

“A CHANGE FOR CHANGE” 20 YEARS OF EDUCATION, COMMUNICATION AND INTEGRATION IN ROMANIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Community Action represents a special opportunity for all its participants. It creates an educational experience which involves the “head, the heart and the hands” for all those involved. It makes a difference to young people with special and/or social needs from special schools and residential institutions as well as volunteers in High schools. It is also entirely mutually beneficial – there are no passive recipients, only active participants. By bringing together young people and by involving them in, amongst other things, a practical understanding and application of the Rights of the Child in the school context and beyond, Community Action helps to contribute to the development of a more caring, committed, compassionate society in the future. Finally, by helping to remove barriers to education and inclusion and by helping to replace them with bridges of cooperation and communication Community Action provides for children a real “Chance for Change”¹.

The purpose of this article is to present a special programme of educational development and social integration called Community Action which began in Romania in 1992 and now in 2012 involves approximately 115,000 young people in 4 different countries across Europe. Its focus is to provide new, more and better educational opportunities and experiences for children in High schools and in Special Schools, Boarding Schools and Residential Institutions and in this way help to realise the educational potential of all children and to effect greater social inclusion and integration within communities.

Barriers to educational development and social inclusion for some children have existed for too long and the aim and effect of such programmes in schools and communities is precisely to help to break down these barriers and to build bridges instead – bridges between High Schools and Special Schools and Institutions and between volunteers from High Schools and children from Special Schools and Institutions so that schools

and individuals become a part of the community and not apart from it.

The successful development of educational programmes promoting social integration has been due to the vision and dedication of many people and groups. It was initiated by Muir John Potter² who has visited Romania every year (sometimes 4 or 5 times a year) since 1992 and has worked on behalf of his High School in England (Christ’s Hospital) and the High Level Group for Romanian Children (co-chaired by the Prime Minister of Romania and Baroness Emma Nicholson) and the Association Children’s High Level Group (ACHLG co-founded by Baroness Emma Nicholson) which has funded and supported Community Action in Romania and several other countries.

Muir John devised, designed and implemented programmes, projects and strategies developing community involvement and social inclusion over the last 20 years and in this way he has been able to make a difference to the lives of thousands of children in need, hardship and distress. In 1997 Muir John Potter was honoured by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II with an M.B.E. (Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) and in 2006 he was awarded by the President of Romania the National Order of Merit (Officer class) – for his work in this particular area of Education in Romania.

Romania has pioneered the implementation of a National Strategy and has acted as a model of good practice for other countries in Eastern Europe to do the same. The process began in July 1992 when Muir John planted (on behalf of Christ’s Hospital school) an educational “acorn” in Sighișoara, Romania and this was called an Integrated Community Action Summer Project (ICASP). 20 years later ICASPs in Romania

continue to be organised each year and they represent a remarkable story of sustained educational development.

Based on the experience of the ICASPs in 2003 Muir John Potter organised (on behalf of the High Level Group for Romanian Children) a Pilot Study in Craiova, Romania, from which a mighty educational “oak tree” grew and this was called the National Strategy (SNAC) and which was implemented in 2004 .

In October 2006 delegates from 12 countries attended an International Conference (“Developing National Strategies for Community Action”) held in Bucharest (and funded by the ACHLG) to share best practice and encourage other national governments to follow Romania’s example. In August 2007 the NSCA was further developed in Romania with a further Government Decision incorporating this initiative in the Optional Curriculum. The number of NSCA participants (volunteers and beneficiaries) in Romania has steadily increased since 2004.

Now in 2012, National Strategies have been implemented in Romania, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia (with Pilot Studies in Macedonia and England) and the total number of young people involved is, approximately, 115,000 from over 1,000 High Schools, Special Schools, Placement Centres and Residential Institutions. Community Action programmes have been implemented and supported by the Association Children’s High Level Group (ACHLG) which has funded the work of Community Action, in partnership with respective Ministries of Education, in countries across Europe and continues to do this.

This work has made a difference to the lives of all those involved in it and has helped them all to learn in new and different ways as well as to become more fully engaged in their schools and communities. It has provided, and continues to provide for all its participants, a real “Chance for Change”.

It may be helpful to provide some Community Action aims, objectives and definitions at this stage:

AIMS - SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

- To introduce volunteers from Mainstream Schools and children from Special Schools and Residential Institutions to a Community Action Programme supporting social, cultural, moral and educational development
- To encourage volunteers to commit themselves to working with children with Special Needs (especially) and to sustain and promote the process of social integration and educational development for all
- To improve the life chances and experiences of all young people in schools, particularly those with Special Needs
- To help to overcome barriers to learning and achievement for all young people
- To achieve greater integration and inclusion through a programme of activities designed to promote active learning and social cohesion

OBJECTIVES - SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

- Linking together student volunteers from Mainstream Schools and young people in “partner” Special Schools and Residential Institutions during and beyond school hours in a locally targeted programme of educational activities
- Enabling young people with Special Needs to become stimulated mentally, challenged physically, integrated socially, and to develop more fully their abilities through creative, imaginative and therapeutic activities (e.g. Art, Drama, Dance, Sport, I.T., Music, Craft)
- Encouraging volunteers to acquire or enhance their qualities of initiative, commitment and resourcefulness through their participation in such a Programme
- Providing stimulating opportunities for learning and development through personal engagement in Community Action in the local community

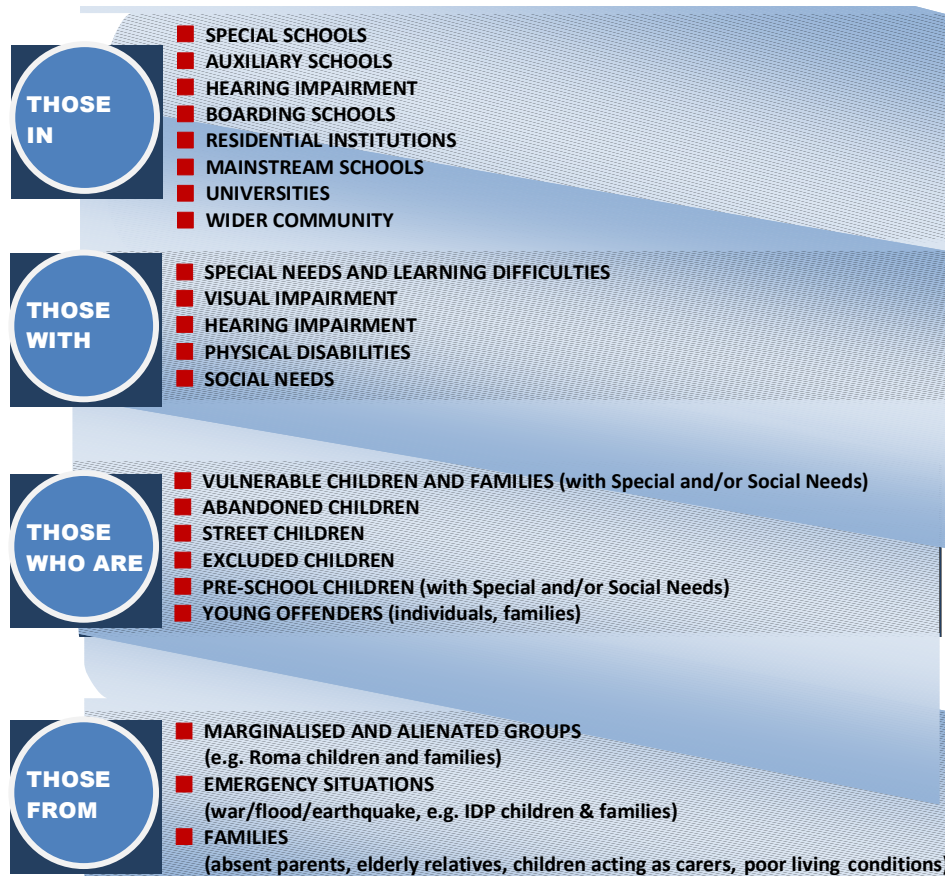
DEFINITION - INTEGRATED SUMMER PROJECT (ICASP)

- The ICASP is a two week residential project based in a residential institution or permanent campsite (belonging to the Ministry of Education) and involves Community Action volunteers from High Schools and children with special educational and social needs from special schools and boarding schools
- Children and volunteers are engaged in an educational activity programme designed to stimulate creative, imaginative and expressive skills and abilities as well as promote social integration and inclusion
- The ICASP takes place in school holidays (specifically in the summer holiday) and adds depth to the educational experience of volunteers and children

DEFINITION - NATIONAL STRATEGY (NSCA)

- Community Action links together Mainstream Schools and Special Schools and Residential Institutions in a clear, coherent and coordinated weekly programme of educational development and social integration. Community Action creates a new and real Partnership of Learning
- Community Action encourages volunteers from Mainstream Schools and children from Special Schools and Residential Institutions to meet 2 or 3 times a week to participate in educational activities which help to build a "Bridge of Communication" between Schools and Institutions, volunteers and children, and across communities
- Community Action takes place throughout the school year providing 'breadth' to the educational experience of volunteers and children

PROGRAMMES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION



An outline of how the programme is implemented	
Definition	An educational programme – a Partnership of Learning - linking High Schools with Special Schools / Institutions
Aims	Increased social interaction, integration and inclusion
Organisers	The Ministry of Education and other Ministries in partnership the ACHLG
Format	An Activity Programme involving both the High School pupils and the children from the Special Schools / Institutions which includes a wide range of creative, imaginative and expressive activities used as “vehicles” for social integration (as well as being educational, enjoyable activities at the same time). Activities may include Art and Crafts, Drama, Music, Dance and Sport
Duration	Ongoing, throughout the school year
Frequency	Groups of High School pupils will visit their link Special School / Institution two or three times a week for a programme of activities
Timings	Community Action is a flexible programme which allows participating schools / homes to find the times (mornings, evenings, evenings and weekends) which suit them best for the programme of regular activities
Roles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each of the participating schools /homes appoints a Coordinator 2. The High School Coordinator recruits (approximately 50) pupils as volunteers 3. The High School Coordinator and Special School / Institution Coordinator liaise and agree an Action Plan (i.e. organise what activities will take place on which day(s) each week) 4. Activities may take place both at the Special School / Institution and at the High School
Special Events	<p>Integrated Special Events (which are prepared for during the regular programme of Community Action activities) will be organised both locally and nationally</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Art Exhibition 2. Drama Performance or Music and Dance Show 3. Sports Event
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A National Conference and Regional Conferences are held prior to the launch of the NSCA to explain the principles of the NSCA and how it will work • Help is given with recruitment of volunteers, the Preliminary Visit (when volunteers and children from the Special Schools / Institutions meet for the first time) and the regular Community Action activities • Full documentation and expertise are available at every stage of the NSCA to support, advise and guide Directors and Coordinators

OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

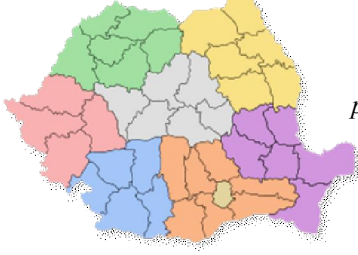
CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS who participate in such Programmes will:

- feel valued and appreciated as individuals
- feel safer and become more confident and outgoing
- benefit from the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with understanding partners
- become more fully involved in the community through regular, organised events
- experience improved behaviour at home and at school
- acquire greater levels of concentration and perseverance when faced with new challenges
- realise unexplored potential over a wide range of activities
- enjoy developing real and lasting friendships
- engage in a process of inclusion and integration
- be better equipped to be healthy, enjoy and achieve, stay safe and make a positive contribution

VOLUNTEERS FROM MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS will:

- appreciate the value of all individuals equally
 - experience and promote integration and inclusion in their local community
 - break down (potential) barriers of ignorance and prejudice and build bridges within the community
- set and achieve high standards of responsibility
 - develop communication and management skills
 - gain a practical understanding of human rights
 - make a positive, active contribution to individuals, groups and communities

BACKGROUND TO ICASPS ORGANISED IN ROMANIA

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|---|---|---|
| <p>1992 Sighișoara (CH)
1993 Dumbrăveni (CH)
1994 Sighișoara + CH
1995 Craiova (CH)
1996 Craiova (CH)
1997 Craiova (CH)
1998 Craiova (CH)
1999 Onești (CH), Iași (CH)
2000 Craiova (CH), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2001 Craiova (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2002 Brașov (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2003 Community Action Pilot Study, Craiova (February – April 2003)
Brașov (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2004 National Conference, Bucharest, to launch the National Strategy (September 2004)
Brașov (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2005 Year 2 of the National Strategy
Brașov (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2006 Year 3 of the National Strategy
Brașov (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2007 Year 4 of the National Strategy
Brașov (CH + JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2008 Year 5 of the National Strategy - ACHLG
Gălăciuc (CH & Hurstpierpoint College) & Zau de Campie (JAGS*), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2009 Year 6 of the National Strategy - ACHLG
Gălăciuc (CH) & Gurghiu (JAGS*), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2010 Year 7 of the National Strategy - ACHLG
Gălăciuc (CH) & Gurghiu (JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)
2011 Year 8 of the National Strategy - ACHLG
Gălăciuc (CH) & Gurghiu (JAGS), Onești (King Edward's School, Southampton), Iași (Sevenoaks School)</p> |  | <p><i>(*Muir John Potter in partnership with these schools;
CH = Christ's Hospital)</i></p> |
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Total number of consecutive years in which ICASPs have been organised in Romania	20
Total number of Judets in which ICASPs have been organised in Romania	9
Total number of ICASPs organised in Romania (including those handed over to other schools)	49
Total number of participants since 1992	2500+

CHRONOLOGY OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES TO DATE

Social Inclusion Programmes organised to date by the ACHLG across Europe

1. Pilot Study, Romania, 2003
2. National Strategy, Romania, 2004

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE , Bucharest, October 2006 “Developing National Strategies for Community Action”
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3. Pilot Study, Moldova, January 2007
4. National Strategy, Moldova, September 2007
5. Pilot Schools Scheme, Georgia, October 2007
6. Pilot Schools Scheme, Armenia, October 2007
7. Pilot Schools Scheme, Macedonia, 2007-2008
8. Pilot Study, Georgia, January 2008
9. Pilot Study, Armenia, March 2008
10. Pilot Study, UK, September 2008
11. Pilot Study Extension, UK, March 2009 – March 2011
12. National Strategy, Georgia, November 2008
13. National Strategy, Armenia, November 2008
14. European CA Conference, Sarajevo, October 2009
15. International Conference (CA Coordinators), Bucharest, June 2010

PROGRESS IN PROGRAMMES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

(As provided by Ministries of Education)

ROMANIA	2003	Pilot Study	800 volunteers & beneficiaries
	2004	National Conference	
	2005	National Strategy for Community Action	22,000 participants
	2006		35,000 participants
	2007		45,000 participants
	2008		58,000 participants
	2009		71,000 participants
	2010		93,000 participants
	2011	107,500 participants	
	From 1,500 High Schools and Special Schools/Institutions		

MOLDOVA	2007	Pilot Study	1,040 participants
	2007	National Strategy For Community Action	7,000 participants
	2009		9,600 participants
	2010		12,200 participants
From 300 High Schools and Special Schools/Institutions			

GEORGIA	2007	Pilot Schools Scheme	260 participants
	2008	Pilot Study	780 participants
	2008	National Strategy for Community Action	2,870 participants
	2009		3,250 participants
	2010		4,150 participants
	2011		5,200 participants
From 90 High Schools and Special Schools/Institutions			

ARMENIA	2007	Pilot Schools Scheme	360 participants
	2008	Pilot Study	650 participants
	2008	National Strategy for Community Action	1,820 participants
	2009		2,200 participants
	2010		2,300 participants
	2011		3,400 participants
From 30 High Schools and Special Schools/Institutions			

MACEDONIA	2007 - 2008	Preliminary visits	
		Pilot Schools Scheme	200 participants
	From 2 High Schools and 2 Special Schools/Institutions		
UK (England)	2008 - 2009	Pilot Study	100+ participants
	2009 - 2011	Pilot Study extended	250+ participants
	Pilot Study extended from 1 to 2 Local Authorities		

(Note: Figures are maximum numbers of participants, numbers vary during each academic year)

Quotations

“A ray of sunlight has lit up my soul: I can see things now I could not see before.”

“Taking part in this programme taught me that I am stronger in spirit and soul than I thought”

“The children may have physical or mental problems but they can dream, love and hope like us.”

“A life-changing opportunity, an experience that changes people.”

“This programme is important for all communities – it brings them together.”

“Involvement in the National Strategy has given me hope for a better future.”

HIGH SCHOOL VOLUNTEERS

“The National Strategy has contributed to both our schools – the General Schools and Special Schools in our city are like one school – as well as to the process of integration in Armenia. There have been changes in the children – they have developed educationally, gaining new skills.”

“The National Strategy is a life-changing experience for both children and volunteers. There is nothing superficial about this – it is profoundly educational and is helping to improve educational, social and emotional outcomes for all... It is as important to us as water and oxygen. We were thirsty for this.”

HIGH SCHOOL COORDINATORS

“The National Strategy activities benefit all participants and the links and networks created in your work make us feel alive, no matter what background we come from. Children are our future

and adults are their guides, helping them make the right decisions. Where the National Strategy is a normal part of everyday life, you are the role model for Europe.”

HEAD OF EU MONITORING MISSION TO GEORGIA

“Such programmes of social integration and inclusion will change the paradigm of social relationships for children. It is the logical paradigm for change in society. This offers a great opportunity to contact the world around them and integrate in a real, practical way in schools and society.”

MINISTER OF CULTURE, BULGARIA

Endnotes

- 1 More detailed articles about the methodology for the introduction, implementation, organisation and evaluation of programmes of social integration and inclusion along with worked models to act as examples of good practice in different countries will be available in future editions.
- 2 Muir John Potter, MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) has been a teacher for over 36 years. He taught Physical Education and History at Worth School (run by Benedictine monks) and at Christ’s Hospital (founded by King Edward VI in 1552). In both schools he was responsible for the organisation of projects which linked together high schools and special schools in regular, weekly programmes of educational development and social integration. It is these programmes which he has developed in many countries across Europe over the last 20 years. He has also worked for important charities whose work focuses on the health, education and welfare

of children. Muir John has held very senior positions, working with Governments and Ministries, which include Director of Education, Children's High Level Group, Chief Executive Officer of the High Level Group for Romanian Children, Personal Adviser to the Prime Minister of Romania and Baroness Emma Nicholson of Winterbourne, M.E.P, Creator and Consultant of National Strategies for Community

Action in Romania, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia. He has been appointed to positions in important Universities, Artifex University, Bucharest-Romania, Research Fellow at Nottingham University, UK. In addition, Muir John Potter has been recognised for his work by both the Queen of England the M.B.E, and by the President of Romania, The National Order of Merit (Officer Rank).