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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

The Legacy of the Open Society Foundations
Step by Step Program

BLOOMSBURY

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY AND INCLUSION

LESSONS FROM THE STEP BY STEP PROGRAM

Jan Peeters And Sarah Klaus

VVOB AND STEP BY STEP SHARE COMMON VALUES



VVOB in Vietnam

VVOB in South Africa



VVOB's vision is to strive for a sustainable world based on **equal opportunities** through quality education. For VVOB **quality education** means: *"... one that provides all learners with capacities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual wellbeing."*

The Step by Step Program: Introducing Democratic, Inclusive Pedagogy

- What is Step by Step (Sarah)
 - *Situation in Eastern Europe and Eurasia before 1990*
 - *How Step by Step introduced child-centered, inclusive pedagogy*
 - *What it achieved*
- What Factors are Crucial for Successful Inclusive and Democratic Programs (Jan)
 - *Choosing a program approach*
 - *Implementing a program*
 - *Building excitement to expand*
 - *NGOs, Networks and the International Community*

STEP BY STEP

Flagship Early Childhood Program of the Open Society Foundation Network (1994 – 2020)

One of largest international early education programs:

- >\$140 million over 26 years
- 30 countries, mostly E. Europe, Eurasia
- At 10 year anniversary:
 - 200,000 teachers, 500 universities, 2000 professors
 - Millions of children
 - Ministry accreditation and approval

Created professional NGOs in almost every country and established the International Step by Step Association

Inspired (not always visible) long-term changes in national policies, training programs, curriculum

Created a cadre of progressive early childhood educators and introduced new ideas at all levels of the system





Situation of Early Childhood Education in Eastern Europe and Eurasia around 1990

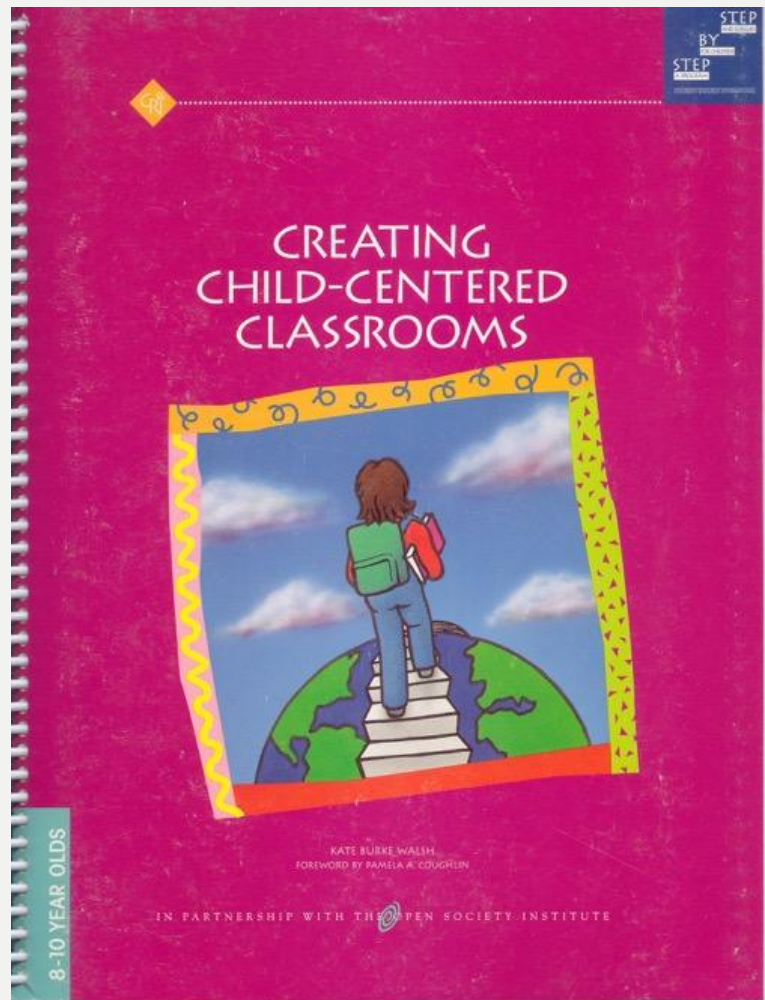
- Early childhood systems had been built to ensure women could work
- By the 1990's communist governments were changing, economies failing
- Kindergartens were in terrible shape, many closing
- Centralized curriculum, lesson plans, rigid schedules, little meaningful parent involvement, focus on collectivism, no critical thinking

BUT...

- Kindergartens had good meals, health and activities
- Highly trained staff
- Children played and learned



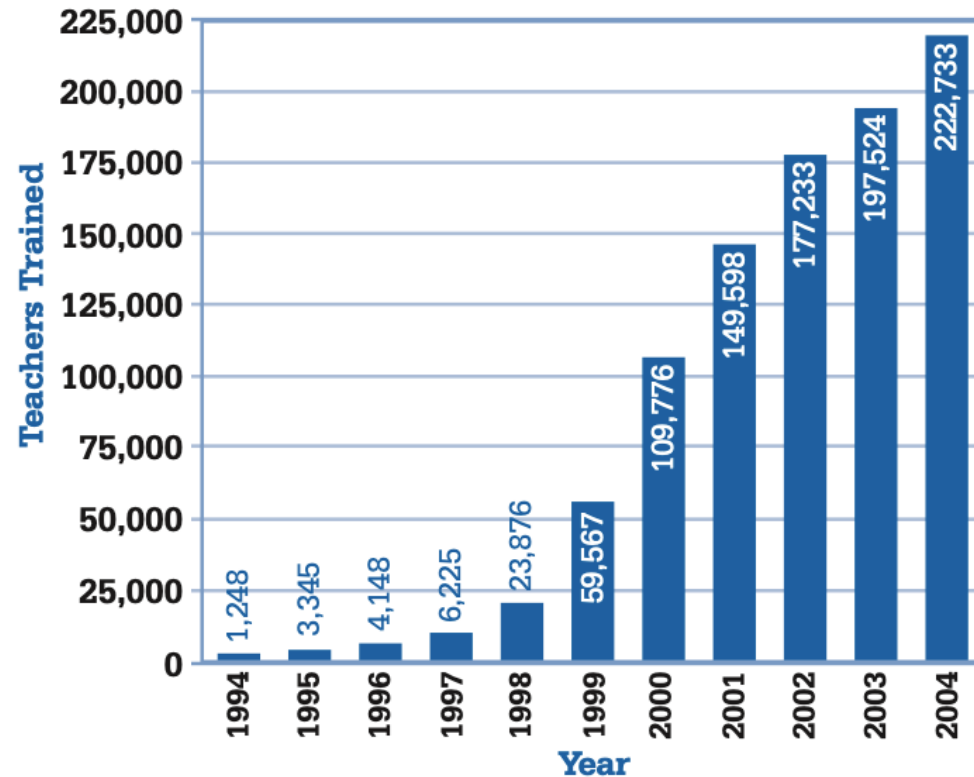
- Parents wanted a different life for their children
 - Curiosity about the West
 - Open Society were ready, they had national foundations in almost every country
-it was a **MAGIC TIME** – lots of hope



How Step by Step Introduced Child-Centered, Inclusive Pedagogy

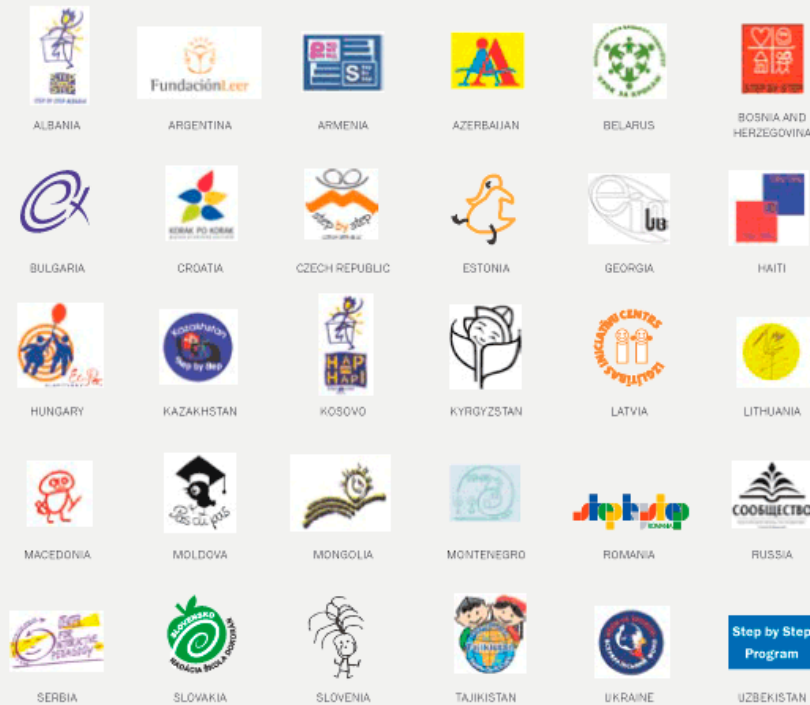
- Partnered with **Georgetown University**
- Used **US Head Start** Program experts
- Created new methodology materials that countries could adapt
- Paired National and US experts
- Brought European/Eurasian Teams to the US to visit programs
- Signed MoUs with each government
- Launched in 5-10 existing kindergartens and worked with them a full year before expanding

Expansion of Step by Step



- Expanded to cover infant/toddler, primary, teacher training, Roma, children with disabilities
- Began co-creating quality principles and new resources, leveraging expertise across the region and US
- Supported strategy divergence: countries developed programs differently
- ‘Spun off’ Step by Step from National Foundations and established the International Step by Step Association (1998)

What did Step by Step achieve?



It's monumental. The investment in building the civil society that works in the early years, what we talked at the beginning, the investment in this paradigm shift from teacher-centered to child-centered, bringing in the Step by Step program but also investing in supporting the development of civil society that can take it forward. As I said also, this constant support towards not just at the country level but at regional level, the network, the civil society, later on bringing on other foundations, advocating inside OSF for the early years but also advocating among other philanthropic stakeholders to support the early years.

(Liana Ghent, executive director, ISSA)



What Factors are Crucial for Inclusive and Democratic Programs to be Successful?

- *Choosing a program approach*
- *Implementing a program*
- *Building excitement to expand*
- *NGOs, Networks and the International Community*



Choosing a Program Approach

Choose a **BROAD PROGRAM**

- Not too descriptive
- Does not prescribe what teachers should do
- Can be adapted to the local context

Make sure the program has **SUFFICIENT CAPACITY:**

- Enough well-trained trainers
- Educational materials for teachers, parents, young children

Implementing a Program (1)



Create

For project managers: **a climate of trust**

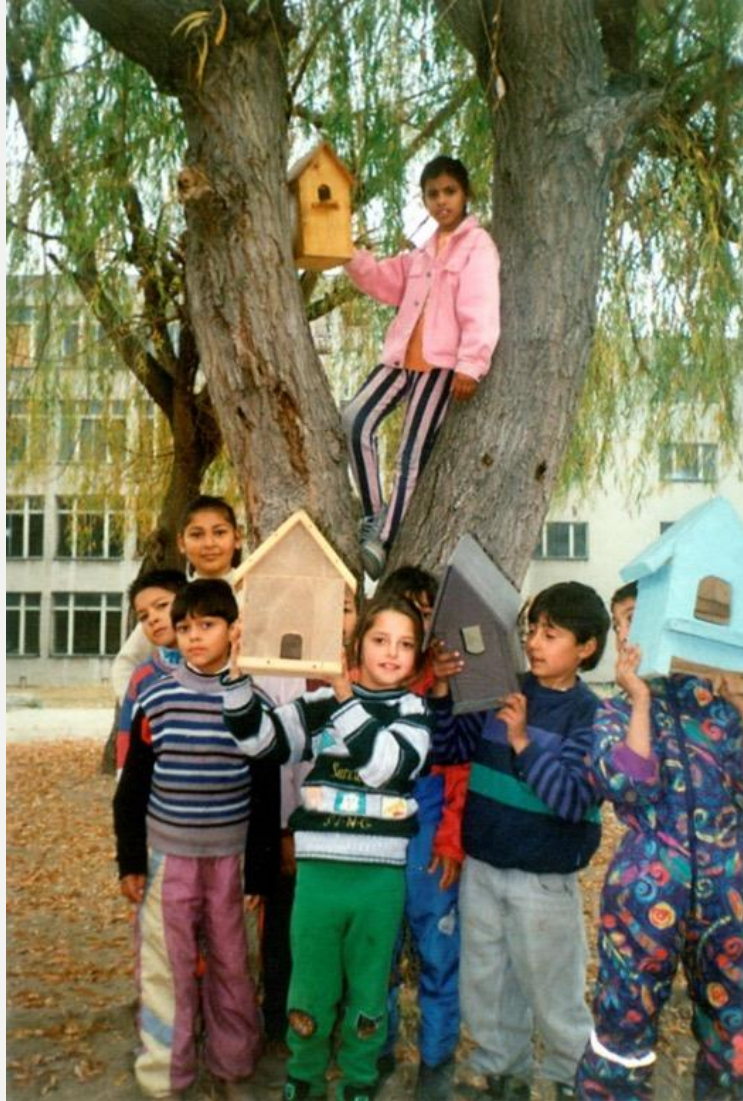
- develop ownership of the implemented program

For teachers: **a climate of openness and flexibility**

- space to reflect on daily pedagogic practice
- Freedom to try new pedagogic methods

Mobilize Strong Women

- Female gender regime: flat hierarchy, warm approach
- Brought people from ethnic groups back together after armed conflicts



Implementing a Program (2)

Introduce **democratic inclusive values** in early education **at different levels of the early education system**

- Classrooms, Kindergartens, Professional and Parent NGOs, Training Institutions, Government
- Inspiration for national governments and partner organizations: World Bank, UNICEF, European Commission



Build Excitement and Capacity to Expand

Continuous Professional Development organized in:

- Retraining (in-service) institutes
- Model Sites:
 - *Open for visitors, policy makers, educators, students, parents*
 - *Show that innovation works*
 - *Get policy makers and donors excited*

NGOs, Networks and the International Community (1)



Support Civil Society Organizations

- Strengthens the early childhood ecosystem
- Makes the program less dependent on changes in government

And Professional Networks

- Gives a voice to civil society and experts

NGOs, Networks and the International Community (2)



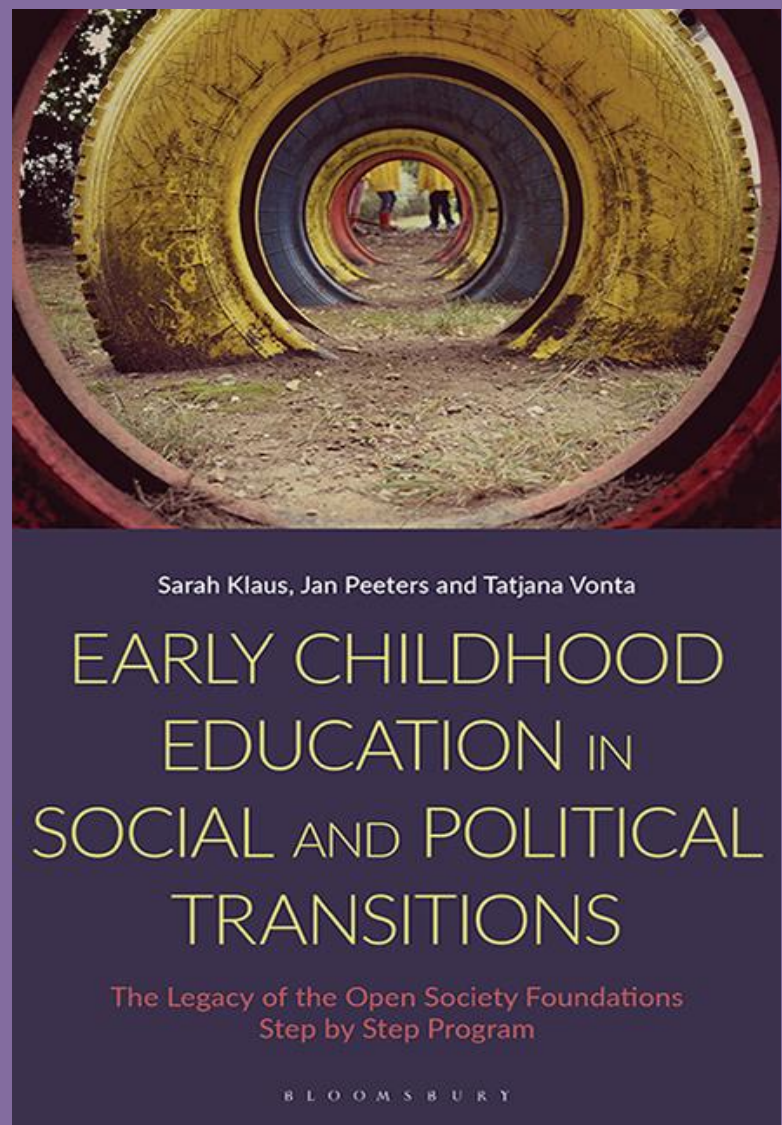
Support transfer of knowledge and ideas about pedagogic practices

- Crossing Borders: Learn and Connect/Educaid

There is an advantage to investing in long-term programs

- Important improvements in the education system sometimes appear years later!





Download your FREE COPY of the book here:



For more information (methodology books, videos, articles) check out the Step by Step page on the ISSA website:

https://issa.nl/step_by_step_program