A view on the contribution of occupational therapy towards inclusive education for disabled children in Ruse, Bulgaria.

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Preface

This paper will describe our bachelor thesis project which we conducted in Ruse, Bulgaria through Erasmus Mobility. The Erasmus mobility provides opportunities for people of all ages to help them develop and share knowledge and experiences at institutions and organisations in different countries within the European Union and partner countries around the world (European Commision, n.d.). On this behalf we were invited to Ruse (Bulgaria) by Liliya Todorova (occupational therapist and associated professor). Together we negotiated our task, to identify the role of occupational therapy within the inclusive education system in Ruse. In order to provide an answer we conducted literature studies and practical research. This paper will describe our process and findings, as well as recommendations for implementation.

Partners during this project

During this project we collaborated with a few partners. To clarify each role we will describe them shortly:

- **Liliya Todorova**: Associate professor and founder of occupational therapy in Bulgaria. Commissioner and supervisor of this bachelor project.
- **Petya Mincheva**: Associate professor and founder of occupational therapy in Bulgaria. Close colleague of Liliya Todorova and involved in supporting us during this project.
- **Mira Lungova**: Resource teacher at Professional school of vocational education A.TZ. Bourov. Provided us with information about the educational system and role of translator when needed towards teachers and students.
- **Yoana Tasheva**: English teacher at Angel Kanchev primary school, provided us with information about their educational system and translates between us and interlocutors.
- **Elitsa Velikova**: Occupational therapist and successor of Liliya Todorova and Petya Mincheva. Provides us of information about children they treat in the ABET centre, collaboration between involved partners and supported us during building collaborations with schools.
- **Kim van Gasse**: Occupational therapy student from Belgium, executing her final internship and bachelor thesis towards subjects within inclusive education.
- **Margarita Asparuhova**: Employee of the Centre of Inclusive Education, speech and language therapist and an ABET occupational therapist at Braľja Miladinovi primary school.
We would like to share our gratefulness and appreciation towards all the people involved with this project.

In the first place we want to thank the Amsterdam School of Health Professions to provide us the opportunity to go beyond borders.
Second we want to thank Liliya Todorova and Petya Mincheva for inviting us to Ruse, supporting us, arranging meetings with several parties and giving guidance during this project.
We also like to thank our coach Eric Tigchelaar for all the support, feedback and interest during our months in Bulgaria, towards our literature studies, our research and during the writing of this paper.

Last but not least we want to thank our mentor Erica Blokker, who guided us through our study in the past years and provided us with the help and support we needed.

With kind regards,

Heidi Jacobs
Axel Peerenboom
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1. Abstract

How can an occupational therapy perspective contribute to the implementation of inclusive education within schools in Ruse, Bulgaria?

Jacobs, H. & Peerenboom, A.

Ruse Bulgarie, Juni 2017

This bachelor thesis presents the findings of Dutch Occupational therapy students during an Erasmus mobility at the Angel Kanchev University of Ruse. The aim of this bachelor thesis is to define and support the role of occupational therapy within inclusive education in Ruse, Bulgaria. To define how occupational therapy can fulfil a role within inclusive education both literature and practical research have been executed. The peer-reviewed literature reviews focussed on how schools can support their students with special needs and what the role of occupational therapy in the inclusive education setting can be. The practical research contained interviews with related parties and observations in schools that are practicing inclusive education. Findings show that a sustainable collaboration between partners is the most important factor of including occupational therapy in the educational environment. Schools can contribute to inclusive education providing involved parties with the resources they need, creating individual learning programs and adjusting the curriculum based on the abilities of the students. Occupational therapists can support inclusive education by assessing the student’s strengths and challenges, the occupational demands, the environment and providing advice towards partners who are involved in the student’s education. This report will describe how occupational therapy can contribute and how these findings can be implemented in Ruse, Bulgaria.
1.1 Recommendations

In order to achieve the role of occupational therapy within the inclusive education system in Bulgaria, a collaboration with involved parties must be established. The involved parties consists of school boards, teachers, the Resource Centre, resource teachers, parents and occupational therapists. Implementable recommendations will be described to create a sustainable and consistent collaboration with the involved parties.

- Use this document as a start to defining the role of occupational therapy within the inclusive education system.
- Provide the involved parties within the inclusive education system with knowledge about what occupational therapy can contribute.
- Provide the involved parties with information about how to contact and consult occupational therapists.
- Periodically join staff meetings at the Resource Centres.
- Have regular meetings with the involved parties to make them aware of the presence and benefits of occupational therapy and show them that the occupational therapists are open for collaboration.
- Promote occupational therapy in a for the involved parties applicable way, inform them about what occupational therapy could do to support them and the students. This can be achieved by working in a community based approach.
- Acknowledge the role of other professionals within the inclusive education system.
- Share results of occupational therapy assessments, setted goals and treatment plans with involved parties. Specifically with the Recourse Centre, as a first step to achieve the same goals and build a sustainable collaboration. Sharing your information could lead to (resource) teachers sharing their information with you.
- Have regularly communication with involved partners through different media.
  Sending emails or having a phone call with a (resource) teacher about a student will be beneficial for both parties and will establish a collaboration.

Opportunities for occupational therapy students:
- Make use of students to promote occupational therapy.
- Practice occupational therapy internships within the Recourse Centre.
- The occupational therapy students which fulfill their practice in schools could apply the principles of school based occupational therapy, which will support teachers and students.
2. Introduction

To ensure people's rights towards participation and inclusion, several agreements are made within the United Nations. These agreements are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). These documents and agreements states that parties should ensure an inclusive system at all levels of society. They describe and state how parties should ensure that effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion. (WFOT, 2016)

The most recent agreement, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), describes, among other things, how children with disabilities should no longer be excluded from the mainstream schools. The children should be able to get the best opportunities to participate in the society, which start by being included within the mainstream educational system whenever possible. The concept is called 'inclusive education'.

The term ‘inclusive’ is a complex concept, it is based on a view that someone has on the topic. The literal translation of ‘inclusive’ is: including many different types of people and treat them all fair and equally (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017).

On behalf of this project we will be writing about ‘inclusion’ within the educational setting. This is not about creating equal outcomes or following the same curriculum as other children, but treating them with respect and giving them the equal chances to achieve something. Van Kraayenoord (2007) describes inclusive education as: “All students in a school, regardless of their differences, are being part of the school community and can feel that they belong”.

In this paper we will use the term ‘students with special needs’ for children who require extra attention or guidance in order to participate in mainstream schools. This can be the result of physical and cognitive impairments.

Schools can offer a wide variety of support towards students with special needs. First and most important is matching with the students abilities by changing the curriculum for special needs students so that they can come along with their peers at their own pace (Boyle, Scriven, Durning & Downes, 2011; O’Rourke & Houghton, 2009; Sakarneh & Abu Nair, 2014). In order to achieve this, schools must have a shared vision on educating students
with different abilities. To create a shared vision, school leaders must build on a trusting relationship with the teachers and supply them with the resources they need to teach the students (Fong Poon-MacBrayer & Wong, 2013). For teachers it is important to share each other’s experiences and how they cope with students that have special needs in order to learn from each other. Schools where the inclusive education is already successful could set an example for other schools (Fong Poon-MacBrayer & Wong, 2013). More practical recommendations of supporting and including students with different abilities are working in small groups, giving positive feedback, providing organised and meaningful information on a repetitive way and use probing questions to check if the student understands the material (Boyle, et al., 2011; O’Rourke & Houghton, 2009; Sakarneh & Abu Nair, 2014). Also programs like The Universal Design for Learning and the Differentiated Learning Design could be implemented (van Kraayenoord, 2007).

To support inclusive education, various allied health professionals can be involved. A well-established collaboration between school board, teachers and involved therapists is essential for implementation of inclusion and participation of students with special needs. Aspects that are important to achieve collaboration are: clarifying the roles of both teachers and therapists; schedule regular meetings; set mutual goals; form individual plans for student’s participation; use effective communications methods and the importance to include and inform all stakeholders, which also includes the parents. (AOTA, 2016; Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Mejasic, Benson & Szucs, 2015; Chiu, Heidebrecht, Wehrmann, Sinclair, & Reid, 2008; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Hart Barnett & O'Shaughnessy, 2015; Hemmingsson, Gustavsson, & Townsend, 2007; Rens & Joosten, 2014).

The inclusive education system made its way in the Bulgarian school systems in 2004, before 2004 there was only integration for children with special needs (Todorova & Mincheva, 2005). Integration is being a separate part within the school community, with inclusion the students take actively part in the class and the social dynamics. Research in Bulgaria shows how most of the children with special needs are not yet included within the mainstream educational system. In 2014 only 1,4% of the students within mainstream schools had special educational needs (Troeva, 2014). In comparison to the United States in the same year, 12.9 % of the students within the mainstream education had special needs (National centre for education statistics, 2017). These numbers show that it might be possible to include more students with special needs in the mainstream educational system in Bulgaria.

In 2016 the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) presented a position
statement about occupational therapy services in the educational system. In this statement
the WFOT presents how they believe that inclusive education is a paramount and non-
negotiable right. They also state how occupational therapists are educated and skilled to
work collaboratively to enable the participation of all students in the occupation and school
environment of their choice as a part of occupational justice.

The WFOT describes that school-based occupational therapy is client-centred, solution
focused, strengths-based, occupation-based, collaborative and context-based,
educationally-relevant and evidence-based. And how occupational therapy can support all
levels of the education system. As the position statement describes the role of occupational
therapists is one to enable, support and promote full participation and wellbeing of students
by supporting the strengths and finding solutions, reducing or removing learning activity
limitations and participation restrictions. (WFOT, 2016)

The role of occupational therapy within inclusive education is already established in
countries like Australia, Sweden and Canada. Experiences from these countries show how
the role of occupational therapy contributes to the inclusive education system. Findings
support that occupational therapists can support the teacher by providing a full assessment
of the strengths and challenges of the child, the tasks and the student’s environmental
context. By the results of this the therapist could fulfil a supporting role in creating individual
learning plans in collaboration with teachers, resource teachers and parents. (Causton-
Theoharis, 2009; Chiu et al., 2008; Mejasic, et al., 2015; AOTA, 2016; Egilson &
Traustadottir, 2009; Rens & Joosten, 2014; Hart Barnett & O’Shaughnessy, 2015; WOFT,
2016)

Occupational therapists can support on three different levels to support and facilitate the
interaction between the student’s abilities, the physical, social, natural and manmade
environment and the school-based occupations he/she needs to, or wants to, perform in
order to achieve a meaningful participation within the educational context. These levels
contains Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiation and accommodation. These
levels will be further described in appendix 1 (WFOT, 2016). These levels of support can all
contribute to establishing individual educational plans which provides general specific, easy
and realistic advices and recommendations. Also occupational therapists can support
teachers and give advice on appropriate guiding styles towards students. This enhances
educational growth, social inclusion and participation. (Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Chiu et al.,
2008; Mejasic, et al., 2015; AOTA, 2016; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Rens & Joosten,
Occupational therapists are good partners to share their knowledge with various stakeholders like teachers, parents and other therapists. This also supports the teachers to have an inclusive classroom.

The position statement of the WFOT (2016) also describes that research has shown the occupational therapy effectiveness and socio-economic benefits of the occupation-based methods. The costs of occupational therapy in schools can easily be compensated by higher productivity of the child/young person, both immediately and in their future. Also research emphasises the benefits of a collaborative approach in which occupational therapists are key facilitators.

**Aim**

The occupational therapy profession would benefit to have a document which explains and supports how occupational therapy is justified to be introduced into the educational system in Bulgaria. The results of this document can be used towards politicians and school boards in order to create awareness and financial support to include occupational therapy within the educational system.

Therefore we will write an advice report which will describe the benefits of including occupational therapy in the educational systems of Bulgaria. To write this we will make use of literature and practical research to answer the main question of this bachelor thesis:

*How can an occupational therapy perspective contribute to the implementation of inclusive education within schools in Ruse, Bulgaria?*
3. Methods

Step 1: Orientation
To get more familiar with the culture of Bulgaria and to establish collaborations with schools, the first weeks were used to observe and talk to schools in a more general perspective. To determine which role occupational therapists can fulfil within the inclusive education system, the first steps were listening and observing. These steps were mainly focussed on the regular teachers as they are the ones experiencing difficulties in teaching students with special needs. The information that was received was used to establish a ground for what the role of occupational therapists can be.

The collaboration was started with three schools. The first school, named the Professional School of Vocational Education A.TZ. Bourov, came across because the occupational student from Belgium introduced us there to show the variety of how inclusive education gets implemented in Ruse. This school practice integrated education within the mainstream school system.

To visit a second school our supervisor arranged a meeting with the dean of primary school Angel Kanchev. This school would be appropriate for this thesis since this school practice inclusive education and in the past there have been moments of collaboration with occupational therapists. During the visit we were able to explain occupational therapy and the purpose of visiting the school. The dean was positive about the project and agreed to let his school be used for observation. He arranged an English teacher she functioned as a translator and contact person.

The meeting with the third school, the Bratja Miladinovi primary school was arranged by the occupational therapist from the ABET centre. This school practices inclusive education just like the Angel Kanchev primary school. This school has an occupational therapy practice room which is used when occupational therapy support is asked for. During the visit the occupational therapist talked with the head while we were present; the head was not able to speak English. Afterwards the occupational therapist told us how the school was not very excited to participate in our research but that they would welcome us after the May holidays.

Our participation within these two primary schools could contribute towards a stronger collaboration between school and occupational therapists and could contribute to a benefit of our research for all involved parties.
The Professional school and Angel Kanchev primary school were already available for observations therefore these schools were first to be observed. Open observations were done in order to create a view on the inclusive education and the experience of both the teachers and students and what role they have. These open observations gave the opportunity to decide which path we should take for structured observations.

**Step 2: Selecting assessments**

The first conclusions we drew was that our intentional plan was not feasible. The intentional method of the project was to have a close collaboration with teachers and use them as an important source. When we visited we had to acknowledge how the language barrier was too big. There also was not (yet) enough trust from teachers to open up towards us. Only two teachers felt comfortable with having us in their class, however we could only observe them and not talk to them.

Because of this we had to change our approach. We have chosen to focus on the children in class so it would give us the opportunity to translate our observations into short recommendations towards teachers. By being part of the class we could build towards more trust and maybe later in the process perceive information from the teachers and share with them our findings.

Taking the language barrier into account, we will not be able to conduct any assessment fully and validate, since we are not able to speak with either the child, teacher or parents.

Since the child is now the centre of our practice, we looked for school-based assessments for observing. The Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance model that intentionally was used does not provide any assessments. However, the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) does provide some suggestions towards assessments. This model has been described as the following:

The MOHO describes humans as being made up of three interrelated components: volition (motivation), habituation (patterns and routines), and performance capacity (physical and mental abilities). MOHO also emphasizes that the physical and social environment has to be taken into account to understand human occupation. (University of Illinois, 2017)

As explained in the introduction of this paper, to implement inclusive education in a successful manner, it is important to take the child’s strengths and challenges in consideration, as well as the physical and social environment. These factors have impact on the occupational performance, as well as the habituation and possibly even motivation.
Therefore the perspectives of MOHO do fit really well for our project and we have decided to use this model as our focus of practice. This model also suggest several assessments and instruments that can be used to explore the different facets of the MOHO. For this project we have specifically taken the Short Child Occupational Profile (SCOPE) into account. The SCOPE is an occupation-focused assessment that determines how a child’s volition, habituation, skills, and the environment facilitate or restrict participation (University of Illinois, 2017). This assessment can give us insights on how we can support the child as well as the teacher, to enhance participation and occupational performance.

**Step 3: Execute assessment**

In the weeks four and five of our stay we were able to observe students with special needs in the Angel Kanchev primary school. We aimed to observe six children in total. To avoid fast conclusions and to take into account how circumstances can affect someone’s performance day by day, each child had to be observed twice. To ensure our interpretations and reports afterwards about behaviours and participation in class will be more valid and reliable. See appendix 2 for the described observations.

To ensure we have a same perspective and interpretation of the SCOPE, we decided to first observe the same child. After two moments of observation we combined our observations and decided to continue observations on different children.

We concluded that we only could use the view of the SCOPE, since we are not able to conduct all parts of the assessments due to language barrier. Therefore we only used the observation part of this assessment.

**Step 4: Taking new directions**

In the meantime we heard that the other primary school was not able to welcome us to observe their inclusive educational environment. After two weeks of observations at Angel Kanchev (two times each week, for 40 minutes), we were told that we could no longer visit them because of their final tests. Therefore we were not able to complete our initiated plan. We did not collect enough data and the relationship we tried to build within the school came to a stop.

These circumstances were discussed with both our supervisor and coach. As a result it has been decided to use different sources and to focus more on literature to complement on the practical part.

As a result of our previous step and the efforts of our supervisor we were able to arrange a
meeting to observe two sessions at the ABET occupational therapy centre. We could observe children that attend the Angel Kanchev primary school. Furthermore our supervisor arranged a meeting with the head of the Resource Centre and she would join us for the meeting. This meeting with the head of the Resource Centre would be a good opportunity to establish a better understanding of occupational therapy and to build towards a more sustainable and effective collaboration. We prepared questions and also consulted the occupational therapists of the ABET centre for additional questions and advices towards the conversation or messages we could leave behind.

4. Results

In this chapter we will describe our findings. These findings will include observations in schools and conversations about inclusive education, our meetings with the Resource Centre and the occupational therapists in Ruse. Also we will present how inclusive education is supported in Bulgaria.

4.1 Schools

4.1.1 Angel Kanchev Primary school

**Situation in theory:**

The Angel Kanchev primary school provides inclusive education for special needs students. Within the classrooms there are between 2-6 students who require special attention. The classes exist of approximately 20-25 students and the students are clustered in groups of 5-6 children. In some classes these groups are only with special needs students and in other classes it is mixed with mainstream students.

The students that require special needs are assessed three times a year. They have to make a test that will show how the student has developed, where they require more guidance and to set adjusted learning goals.

The teachers and children are receiving support from resource teachers, which is provided by the Resource Centre. The resource teacher guides the students with special needs during classes on an individual level, while the regular teacher is providing the mainstream curriculum.

Besides the resource teacher a speech therapist and a psychologist are part of the school support, they are also provided by the Resource Centre.
When students graduate from primary school, they receive a diploma, which gives them access to secondary schools. The special needs student receive a certificate which will not give access to further secondary education. They can only go to two professional schools where there are special classes for students with special needs.

**Situation as observed:**

There is no recent experience with occupational therapy.

During basic classes like mathematics and writing/reading a resource teacher is present in the classroom. Within the classroom the resource teacher works with a group of students who require extra support. Also mainstream students sit in a group with special needs students without receiving extra support.

The regular teacher handles the subjects while the resource teacher clarifies it for the special needs students and helps them when needed. The resource teacher helps the children with their individual goals of the class they attend. Helping the students contains of: preparing tasks, pointing out what to do, clarifying the exercise/topic, helping the children participate and keeping the students focussed on their tasks. Each resource teacher has their own way of supporting the special needs students: one resource teacher has a hands-on approach and sits in between students. The other resource teachers takes her own desk in the clustered group of tables and offers support from there. She does not provide hands-on support, she uses words and nonverbal communication to make herself clear. Besides this, also the location of the special needs students within classes varies: depending on the needs the students have they are part of the cluster with students with special needs. Also in one class they are sitting in front of the class, while in other classes the students are in the back of the classroom.

The bond between the resource teacher and the student is strong, the students rely on the resource teacher and asks for help when necessary. They also get help to provide the correct answers when the teachers ask the students anything to include them during classes.
4.1.2 Atanas Bourov Professional School of Industrial Technologies

**Situation in theory:**
The Atanas Bourov technical secondary school provides special education within a mainstream secondary school. There are two classes that are receiving special education. The groups are small and they get classes in the kitchen and two classrooms. All students are classified as disabled and there are no students without disabilities in the class. The students have individual learning goals.
The students get support from their two main teachers, one provides practical classes: cooking and arts. The other teacher provides the regular classes like writing and reading Bulgarian. There are also teachers who give specific classes like physical education and mathematics to the students. Besides the regular teachers the school also has a resource teacher who provides the children with extra support and guidance when they are having problems. This schools has its own resource teacher which is not provided by the Resource Centre, so the resource teacher is always able to join in one of the two classes. There is a special room for the resource teacher to provide individual education when needed. The tasks of the resource teacher consists of: providing individual guidance, guiding the teachers and writing advices/progress of the students. The students obtain a certificate for completing their lessons in this schools, they will not receive a diploma that is valid for working.

Since 2006 occupational therapy students attend this school once a week to do their internship, they do this in groups of three to four students. They provide activities, take over the role of teacher and work with the special needs students. There is no graduated occupational therapist involved in this school.

**Situation as observed:**
The resource teacher and other involved teachers have experience with occupational therapy students, but they are not able to describe the role and function of occupational therapy (OT). When the OT students come the school expects that the ot students take over the lessons and provide the class with activities.

The resource teacher is not always present during classes this is the result of administrative work. Advices for students and progress for the students have to be written as well as recruiting new special needs students in order to continue with this education. The lessons are being held once a week in the kitchen, and the rest of the week divided over the two classrooms. Most of the time the two main teachers are providing the classes, some of the
teachers for specific, mainstream classes do not show up or ask the main teacher to give the class.

There is a broad variety and severity of disabilities within the group of students. Most of them need individual guidance and support, which makes it difficult to provide suitable education for the whole group of students. The students have individual learning goals, but it is hard to work on these individual goals because of the limited time the resource teacher has.

The classes of the children start at 9 a.m. in the morning and last until 12:30 p.m. every day. The students rely on their regular teachers and the resource teacher as they seek both physical as vocal attention. These teachers are passionate about the contact with their students, however they encounter difficulties to implement a fitted educational program that fits all students.

Overall findings:
Both schools have experience with occupational therapy, either recent or in the past. There is not a graduated occupational therapist currently active within the educational settings. At some school there are occupational therapy students involved. However both schools are unable to describe a clear view on the role of occupational therapy and the field of work. Not all teachers have the experience to teach special needs students and feel insecure about their skills. They receive trainings, but these do not support them enough to feel confident enough to teach these students. The trainings they receive are sometimes provided by occupational therapists. The efforts of the teachers who are experienced with students with special needs provides the students with a safe environment. It also contributes to the first steps towards being included within the educational system. Due to limited time, resources and the amount of students that are in need of support, the resource teachers are not to able provide all the support the students need.
4.2 Bulgarian vision towards disability

During our visit in Ruse, Bulgaria we encountered a different view on health and disability than we are used to in the Netherlands. Therefore in this chapter we will share what we have learned about this. We included this chapter within the thesis because it is important to have an understanding about what is seen as a disability.

Having a disabled child is for a lot of Bulgarian people still connected with punishment and sins. Therefore there is still a lot of shaming involved. Especially when parents have their first child with a disability they are shocked and hesitant to seek the help they either need or could use. In addition, it might occur that parents don’t see the value of providing the child with all the opportunities and materials needed which the child requires. For example regular fitted clothing. When their second child is born disabled or has difficulties later in his or her life, the parents are more able to put it in perspective. Being in contact with other parents, through having the child in school, also helps parents to realize they could provide the best they have for their child. On the other hand, there are parents who are eager to support their child and put in effort to get the best care they can provide. They make use of allied health professionals and support. However the amount of therapists can be overwhelming for the parents and the child and can also be contradictive. In the end, it might not result in the best care and support for parents and child.

The medical system in Bulgaria is different than in the Netherlands. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) get this diagnosis until they are eighteen years old. After this, the medical diagnoses becomes schizophrenia. Besides that, children with learning difficulties or learning disadvantages because of circumstances get diagnosed with a disability. Diagnosis could be based on temporary health issues or socio-economic circumstances. As a result there is a broad variety of disabilities included within the target group ‘special needs students’.

4.3 Resource Centre

Our appointment with the head of the Resource Centre turned out in a meeting with eight of the employees of the Resource Centre, including their supervisor. In this chapter we will describe the summary of this conversation. To read the specific questions and answers, we would like to refer to appendix 3. Since only one of the employee was able to speak English, our supervisor took the role as translator between both parties.
In 2006 inclusive education was introduced in Bulgaria for the first time. Before this there existed in some situations ‘integrated education’. This means that children with special needs were sometimes included at mainstream schools but did not participate in regular classes. Resource Centres were introduced to support these children.

At this moment there are twenty-eight Resource Centres in Bulgaria, each region has its own. These centres use a multidisciplinary team to assess what are the children’s needs and individual learning goals in school to be able to participate. This team consists of resource teachers, psychologists, speech and language therapist and pedagogics. Also teachers and parents will be involved within this process. The team assess the child twice a year and tries to meet twice a month to set and discuss any progress on the child’s individual learning goals.

Since 2017 the policies have changed with the result that no longer the Resource Centre is responsible for providing the needed support towards students. They are still involved with the assessments of children with special needs, however they now provide advice towards school management. Also the team provides a short description and support for the teacher how to educate the child, if there is no recourse teacher in class to support the child. Instead of the Resource Centre the school management is now responsible to provide the needed support and has to involve the needed professionals and also pay them. The school can make use of the professionals that are employed within the Resource Centres. Besides this, the regular teachers got more responsibilities to educate children with special needs since new policies in 2017. To motivate the teachers they get some financial compensation for the efforts they put in their students.

Since the economic and political circumstances in Bulgaria, the financial support to provide supportive care is often not enough to provide what is needed. Schools tend to make use of the disciplines whom are already included in their educational system, which is most often a speech therapist or a psychologist. One of the consequences is that there is not enough money to hire occupational therapists to join the resource teams.

Some of the employees we spoke with did know about occupational therapy and they could remember to have participated in a presentation/workshop. The team knows of some students that they receive occupational therapy. However, due to a lack of financial resources they do not actively collaborate with the ABET centre and do not seek each other’s knowledge about the child. They are open towards collaboration with occupational therapists but do not know how to establish a sustainable collaboration with the resources they have.
4.4 Occupational therapy centre (ABET)

The field of occupational therapy only exists for 10 years now in Bulgaria. After the first group of graduated occupational therapists they were able to unite within the Association of Bulgarian Occupational therapists (ABET) founded by Liliya Todorova and Petya Mincheva. In Ruse there is a rehabilitation centre, it is called the ABET centre. The occupational therapists in this centre work with children who attend for example the primary school Angel Kanchev. The therapists know that the Resource Centre is involved with these children. Because the lack of financial support and resources occupational therapists focus on the most important parts of their work and therefore choose to give treatment to the children and guiding parents over investing time in collaboration with other parties. The occupational therapists have tried to build up collaboration with schools and also with the Resource Centre. However there is no committed and sustainable collaboration between these parties. In daily practice the occupational therapists work together with the parents of the children.

Occupational therapists encounter a lot of difficulties to build sustainable relationships and collaboration within the educational system. The occupational therapists themselves know what occupational therapy can contribute in schools and towards the Resource Centre. There are several challenges occupational therapists in Ruse (and Bulgaria) have to encounter:

- Constantly changing policies, changed school boards and a lack of financial support to provide services in schools.
- The field of occupational therapy is still young and unfamiliar within the healthcare system. Therefore the occupational therapists encounter challenges towards expectations and influences from other disciplines.
- Occupational therapists work often alone instead of with colleagues, therefore it is a challenge to learn from others.
- Through the few amount of occupational therapists and the diffusion of them within Bulgaria, it is difficult to arrange well-attended meetings within the ABET to share knowledge and experiences.
4.5 Support of inclusive education in Bulgaria

4.5.1 Centre of Inclusive Education

As presented earlier the Resource Centres are formed to support inclusive education. Since it’s a difficult process to change an educational system and support children with special needs in a fitted way, there is more support needed. On behalf of this there is formed a non-governmental organisation named the Centre for Inclusive Education (CIE). Their main aim is to promote an inclusive school environment as a quality standard in education and they promote social inclusion. The CIE support schools in their development towards school management, teachers, students and parents.

“The Centre for Inclusive Education considers inclusion in education an opportunity for schools to provide quality education to all children, irrespective of their educational needs, ethnicity, social-economic status, or limitations of the environment they are raised in.”

The goals they have are the following:

- Support professionals in the field of education working with school children with various educational capacities and needs in a way that will make them confident to teach and support children effectively and to create inclusive school environment for all.
- Raise awareness among educational and social institutions, and strengthen their capacity, to introduce and meet child safeguarding and child participation standards.
- Raise awareness and sensitize national and local decision makers about the philosophy and problems of inclusive education and child protection.
- Stir interest and gain support within the wider community, donor organisations and businesses about causes dealing with quality education, child safeguarding and child participation.

The organisation is currently working on a project named One School for All. Within this project they have set up a program to build towards changing the school environment, based on respect and acceptance of other people. Their ultimate goal is comprehensive introduction and application of the principles of inclusive education.

The CIE works in partnership with mainstream schools by supporting them in the process of building inclusive environments which enable teachers to meet the needs of all children in their classrooms so that the children can learn and unfold their potential.

This project is funded by the America for Bulgaria Foundation and will be implemented in the period of August 2016 till August 2019. They have selected ten schools, based on three
steps of contests, to start this project with. Within these schools they follow a model that have been carefully designed by CIE over a five year period: a Bulgarian Model for organisation of school processes and building of inclusive school environment. This model contains the following steps:

1. Analysing the school setting through self-assessment against key indicators in each of the four areas, with the involvement of all stakeholders;
2. Selecting priorities and setting specific and measurable objectives alongside indicators of success;
3. Developing an inclusion action plan featuring responsible persons and deadlines;
4. Implementing the plan and coordination of activities;
5. Progress monitoring;
6. Updating and amending the objectives and the action plan.

With the support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation the CIE will expand their partners in the educational system over time, together with the partners they are already involved with. (CIE, 2016)

4.5.2 Experiences in practice

The employee of the CIE and speech and language therapist combined her practice with occupational therapy in the primary school Bratja Miladinovi. She educated herself on the topics of school-based occupational therapy. She observed the children on occupational performance and the environment. Her main focus was based on training fine motor skills and reading and writing skills in combination with sensory integration.

During her practice she encountered difficulties with profiling occupational therapy and felt hostility from the teachers in collaboration with her. As a result she did not feel welcome to present recommendations towards teachers. After a few years of collaboration and being present in the school environment, the collaboration got more friendly, however based on her role as speech and language therapist and not based on the practice of occupational therapy.

The collaboration that existed between teachers and therapist was depending on the severity of the disability of the child:
When students had more severe disabilities (Down syndrome, autism and intellectual disabilities) the resource teacher was responsible for the educational support in class. The
role of the resource teachers was mainly focussed on keeping the students occupied in class and less focussed on individual learning and support. Parents were in class all day to support their child and secure safety for all parties. Communication from the therapist was mainly focussed towards parents, the collaboration with resource teachers was minimal. Collaboration with resource teachers consisted for example of sharing knowledge about pencil grasps.

Students with minor disabilities were more included in the educational system and the collaboration between parties was also different. The therapist discussed with teachers about encountered difficulties in teaching the children and how to cope with this.

5. Discussion

For this research we have visited three schools in Ruse that educate students with special needs. We were able to observe in two of them, which provided us with limited data. Because of the language barrier and the hesitance of teachers to be open about their experiences with teaching students with special needs, we were not able to gain information from them. As a result we are only able to present results of limited data from general interviews and our own observations. We were not able to discuss experienced difficulties of teachers and how occupational therapy can support them in these encountered difficulties.

However, one of the important reasons to practice this bachelor project is to strengthen the field of occupational therapy in Bulgaria/Ruse. Through the steps we took to collect data, we were able to bring occupational therapy under the attention of several parties within the educational system and created opportunities to strengthen and rebuild collaborations. During the conversations and interviews we held, we concluded that the experiences of the inclusive education systems are not very different: the stories and experiences from all the different sources had a lot of similarities. This contributes to a more valid conclusion of our findings. In addition, we presented our research towards physiotherapy and occupational therapy students, which provided them with new insights. The paper that we wrote for this is added in appendix 4.

We had to redirect and adjust our plans several times in order to get to the final product. When we encountered difficulties or obstructions we sought contact with our supervisor and coach to discuss further steps, based on the circumstances and possibilities. By doing so we have secured how the process of this project was in full collaboration and with consensus of all parties involved.
The results show that the inclusive education in Bulgaria is still in progress. Experiences from countries where inclusive education is already implemented can contribute towards the implementation of inclusive education in Bulgaria. The schools we have visited are putting a lot of effort in trying to make the inclusive educational system work. They still encounter difficulties of which the most important one mentioned is financial support. The Bulgarian vision towards disability might contribute to difficulties that are encountered.

We cannot underestimate that the profession of occupational therapy in Bulgaria is still young. Therefore the therapists have a lot of challenges ahead of them. There is still need for profiling the profession of occupational therapy in Bulgaria and the inclusive education. Schools and professionals need yet to realize how the positive contribution of occupational therapy within inclusive education will result in enhanced participation and inclusion of the supported students.

To build up towards implementing occupational therapy in Bulgaria there are several recommendations that will be suggested. The recommendations will be based on our findings and on conversations with the supervisor of this project. By combining these results the capacity and opportunities can be created to slowly integrate occupational therapy in the educational system.
6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The current system in Bulgaria contains resource teams who are responsible for assessing the student and giving advice and support towards schools. These teams provide individual learning programs for students with special needs to make participation and inclusion possible. The teams consist of a variety of professionals: resource teachers, psychologists, speech and language therapists and physical therapists. There are no occupational therapists included.

The occupational therapists who are treating children with disabilities do not yet have a sustainable communication and collaboration with the Resource Centre. The most important partner of occupational therapists at this moment are the parents of the students. At this moment parents are the ones to communicate between both parties to combine knowledge and support, however this is rarely done.

There is not yet enough support from the educational system to be open towards occupational therapists. Also the expectations of the tasks of occupational therapists seems not to be defined and are different from the roles and tasks that are described in literature.

The findings from literature show the importance of collaboration between all involved parties around a student. The findings from our practical research show how the results of our literature study could be implemented to create a role for occupational therapy within the inclusive education system in Bulgaria.

The role of occupational therapy within the inclusive education system of Ruse Bulgaria can be fulfilled by assessing and evaluating the strengths and challenges of the student and their environment. Through these assessments a more specific and supporting individual learning program can be given form. Occupational therapist could fulfil a guiding role in creating individual learning plans in collaboration with teachers, resource teachers, other therapists and parents. Also occupational therapists can support teachers, share knowledge and give advice on appropriate guiding styles towards students. This enhances educational growth, social inclusion and participation of all the students with special needs in class.

In order to support the inclusive educational system from an occupational therapy perspective, a well-established collaboration between school boards, teachers and occupational therapists is needed. This can be achieved by sharing the same vision on inclusive education, have a
mutual understanding of each other's roles, having different methods of communication and regular meetings.

6.2 Recommendations

Supporting inclusive education from an occupational therapy point of view

To support and work towards further implementation of occupational therapy within inclusive education the following recommendations can be made, according to the research in literature and practice:

- Build towards a stronger collaboration with all involved parties and have regular contact and meetings.
- Combine knowledge from occupational assessments and treatment with the results of the Resource Centre and other therapists.
- Collaboration with the Centre of Inclusive Education (CIE) in Bulgaria to profile occupational therapy and seek support for implementing occupational therapy within the inclusive educational system and creating job opportunities within the existing team.
- Promoting occupational therapy within schools, combined with a good clarification of the contribution of occupational therapy in the current system and defining roles and tasks of the persons involved.
- Assess person, environment and occupations from students with special needs.
- Provide general specific, easy and realistic advices and recommendations towards (resource) teachers.
- Providing knowledge about Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- Share knowledge about the variety of disabilities towards parents and teachers.
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Appendix

1. WFOT

The WFOT describes that school-based occupational therapy is client-centred, solution focused, strengths-based, occupation-based, collaborative and context-based, educationally-relevant and evidence-based. The position statement describes the role of occupational therapists as one to enable, support and promote full participation and wellbeing of students by supporting the strengths and finding solutions, reducing or removing learning activity limitations and participation restrictions.

Occupational therapists can support on three different levels, to support and facilitate the interaction between the student’s abilities, the physical, social, natural and manmade environment and the school-based occupations he/she needs to, or wants to, perform in order to achieve a meaningful participation within the educational context. These levels contain Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiation and accommodation:

*Primary level with the focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*
Occupational therapists can contribute collaborative support at the level of the school system, the school, the support team or the whole classroom using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). At this practice level, occupational therapists collaboratively enhance the capacity of students, educators, parents and caregivers, peers and therapists to understand the diverse range of student needs, abilities and challenges. In addition, occupational therapists collaboratively support the capacity of educators to teach skills through curriculum-based activities to all children by creating an inclusive development and learning environment.

*Secondary level with the focus on differentiation*
Differentiated instruction involves modifying teaching practice to support those students whose needs were not able to be met through UDL. Occupational therapists work collaboratively with educators to find ways to differentiate tasks and instruction to increase school-based occupational performance. There will always be an element of developmental focus included. At this level, occupational therapists also determine which students may have need for more individualised accommodation.
Tertiary level with the focus on accommodation.

When a student is still unable to meet the general learning and curriculum demands, occupational therapists can collaboratively support and provide direct occupational therapy for the individual student and introduce changes to the activity or environment in order to maximise the students’ wellbeing and participation. Occupational therapy contributions to an individual curriculum can enhance the capacity of the team of educators to follow through in other situations, which can ensure more generalisation of the service.”
2. Observations

**Child A: Autism Spectrum Disorder**

- **Volition:**

  Child A: The child feels free to express himself, however the task for his work doesn’t seem to match his interests. He takes a passive attitude when he is not being instructed by his resource teacher. However during free time he shows happiness and he does not need an external motivation to play.

- **Habituation:**

  Child A: The child doesn’t show much response towards the transitions in the class. He waits till something is instructed towards him. He takes the role of a child playing with other kids. However the role of an eager student like the others doesn’t seem to be present.

- **Communication and interaction skills:**

  Child A: The child shows a stronger non-verbal than verbal communication and behaviour towards his peers. When he is enthusiastic he jumps around and smiles. . The child turns his back when he is not interested or bored with the task. It seems that he has a strong relationship with his resource teacher, she seems to provide him safety. He only played with one other child and a different child who tried to help him in class.

- **Process skills:**

  Child A: The child seems to understand what is expected of him, however it doesn’t seem to match his interest. This might be why he shows a passive attitude.

- **Motor skills:**

  Child A: The child has the ability to perform the tasks that he is offered. He is able to hold, manipulate and use a pen and pencils.
Environment:

Child A: The equipment in the classroom is new, however the tables and chairs are
too big for the students. Also, while seated, they put their bag behind their back. The
child works in a group with two other special needs children and two children without
special needs, who are trying to assist him. During tasks he does not really respond
towards the other students, during playtime he does. The resource teacher gives
him a lot of attention and also takes over the writing. It seems that she is doing his
work instead of supporting him to do it himself.

Child B: Epilepsy

Volition:

Child B: There is a lot of enthusiasm and spirit in this child. The child is engaged with
his tasks and eager to participate in class. The child is mostly focussed on the teacher
and resource teacher. There is some interaction with the students close to him, mostly
when they offer assistance or help or when he reaches out to celebrate his
achievements.

Habituation:

Child B: The child is very responsive for the music that starts and ends the class that
is part of the class routine. However the transition is not completed since the rest of
the children start to play and he is focussed on finishing his task, he doesn't
participate within the play.

Communication and interaction skills:

Child B: The child seems to be limited in expressing verbal communication. He knows
how to express himself with non-verbal communication and when he adds verbal
communication he is able to use the right volume according to the situation (talking to
resource teacher, to student, give answer in class). It seems that he is limited to
communicate in a more meaningful manner. There is some (non)verbal
communications with peers, however more with the (resource) teacher.

Process skills:
Child B: The child seems to be able to process his own work. He fulfill the task that is given. Also when the work is either more or less challenging, he is able to get back to his task after being distracted. The skill of problem solving was not yet observed. The child seems to have a plan and stick to this. When he is asked to answer a question, he responds and get the correct answer of the teacher, after which he get positive feedback.

-Motor skills:

Child B: For this child there seems to be no problem on the physical part. He is capable to use fine-motor skills to perform his tasks. He also is self reliant towards mobility in class. He is able to endure activities for the duration that is being asked.

-Environment:

Child B: The child sits (like his peers) on a desk that is not appropriate for this length, however he is managing this. Next to him, settled in a group there are 5 other peers, 2 of them with special needs. The resource teachers is in between him and another peer. She is really close to him. Also she needs to look at his work really closely to judge and or instruct his work. The child is provided an individual learning program, based on the assessment/judgement of teachers. The teacher is involving him in class and when asked also his peers will include them. Besides 2 of the peers next to him there is almost no interaction within the social environment and children seem a bit hesitant.

Child C: Speech problems and mild mental retardation.

-Volition:

Child C: The child wants to participate in the class, he is eager to work but he reacts differently on various subjects. He is not shy and makes a lot of physical contact with his peers, who don’t seem to react towards his search for social interaction.

-Habituation:

Child C: The child understands the routines in the class (start & end of the lessons)
however he needs a verbal/visual stimulation to start working on the assignment. In his enthusiasm he gets corrected by the resource teacher, he jump and makes sounds to get attention from the teacher.

-Communication and interaction skills:

Child C: The child mainly looks for attention from everyone with the use of non verbal communication (physical). However the only strong relationship is with his peer who is also disabled, they are both older than the rest and both have the same problems. (ask for age). Tries to help friend with giving answers.

-Process skills:

Child C: Child is slow learner, can focus on task, understand expectations towards tasks, expects help when he has to give answers (looks at them).

-Motor skills:

Child C: Too much flexion during writing, also no proper placement of arms. Restless. Able to mobilize himself everywhere.

-Environment:

Child C: He is too big for table. Doesn’t support proper sitting. Resource teachers support him by pointing out the assignments to make. Teacher explains for the rest of class while he is doing other task. Then she asks him to reply or show off his skills. Resource teacher provides answer. Also he will probably not receive the knowledge from the teacher to be able to answer because of this.

Child D: Autism Spectrum Disorder

-Volition:

Child D: The child participates actively in the class, there is a strong interaction with his environment and looks for interaction with his peers and teachers. He is able to choose activities and tasks and is also able to initiate them. He challenges himself when possible.

-Habituation:
Child D: The child understands the routines in the class (start & end of the lessons). Practical classes seems to be more demanding for him, since he shows more emotional distress. During classes he is willing to participate but seems to be shy and insecure.

-Communication and interaction skills:

Child D: He is able to express verbal and non-verbal ways of communication and seeks contact with others around him. However the contacts seems superficial and there does not seem to be real friendship.

-Process skills:

Child D: It seems the child have problems with using new objects. He needs time and repetitive instructions to learn new tasks. He seems hesitant in solving problems and seeks help.

-Motor skills:

Child D: Child has no problem in motor skills.

-Environment:

Child D: There are for this child no limitations in the physical environment. The child does not always receive the educational challenges he seems to need. His peers know how to make use of the skills he has, for example the English language and enable him through this to participate.

Child E: Cerebral Palsy

- Volition:

Child E: The child participates in class and engages in exploration. He is often joyful, but get frustrated when teachers or peers constrain him. He is well aware of his environment and knows right from wrong behaviour. He avoids new or more challenging activities because they elicit a high level of frustration.

- Habituation:

Child E: The child has his own routine in class. There is no clear routine offered,
he follows instruction when he feels like it.

- Communication and interaction skills:

Child D: The child expresses himself mainly non-verbal because of a limited vocabulary. To express himself he seeks physical contact, hit on subjects or make verbal expressions. He is able to understand his teachers and peers but is not able to reply verbally. He seeks attention and connection with others when he has an occupational demand.

- Process skills:

Child E: Is not able to understand use of objects without instruction, needs physical and verbal guidance to be able to perform activities. He wants to decide what he wants to do and knows who to go to, to make it happen.

- Motor skills:

Child E: Child has problems with delivering the appropriate amount of strengths that is needed for activities. Coordination is limited and gross and fine motor skills are not developed according to his age. His mobility is limited, he is able to walk independently, however only limited distances. It is a challenge to climb stairs or elevate himself.

- Environment:

Child E: The classroom contains platforms for the tables and also to reach the blackboard. His teachers and peers give him the opportunity to do what he wants, however during practical classes they are hesitant in letting him actively participate. His mother often is present in the class to support him when education of motor tasks are being presented.
3. Resource Centre

Liliya Torodova arranged for us a meeting with the head of the Resource Centre where she also would be joining us. We prepared some questions which we will go over.

When we arrived at the Resource Centre we expected to have a meeting with the head of the Resource Centre, however there were 8 people present who were all part of the Resource Centre. They welcomed us very warmly and they were very interested about the education in Netherlands and Belgium. The conversation was more informal and open, the only downside was that only one person of the Resource Centre spoke English so Liliya had to translate everything for us.

After we discussed the differences between Bulgaria, Belgium and the Netherlands we headed over to the questions.

1. What is your vision on inclusive education?
   (We received the answer to what inclusive educations means in Bulgaria)
   Until 2006 there was only integration and not inclusive education since 2006 the inclusive education was introduced into the Bulgarian educational settings. 28 Resource Centres were created one for each region, within these Resource Centres multiple disciplines are included: resource teachers, psychologists, speech and language therapist and pedagogics. These Resource Centres supplied the schools with the professional help a student with special needs need.
   Since 2017 the policy changed and the head of the school can make the decision what support a student with special needs should receive. So the Resource Centre rely on the head of a school if they receive work. The head of the school receives a certain amount of money depending on how many students with special needs there are and the severity of their disabilities. If there are only a few students with disabilities in one school the amount of money they receive is so little that the Resource Centre can’t even be used.

2. On what parts of the education/development of the students do resource teachers focus on?
   The child receives the education which is most relevant for the individual needs. There is a team around the student where the head of schools chooses who of the team gets to help the student. The team does collaborate a lot there is meeting 2 times every month. So they have to meet a lot for every child. Some of disciplines are already working in the schools the other disciplines will be delivered by the Resource Centre.
3. What tests are being used to make individual learning plans for the students and who is involved?
The centre for support is a centre who scores the severity of the disability of a child with the use of a test which takes place twice a year. After the tests are being taken a special team around the student is made containing: the teacher, the parents, the resource teacher and the disciplines who are being involved with the individual needs of the student.

4. Do you also help/support the teacher with the students when there is no resource teacher available?
Each student with special needs has its own paper where is written on what guidance they should receive. The teachers can use this when there is no resource teacher around, when the teacher cannot manage to work with the student, a resource teacher will take the student out of the class and work individually. Since last year the regular teacher gained more responsibility towards the support of special needs students to motivate the teachers, they will receive a financial reward.

5. Are you familiar with occupational therapy?
One of the psychologists was very familiar with occupational therapy and told us we facilitate the general state of a person. She also told us that we work with disabled persons, adapt the context/environment and work on prevention. They also know the occupational therapists in Ruse who gave a presentation about occupational therapy, furthermore they know that some of the students who are receiving support from the Resource Centre also go to the occupational therapy centre, but they do not communicate with each other.

6. Are you open for collaboration with occupational therapy?
They are open for collaborations with occupational therapists, but for now they say it is not possible because there is a lack of financial possibilities. We suggested to mail with each other about the students to align the goals, but it seemed not possible (also because of financial reasons). We told them that the ABET centre is open for the collaboration and that they could visit to observe a session, they seem to be interested in that so we told them that they could contact Elitsa (head of the ABET centre).
A View by Dutch Occupational Therapy Students on an Occupational Therapy Contribution to Inclusive Education in Ruse, Bulgaria – Literature and Practice

Axel Peerenboom, Heidi Jacobs

A View by Dutch Occupational Therapy Students on an Occupational Therapy Contribution to Inclusive Education in Ruse, Bulgaria – literature and practice:

The paper presents our experience as Dutch students on Erasmus mobility at the University of Ruse. Our bachelor thesis is focusing on the role of occupational therapy within inclusive education. To define how occupational therapy can fulfill a role within inclusive education both literature and practical research have been executed. Findings show how there are not yet sustainable collaborations between schools and occupational therapists. Research shows how there are opportunities for occupational therapists to contribute towards supporting the participation of students with special needs in the inclusive educational system.

Key words: inclusive education, occupational therapy, special needs students, collaboration, school, Bulgaria, resource teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Our bachelor thesis project is about inclusive education in Bulgaria and which role occupational therapy can fulfill to support the implementation. To do so we have done individual literature reviews and a practical research. In this paper we will present our main observations so far and compare the situation in Ruse with the recommendations and findings from our literature reviews.

THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The first thing that we’ve noticed from our stay in Ruse is the unfamiliarity of occupational therapy in the two schools that we have visited. One primary school had experiences with occupational therapy, unfortunately they were not able to welcome us to observe in the classes. Luckily there was another primary school that was open to welcome us. The headmaster of this school did not know what occupational therapy was, neither did teachers we spoke with. This could be the result of the changing policies within the inclusive education and a change in school board.

We were also welcomed at a regular secondary school in which students with special needs have their own classes. The resource teacher told us how she is unfamiliar with occupational therapy and there has been no collaboration with them so far.

Summarizing, during our stay we were welcomed by two schools. These schools have both different ways of including students with special needs. The primary school seems to practice inclusive education and the secondary school practices special education within a regular school environment.

"Angel Kanchev" Primary School
Within “Angel Kanchev” primary school the inclusive education is provided by working in small groups which contain special needs students (sometimes combined with regular students) and a resource teacher. The resource teachers from the primary school are provided by the Resource Center. The resource teacher helps the students with their exercises, their behavior and the preparation of tasks. These students are getting assessed three times a year, to adjust learning goals and to monitor educational growth. The students have their own learning goals, with adjusted exercises when needed. The resource teacher we observed mainly helped the students instead of supporting them.

We observed how the students tend to rely on the resource teacher to help them, especially when it comes to class participation. When the teacher is asking questions to the students, the resource teacher will provide the students when needed with the answer. This seems to result in the following: the students enjoy to participate during class and want to contribute when the teacher asks a question. They feel confident in answering questions, because of the expected help.

The students are following the same course as their peers but with different learning goals. Due to these individual learning goals, the resource teacher is working sometimes on different subjects with the special needs students, while the teacher is covering another subject. During observations we saw how this can interfere with the necessity to provide instructions or explanation. The connection between the resource teacher and the students is really strong, the students trust and have a strong bond with the resource teachers.

There are also classes and subjects given in which no support from the resource teacher is provided. We were not able to observe these classes, therefore we cannot describe if there is any difference in the participation and inclusion of students with special needs in these classes.

Secondary school

At the Professional School of Industrial Technologies "Atanas Bourov" children with special needs have their own classes within the mainstream school. The resource teacher has a different role than in the primary school. There is time to work with the students individually, however due to administrative tasks and registrations that the time for individual guidance is limited. Also the resource teacher is asked to contribute to the recruitment for new students with special needs. Another difference is that the resource teacher of the secondary school is part of the school instead of being part of the team from the Resource Center.

The students get practical classes from their two main teachers who are strongly involved and interested in the development of the students. The students are provided with general classes from other teachers within school. The general teachers encounter some difficulties with teaching the students with special needs because they are not prepared to educate them. They do not have expertise or experience and they are (not yet) supported in how to educate these students.

The special needs students have a resource classroom, on the third floor for individual lessons. However this room is not easily accessible for some of the students whom have difficulties with their mobility. Therefore all the students make use of rooms on the ground floor, which are accessible and functional for their needs.

The students feel confident and enjoy their stay in the school. However, because of the broad variety of disabilities and intellectual possibilities, it is difficult to meet the educational potential of all the students during classes. Despite these differences between students, there is a lot of social interaction between the students. Also the teachers whom are involved and skilled are putting a lot of effort into including every child.
The interaction with other, “regular” students has not been observed. According to the stories that were told to us, there is still a bit of distance between them.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**QUESTION 1: How do schools where inclusive education is already successful support the students with special needs to participate in class?**

To make inclusive education possible it is important for schools and teachers to understand the abilities of students. When there is shortage of knowledge and experience to support a student with special needs it will make the attitude towards the inclusion of special needs students negative [15], [16]. Furthermore, discussing and talking with colleagues about experiences will make coping with the special needs students easier. Fong Poon-MacBrayer & Wong (2013) are even stating that the use of resource schools where inclusive education is already successful could serve as an example [6].

To make students participate in the class some programs are being recommended: The Universal Learning Design (ULD) and the Differentiated Learning Design [10]. These teaching strategies are very different but the principles out of both designs could help to implement inclusive education. Boyle, Scriven, Durning & Downes (2011) name 3 different strategies which are used in the inclusive setting: the students’ direct instruction, cognitive strategies and co-operation learning [2]. Other ways of supporting and teaching within inclusive education are modifying the curriculum standards, working in small groups and providing organized and meaningful information in a repetitive way [10], [13], [15]. Sakerneh & Abu Nair (2014) add that teachers should encourage the students to be optimistic about their abilities and provide the student with positive feedback [15]. Meynert (2014) also supports the fact of making curriculum changes to match an individual’s capacity instead of making it too hard to stay in a normal class and getting a low self-esteem and distress [12]. To check if the student understands the information probing question could be used to check this [15].

To optimize the socialization and communication of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in class there are several interventions that could be implemented: Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) and the Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA). These interventions could help to optimize the participation of students with ASD [9]. One of the most important factors to implement inclusive education and let students with different abilities participate is to have a shared vision within the school. Teachers and the school leader must have an understanding and trusting relationship with each other to make the inclusive education successful and make sure that everyone gets along [6]. Also a learning support coordinator could help teachers and schools to support the students with different abilities and give them support in making an individual learning plan for these students [2].

**LITERATURE REVIEW QUESTION 2: How can occupational therapists support teachers to implement inclusive education in their classroom?**

The articles used to answer the main question of the literature review are selected because of their relation with occupational therapy and education and will be named in the bibliography. The articles describe the role of occupational therapists from various perspectives, as well from the point of view of teachers, occupational therapists and organizations which provide more general insight about occupational therapy in schools from an occupational therapy (OT) perspective. Some articles do not have a specific description of the role of OT, however the role that is being describes fits OT perfectly. By combining all these different perspectives, it gives a good opportunity to understand how occupational therapists can support teachers in
the most effective way.
The articles which are considered to have the most added value to answer this question are written by Hart Barnett & O’Shaughnessy (2015), Causton-Theoharis (2009), Rens & Joosten (2014) and Hemmingsson, Gustavsson & Townsend (2007) [7], [3], [14], [8]. Two of them describe how literature gives an insight on the support that can be provided to support students with special needs. The other articles present research that have taken place in countries where inclusive education is embedded for a longer period of time, and describes the issues that are recognized by teachers and therapists to practice this inclusive education. It gives the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others and gives guidance to how the support that can be given by therapists in new and existing settings to build up towards an implementation of occupational therapy within the school environment.

The main findings support how a good collaboration between teachers and therapists is essential for a good implementation of inclusion and participation of students with special needs [11], [3], [4], [6], [7], [8], [14]. Aspects that are important to achieve a good collaboration are clarifying the roles of both teachers and occupational therapists [11], [4], [7], [14], schedule regular meetings [7], [8], set mutual goals [8], [14], and form individual plans for students' participation [1], [3], [6], [7], [14], use effective communications methods [11], [7], [6], [14], [3], [8], and the importance to include and share the same information with all stakeholders, which also include parents [1], [6], [14].

Also, there are several interventions the occupational therapist could provide to eventually support the teacher in making participation and inclusion possible of students with special needs. To support teachers in inclusive education, occupational therapists can use their expertise about the person, environment and occupation. They have the knowledge to observe and assess the student’s strengths and challenges and they are able to give advice on which support would be appropriate to let the students participate and be included within the mainstream education system.

The main findings support how the teacher can be supported by providing a full assessment of the strengths and challenges of the child [11], [1], [6], [14], [7], the tasks and the students environmental context [11], [14], [6], observing in class [7], [3], [14], educate the teachers how to implement the method of UDL [1], [7], give workshops to enhance awareness about occupational difficulties that may occur in class [4] Chiu, Heidebrecht, Wehrmann, Sinclair, & Reid, 2008 and contribute to individual educational plans which provides general, specific, easy and realistic advices and recommendations [14].

Besides all this, through these articles it is shown how a positive attitude of teachers and school board towards inclusive education, adaptability and a willingness to do effort important, is for successful implementation. Also occupational therapists will be good partners to share their knowledge with various stakeholders like teachers, parents and other therapists, which also supports the teachers to have an inclusive classroom.

CONCLUSION
The role of occupational therapy within the inclusive education system of Ruse Bulgaria can be fulfilled by assessing and evaluating the strengths and challenges of the student and their environment. Through these assessments an individual learning program can be given form. Occupational therapist could fulfill a guiding role in creating individual learning plans in collaboration with teachers, resource teachers and parents. Also occupational therapists can support teachers and give advice on appropriate guiding styles towards students. This enhances educational growth, social inclusion and participation.
In order to support the inclusive educational system from an occupational therapy perspective, a well-established collaboration between school boards, teachers and occupational therapists is needed. This can be achieved by sharing the same vision on inclusive education and have a mutual understanding of each other’s roles.

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