
Step by Step: A Multicountry Perspective on Implementing and Monitoring ECD Programs

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The Step by Step Program, initiated in 1994, has had significant impact in revitalizing and extending early childhood care and education throughout Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere. The Open Society Institute and the Network of Soros Foundations initially conceived the program as a 2-year pilot project in 15 countries. The program continued beyond these first 2 years and has since been modified and expanded to reflect new understandings and challenges.

By 2004, 10 years later, Step by Step had developed into a network of 30 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) united under the umbrella of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA). These organizations are working together to implement large-scale national reforms and to advocate regionally for improved early childhood care and education.

The continuing experience with Step by Step is a valuable resource for the monitoring and evaluation of large-scale, multicountry early child development (ECD) programs. Various groups have conducted selected impact studies of the program, and a collection of qualitative case studies is emerging. Recently, ISSA defined a new strategic direction for the program and identified key opportunities for evaluation research.

The Step by Step model and the program initiatives undertaken in the first 10 years are especially informative for national and regional efforts in emerging economies and countries undergoing transition. Step by Step is charting future research directions and responding to new challenges in monitoring ECD efforts and conducting structured evaluations of its large-scale programs.

**Step by Step: The First 10 Years
Evaluation: Research Directions and Challenges**

Step by Step: The First 10 Years

In the early 1990s, George Soros became convinced by Dr. Fraser Mustard and others about the importance of children's early development. This increased awareness led to Soros' funding of

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ECD programs for infants and children—from the prenatal period through age 6 years—in Central and Eastern Europe and countries of the former Soviet Union.

In 1994, the Open Society Institute and the Network of Soros Foundations negotiated with each Ministry of Education in 15 countries to initiate an experimental 2-year pilot project to improve preschool programs across Eastern Europe and to ensure that the poorest children had access to these programs.

Historically, the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries had supported high-quality, public preschools. But, they used didactic teacher-centered methods, rather than child-centered approaches, and they discouraged parents from being actively involved.

During the first year of Step by Step, the program was offered in up to 10 public preschools in each country. Step by Step emphasized training of teachers and involvement of parents. It included development of comprehensive training modules and teacher manuals. And it relied initially on international trainers (and later on well-trained national trainers) to provide training and ongoing mentoring in child-centered educational methods for 1,248 teachers and educators—in the first year alone.

By 2004, the Step by Step program—

- Extended to 30 countries—27 countries in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Baltic States, as well as Argentina, Haiti, and Mongolia
- Had provided training in child-centered education for more than 222,000 educators and parents
- Was being implemented by independent, national Step by Step NGOs under the umbrella of ISSA, which was established in 1998.

Now, in almost every participating country, and depending on its accreditation system, the Ministry of Education accredits the program, the teacher manuals, and NGO implementing organizations' training courses and/or training centers—which are based in existing preschools, primary schools, or institutions of higher education. In these countries, Step by Step has become an integral component of the systems of education. In 24 of the countries, Step by Step experts participate in the development of policies for early child development.

Core Principles

A set of core principles underpins the Step by Step program. These principles are as follows:

- Equal access to education and care opportunities
- Child-centered, individualized teaching and learning
- Development of skills for lifelong learning and participation in a democracy
- Use of teachers as facilitators
- Involvement of families
- Community engagement in public education
- Culturally appropriate learning environments and approaches
- Ongoing professional development.

The ultimate goal in applying these principles is to build open societies, with active citizens who think critically and creatively and celebrate and defend diverse opinions and ideas.

Program Initiatives

In the decade from 1994 to 2004, the Step by Step program grew to encompass a range of initiatives for children ages 0–10 years. Extension of the age range to 10 years—a shift in strategy—was made to accommodate parents’ demand for continuity through primary school. Because 1st grade teachers remain with their class through the 4th grade in most educational systems in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the program currently follows children through the 4th grade.

Step by Step embraces six initiatives. Examples of activities conducted under these initiatives are:

Early Childhood (Birth to Age 6 Years)—establishment of parent education programs and ECD community centers; strengthening of child-centered methodologies and family involvement at preschools and of center-based infant and toddler programs

Primary School (Grades 1–4)—teacher training; school improvement programs; community education; support for transition to middle school

Equal Access—Education for social justice (e.g., anti-bias training for adults, programs on community and culture in the classroom, second-language learning) to support education for Roma and minority children and inclusive education

Teacher Education—development of courses for teacher-training and retraining institutions, students’ practica, training of adult trainers, and teacher certification

Civic Participation in Education—fostering of parent advocacy and professionalization of early childhood education NGOs.

Professional Standards and Assessment Instruments—establishment of standards for programs, teachers, and trainers; development of observation and assessment instruments for preschool and primary school children.

Network of Partners

Beginning in 1998, Step by Step made another shift in strategy—as development of the third, nongovernmental, sector in early childhood education became a priority. Through a partnership strategy, Step by Step has fostered the long-term sustainability of its programs and expanded in-country training activities exponentially. Key actions have included:

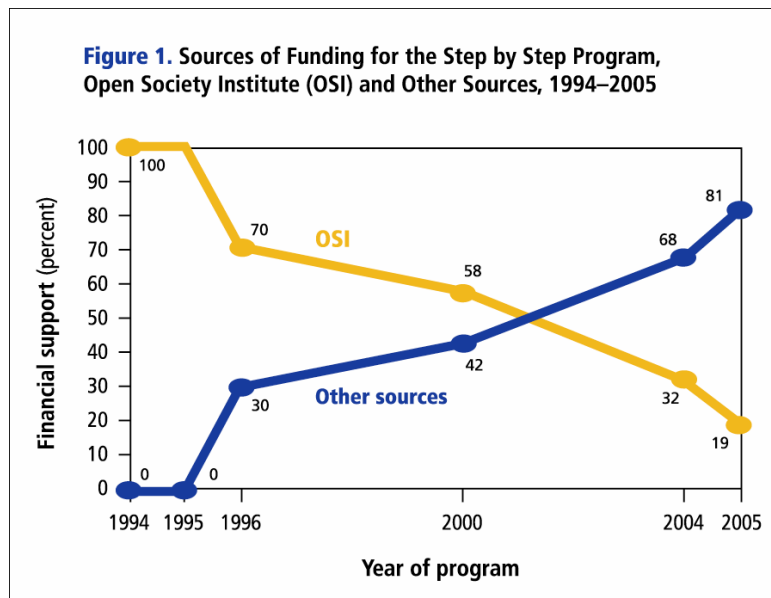
- Registering of independent early childhood NGOs in each participating country—which moved the responsibility for implementing individual countries’ programs from the national Soros Foundations to the NGOs, thereby establishing a permanent institution to protect the program in each country

- Formation of ISSA—initiated by the country programs in 1998 to institutionalize Step by Step’s regional and international activities
- Establishment of relationships with teacher-training institutes and preservice institutions
- Organization of partnerships between individual Step by Step programs and U.S., international, and multilateral organizations—which include, among others, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), European Union, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and World Bank.

Sustainability: Training and Funding

The sustainability of Step by Step is assured not only by the institutional changes and partnerships noted above, but also by extensive training of early childhood educators *and* by identification of new sources of funding. As already noted, Step by Step trained more than 222,000 educators and parents in 30 countries within the first 10 years.

And, by 2005, the Open Society Institute provided only 19 percent of the funding for national Step by Step programs, while other sources provided 81 percent of the funds (figure 1).



Evaluation: Research Directions and Challenges

National studies of the Step by Step programs are conducted as stipulated by the Ministry of Education in each country. In addition, selected international research studies have been undertaken to assess various aspects of the programs. The major studies (Brady and others 1998; Mclean 2000; Proactive 2003; Rona and others 2001) include:

- An impact study of Step by Step’s preschool projects in four countries—funded by USAID in 1998.
- The Roma Special Schools Initiative—implemented by the Open Society Institute between 1999 and 2003. This experimental intervention was backed by an international evaluation, which demonstrated that the majority of Roma children assigned to special classrooms and schools in four countries were capable of reaching the mainstream curriculum if they were provided with supportive, well-trained teachers, Roma teacher assistants, and high-quality, child-centered education.
- An assessment of the sustainability of Step by Step NGOs—conducted by the Open Society Institute’s Budapest branch, using independent evaluators, in 2001.

Because there were no normed tools appropriate for evaluating child-centered early education in the region, ISSA has developed two tools for assessing changes among children and teachers participating in the programs. The tools (Ginsberg and Lerner 2001; ISSA 2005; OSI 1998), which enable Step by Step to track program quality, are:

- Child assessment forms (Preschool and Primary)—to measure and report changes in children’s developmental levels.
- ISSA pedagogical standards—to mentor and certify the professional development of teachers.

Currently, the Open Society Institute is sponsoring qualitative case studies of Step by Step programs in 28 countries. For these studies, ISSA has trained more than 100 researchers across Central and Eastern Europe. Each national research team has worked with an international mentor to prepare a case study addressing one aspect of the Step by Step Program in its country. Taken together, the case studies provide an exploration of the program in situ and the motivations of the participants, including children, parents, teachers, community members, and government officials, and others.

New Program Content

In 2004, ISSA modified the Step by Step strategy, model, and program to accommodate a changing situation across Central and Eastern Europe. Key regional considerations included demographic changes (i.e., declining populations and birthrates), slowly recovering economies and variable rates of growth in gross domestic product per capita, and a low preschool coverage. In at least 12 countries (mostly in Central Asia and the Caucasus), the percentage of children in preschool had declined significantly between 1989 and 2002, and reached 20 percent or less in 6 countries.

Adopting a new strategic direction, ISSA now seeks to revitalize the existing preschool system with the goal of providing early learning opportunities for greater numbers of young children. The model for child development and family resource centers embraces the following four program elements:

- Early learning and school readiness—part-day, center-based programs for infants/toddlers and children ages 3–6 years
- Time together for parents and children
- Parental education—general parenting education as well as interventions focused on getting children ready for school
- Community linkages and referrals.

Together with UNICEF’s regional office in Geneva, ISSA is promoting implementation of this model across Central and Eastern Europe—by advocating for changes in national policies regarding early child development, securing local government support from the start, mobilizing communities, and raising awareness of the need for ECD intervention.

Research Challenges

Implementation of the new Step by Step model will proceed from support of pilot projects to evaluation of outcomes, costs and benefits, and coverage, and subsequent replication and scaling up of quality programs proven to be effective. The research challenges in monitoring and evaluating this effort are many, yet “getting it right from the start” is imperative.

Three research challenges are the need to:

1. Acquire convincing cost-benefit data—that is, developing a cost-benefit analysis that will yield sufficient and appropriate information to convince local and national politicians about the need for child development and family resource centers. The research questions to be resolved include what kind of data need to be collected for establishing a baseline, start-up costs, ongoing costs (including training and mentoring of service providers), and scale-up costs, and what short- and long-term outcomes for children and other benefits should be measured.
2. Target efforts to at-risk children—that is, determining whether child development and family resource centers are reaching the children who are most at risk.
3. Compare outcomes among programs—that is, comparing the costs and benefits of child development and family resource centers with those of other ECD models and programs for children of different socioeconomic status.

Conducting research in Central and Eastern Europe, the independent states of the former Soviet Union, and the Baltic countries is particularly challenging. In these countries—

- Many researchers have limited experience in using quantitative and qualitative research models and objective assessments to assess child-centered programs.
- Standardized tools for evaluating holistic outcomes of child development are lacking.

- A lack of reliable national statistics has resulted in a general mistrust of data.
- Educational systems have not cultivated critical writing and thinking skills.
- Researchers and policymakers have limited experience in developing evidence-based policies.

Despite these challenges for research, there are many reasons for optimism. Following years of isolation, there is an openness to change and an interest in technical partnerships, which is motivated, in some cases, by the desire to join the European Union. In addition, expertise and skills in general child development are high. Most importantly, ECD programs and participatory evaluation are highly valued.

Web Resources [as of November 2006]

International Step by Step Association: <www.issa.nl>

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