of *difability*. It is not that some people are less able than others; it is simply that we all have different abilities and needs and this should be recognised and respected. Similarly, the participants also want to promote the concept of working together, rather than “helping”. Communication is the key – one has to ask the people directly involved what they think is

best, get their input too, not just make decisions and assumptions about what one thinks is best. Therefore one must communicate and have an open dialogue and work together.

The participants at the Study Session also endorse the idea of active inclusion: meaning that everyone has the responsibility to include others as well as include oneself. One should not wait for the other party to include them, but also take the first step, if needed.

The two most important messages of the Study Session “*Special Needs*”: *education, participation and social inclusion* are:

- ❖ "Different Abilities, Same Opportunities", and
- ❖ “Nothing about us, without us”.

References

[Council of Europe Action Plan to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society: improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in Europe 2006-2015](#)⁵

[UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)⁶ and [Optional Protocol](#)⁷

[Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)⁸

[European Convention on Human Rights](#)⁹

Council of Europe: [Compass – a manual on human rights education for young people](#)¹⁰

YEU: Eurogames 2010 for inclusion of disabled youth and promotion of non-formal education

⁵ <http://bit.ly/RmemEI>

⁶ <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

⁷ <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

⁹ http://www.echr.coe.int/NR/rdonlyres/D5CC24A7-DC13-4318-B457-5C9014916D7A/0/CONVENTION_ENG_WEB.pdf

¹⁰ <http://eycb.coe.int/compass/>

Appendices

Appendix I: Final Programme

*Study Session of **OBESSU***

“Special Needs”: education, participation and social inclusion

Aim and objectives of the OBESSU Study Session 2011

Aim: to explore and further develop tools and methods for social inclusion for school students with special needs in youth project

Objectives:

- to establish a common ground and develop a shared understanding on the topic of special needs;
- to explore the different levels & definitions of inclusion around Europe;
- to make participants self-reflect about their organisations work on inclusion and share their personal experiences;
- to encourage networking amongst participants and develop effective follow up plans.

Day by day programme

4th – 11th March 2012

Sunday, 4th March 2012

Arrival of participants
19:00 Dinner
20:30 Welcome evening

Monday, 5th March 2012

09:30 Opening with Introduction to Study Session,
intro of aims & objectives of the Study Session / ice breakers / Expectations &
programme
11:00 Break
11:30 Code of Conduct / Building activity
13:00 Lunch

14:00 Common ground & definitions
15:30 Break
16:00 Getting to know the organisations
17:30 Reflection group
19:00 Dinner

Tuesday, 6th March 2012

09:30 Fishbowl on “do we need inclusion?”
11:00 Break
11:30 Topic Introduction / Definitions and levels of inclusion
13:00 Lunch break
14:00 Standpoints
15:30 Break
16:00 Wrap up
17:30 Reflection group
19:00 Dinner

Wednesday, 7th March 2012

09:30 Inclusion project sharing
11:00 Break
11:30 What do I need?
13:00 Lunch break
14:00 Tool sharing (Forum theatre)
15:30 Break
16:00 Debriefing
17:30 Reflection Groups
19:00 Dinner
20:30 Intercultural Evening

Thursday, 8th March 2012

09:30 How to be accessible
11:00 Break
11:30 Solving problems
Midterm evaluation

- 13:00 Lunch
- Free Afternoon in the city
- FLASH MOB!
- 19:00 Dinner out in the city

Friday, 9th March 2012

- 09:30 Empowerment by Karina Chupina
- 11:00 Break
- 11:30 Empowerment
- 13:00 Lunch
- 14:00 Development time & action plans
- 15:30 Break
- 16:00 Development time & action plans
- Topics for open space
- 17:30 Reflection groups
- 19:00 Dinner

Saturday 10th March 2012

- 09:30 Open Space
- 11:00 Break
- 11:30 All accessible game
- 13:00 Lunch
- 14:00 Final evaluation
- 15:30 Break
- 16:00 Final evaluation
- 19:00 Dinner
- 20:30 Farewell Party

Sunday 11th March 2012

Departure of participants

Appendix II: Agenda

Time	04/03	05/03	06/03	07/03	08/03	09/03	10/03	11/03						
08:00	 <p>OBESSU Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions</p> <p>AGENDA STUDY SESSION "Special Needs: education, participation and social inclusion"</p>	<p>ARRIVAL DAY</p>	<p>Breakfast</p>	<p>Breakfast</p>	<p>Breakfast</p>	<p>Breakfast</p>	<p>Breakfast</p>	<p>Departure Day</p>						
09:00									<p>Introduction session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Icebreakers Expectations 	<p>Fishbowl on "do we need inclusion?"</p>	<p>Breakfast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion project sharing 	<p>Breakfast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to be accessible? by Micah 	<p>Breakfast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowerment by Karina Chupina 	<p>Breakfast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open Space
11:00									<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Code of conduct Group Building 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Topic: introductions and levels of inclusion 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do I need? 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solving problems 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowerment 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All accessible game
13:00									<p>Lunch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common ground & definitions 	<p>Lunch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standpoints 	<p>Lunch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tools sharing (Forum theatre) 	<p>Midterm evaluation</p>	<p>Lunch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development time & action plans 	<p>Lunch</p>
14:00									<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting to know the Organizations 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wrap up 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debriefing 	<p>FREE AFTERNOON</p> <p>flash mob!</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development time & action plans 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final evaluation
15:30														
17:30									<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Re-Groups</p>	<p>Re-Groups</p>	<p>Dinner out</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development time & action plans 	<p>Coffee Break</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final evaluation
18:00									<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>
19:00									<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>
20:30									<p>Welcoming evening</p>	<p>Intercultural evening</p>	<p>Intercultural evening</p>	<p>Intercultural evening</p>	<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Dinner</p>
							<p>Dinner</p>	<p>Farewell party</p>						



Appendix III: List of Participants

Study Session
Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions
“Special Needs: education, participation and social inclusion”

European Youth Centre Budapest, 4th – 11th March 2012

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¹¹ *All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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Appendiv IV: Other links

To find out more about the Study Session go to the dedicated page on OBESSU's website:

www.obessu.org/studysession2012

Here you can also find the articles and social media updates made by the participants, and the Flashmob video, as well as any articles about follow-up activities.