

MILAN + JANEZ FOR INCLUSION



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A MILE
FOR
INCLUSION



Center Janeza Levca Ljubljana



**“Tell me, and I forget. Show me, and I remember. Involve me, and I understand.” -
Chinese proverb.**

For the past 20 years of having worked at the Slovene National agency for Erasmus+ programmes, I have firmly believed in and promoted the importance and benefits of international cooperation, particularly mobility. Finally, the moment has come that I could link my theory to the practice. I knew how, but talking about projects is far from making them happen, many have shown me it could be done, and I did remember a lot. However now having completed my first concrete small partnership project and within it many implemented exchanges, and having been involved, I can say I understand. Even more so, due to the fact that I have actively been involved in many of its parts. And nothing may surpass the actual experience. My belief and conviction in the benefits of international cooperation and positive effects it brings have been confirmed.

Surely I had my fears and worries, especially when it came to the exchange of our pupils, for mobility for them is an extra effort. It is for this reason we were even more careful and alert, having thought of every aspect, all possible expectations and challenges. Fortunately, we have safely led the project to its happy and hearty end. I am very proud of the fact that we have sent 14 of our pupils with special needs to Serbia, accompanied by our staff. Furthermore we have implemented 4 exchanges of Serbian partners, school staff and pupils, and our staff returned the visit. We have thus created 6 opportunities for mutual exchange of knowledge, practice, ideas, experiences as well as challenges, worries and expectations.

Both schools that represent one of the largest, oldest and most experienced special education institutions in their respective countries, have improved their partnership, cooperation and friendship and both have input a lot of effort, organisation and engagement into this project. Both institutions organise many inclusive events and both found synergies with this project. In Slovenia, we have linked the project to our main international festival “Play with me” and its art event ‘Be an Artist’ as well as sport event Be a Sportsman. In Serbia the project was held at the time of their Child week and Autism days that are held in Novi Sad for many years. In this way I believe we have managed to further sensibilise the society both in Slovenia and Serbia and on the other hand show the impact of international projects and Erasmus+ programme, which is a European success story, in my opinion.

All of our pupils, all children with special needs (intellectual disability) have become more independent, by having taken part in the project and exchanges. Out of their comfort zone, familiarity and security, they have all shown great care for themselves and others, improved their cooperation from day to day, made new friendships, even sympathies. They made an effort to communicate in a foreign tongue, sometimes English and if nothing worked, the body language did its job. They enjoyed each other’s company, learned about new places, customs, food, sights and habits. The project brought many spontaneous unexpected moments, ranging from mutual playing to performing on a stage.

The teachers have gained important time and place for being together, sharing practices, ideas, experiences and challenges they face in every day's work in their classrooms. Many new solutions arose, they made tighter connections, new ideas were born. They made teams that did not exist before. More motivated they now come back with ideas and wishes for new projects, new cooperation. Almost all of the staff that have been part of their exchange, have also accompanied students on their mobility and thus enhanced their experience and partnership even more.

The heads of both institutions, as important project supporters, have had a chance to meet several times. Their vision, wishes and ideas were further upgraded in the new, larger, more strategic cooperation partnership in which the largest Macedonian similar school also takes part. They all share the willingness to improve their own work by international projects and cooperation, ensure continuous professional development of their staff, and enrich the schooling of their pupils. The latter gain priceless experiences by which they gain competences and skills for their life. And all of this is of even more value and importance for learners with special needs, which teach us daily the most important human values, give us so much and bring us back to normality.

In my opinion everyone deserves an international experience, our pupils even more, since for them each event of this kind, represents not only a step but a mile towards new experiences, and inclusion. Milan and Janez (the names of the schools) have done this mile in their project (also titled »A Mile for Inclusion«) and reached or rather exceeded their initial goals. My excitement at this stage of projects' ending is no smaller than at the beginning and I am ready for all new international adventures that Center Janeza Levca, its eager and motivated teachers and learners create in the future.

Marja Medved, Project Coordinator, Department for Projects, Centre Janez Levec, Ljubljana.



Inclusion means a conceptual transformation of the school system

A brief comparative description of the system in Serbia and Slovenia

Experts dealing with the effects of inclusion on society have shown that inclusive education has several positive effects on social cohesion. First, inclusive education means opportunities for learning and progress for all students – learning content, concepts and learning behavior can be learned by everyone at the level of their abilities – everyone has the opportunity to learn in their own area of proximal development, secondly, all students and adult stakeholders (teachers and parents) have benefits in the field of socialization and social awareness, and thirdly, inclusive education is also economically justified in the short and long term.

Inclusion postulates

Since there are many different interpretations of the meaning when understanding inclusion, it is necessary to state some postulates of inclusive education – these apply universally, i.e. also for the two studied countries, Serbia and Slovenia:

1. In discussions about inclusion, we are not only talking about the population of children with special needs (SEN). Inclusion is a broader social concept that goes beyond not only persons with special needs but also the school as a social subsystem. This is why we talk about the community concept; if we stay only at the school level there are no real benefits for the wider community.
2. Since in this article we are talking about inclusion in education, all students are included in this process, in accordance with the paragraph written above. Many attempts at inclusion, where we only sought the interest of persons with special needs, failed. Moreover, such an attempt even has negative effects, as it convinces us that these processes are not possible.
3. Changing characteristics of society as a whole and demographic changes are also reflected in the changing population of students in the school. In addition to SEN, students with borderline intellectual ability, low socio-economic status, there is an increasing number of students with autism, immigrants, students with emotional and behavioural problems and mental health problems. The processes of inclusion inevitably include these students as well. Of course, they also include students with completely typical development and especially gifted students.
4. Any school is obliged to respond to the diversity of students. This means that adaptations in school mean a more safe and stimulating learning environment.

5. Understanding the diversity of students requires abandoning the old paradigms when we talked about diversity. Differentiation automatically means stratification of students, redirecting to those with special needs and those without them. A school is simply a community of different students, each in their own developmental period, each in their own zone of proximal development.

6. Inclusion is not a substitute for 'mainstream'; an ordinary, traditional school cannot be an inclusive school, and in this regard:

- students progress with their peers (as a rule, there is no repetition - Every student has the opportunity to progress within his zone of proximal development
- Students are motivated because the content is within their "learnability", they are not studying for grades.

A brief comparative description of the system in Serbia and Slovenia

Until 2009, the Serbian education system was similar to the Slovenian one, both systems developed during Yugoslavia. The common country we shared in the past had common labour doctrines on persons with special needs. In some implementation parts, the two systems differed, which is completely understandable given the historical and geographical circumstances. One of the common features was that both school systems had highly segregated specialised education.

In 1996, the Act on 9-year primary school was published in Slovenia, which for the first time also mentioned OPP. However, the Act on Guidance of Children with Special Needs (ZUOPP), adopted in 2000, is more important for people with special needs. The Act has been amended and supplemented several times, although the changes did not bring major conceptual and systemic shifts. Under the auspices of UNICEF, in 2009, Serbia adopted the Law on the Basics of the Education System (Basic Law on Education - OZVI). In the following, at least in the part that concerns inclusive education, we will compare both educational systems:

OZVI represents a modern approach to education for the sake of education and defines a series of mechanisms that prevent segregation and discrimination. Specialized institutions are not abolished directly, but rather left to the "market". This means that it is solely the parents of the person with special needs who decide which school, specialized or majority, to go to. The status of majority and specialized schools is completely equal. Any school in Serbia can enroll students, regardless of their abilities. In theory, this could mean that students with typical development can also attend specialized schools. We did not notice such a case when we visited the "Milan Petrović" institution.

Compared to OZVI, ZUOPP is much more discriminatory. The space for the enrollment of students with intellectual disabilities (MDR) and other disabilities is opened only in the part that specifies that adapted elementary school programs can be implemented in the regular class or in parallel with it. Theoretically, therefore, children with mild MDR can enroll in a regular school. At the same time, the school must provide adequate personnel (special pedagogue) and enter the Adapted Program with a lower educational standard (PP NIS) in the list of programs. It should be noted that to date, 23 years after the adoption of the law, no regular primary school has introduced PP NIS.

At the curriculum level, Serbia abandoned customized programs and introduced a universal curriculum. Such a curriculum is the starting point for all students and at the same time the basis for creating an individualized program. The expert team therefore decides what content the student should learn and what adjustments he needs. The student attends all the subjects provided by the curriculum, which leads to unusual situations – students with severe MDR learn foreign languages, physics... This is not to say that e.g. physics cannot be adapted to the level of understanding of children with MDR. In Slovenia, we kept the system of several different programs; each group of persons with special needs defined in ZUOPP has its own program, and an individualized program is also prepared within it.

The problem arises when the student is in an overly demanding program, as a reorientation usually follows, which often means a change of school – from a regular school to a majority school. Legislation in Serbia, due to the described design, prevents students from changing programs (because there is only one program) and also prevents students from changing schools due to failure (because conditions are supposed to be created for them in all schools). Students in Serbia do not repeat a grade; according to their individualized program, they are progressing with their same age peers.

In Slovenia, the repetition of the class is in the very conceptual design. If the student does not reach the minimum standards, he repeats the class. After several repetitions, as a rule, he is redirected to PP NIS at another location, at another school.

Despite the fact that in Serbia parents can decide for themselves which school they will enroll in after school, the number of students in specialized schools has been increasing in the last few years. Parents realized that they have more qualified teachers and other support activities for the better development of their child, in addition, they have developed activities for developing skills for everyday life and independence. It is interesting that in the last decade, since the introduction of OZVI, specialized schools have become less stigmatized, as they are no longer the only option for person with special needs. In Slovenia, such schools still have a negative connotation, as they are the only legal option and obligation for person with special needs with intellectual disability.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties in the implementation of inclusive education in Serbia, it must be recognized that since the introduction of OZVI in the school year 2010/11, many positive systemic changes have been made – some of them I have described above. Systemic and conceptual shifts, as they set out, require at least several decades of effort and a strong alliance between profession and politics. The agenda of the National Renovation Commission VI in 2023 does not (yet) contain the concept of "inclusive education" and it seems that we are not even at the beginning of such systemic changes.

The ultimate state of inclusion lies in the creation of such a school system, which will enable any child to optimally develop all their potential and be equally integrated into the social community. It seems that Serbia has an advantage here compared to Slovenia.

Matej Rovšek, Principal, Centre Janez Levec Ljubljana



When evaluating the success of inclusive education, instead of academic success, the focus should be on students' social inclusion, their well-being and identification with the school they attend.

Successful inclusive education of students with special needs (SN) represents a challenge to many educational systems around the world, often causing debates and raising questions about its benefits and drawbacks within the pedagogical profession. Among the positive effects of inclusive education, examples of good inclusive practices highlight that in inclusive environments students with SN are exposed to higher expectations compared to segregated forms of education.

They are exposed to diverse learning opportunities, where they can enhance their communication and social skills and emulate positive behavioral patterns. Students from mainstream schools, on the other hand, learn tolerance, understanding, acceptance and respect for diversity in society through co-existing with individuals with SN. On the other hand, studies from countries that have been practicing full inclusion for years often point to the problem of social ex/inclusion of students in inclusive education – particularly among those with more significant disabilities, impairments or cognitive limitations, raising the question of when inclusive education can be considered successful for an individual student.

I decided to participate in the “Mile for Inclusion” project because I was interested in what the inclusive education of students with intellectual disabilities looks like in Serbia. I wanted to understand what observations professionals have made in practice after more than a decade since the introduction of inclusive education, and with what difficulties they face in a place with which we once shared a common country and had a similar school system.

Despite their different status, size service offers, the Milan Petrović School of Primary and Secondary Education (ŠOSO) from Novi Sad and the Center “Janeza Levca” from Ljubljana (CJL) share many similarities. It is difficult to directly compare the school systems of Serbia and Slovenia, as the Slovenian school legislation enables the inclusive education of students with SN only within regular educational programs with adapted implementation and additional professional support, where students must achieve an equivalent educational standard and as such is out of reach for students with reduced intellectual abilities.

On the other hand, in Serbia, where inclusive education for students with SD was introduced with generous financial support from UNICEF in 2009, the school system allows parents of children with SN, regardless of the type and level of SN, to enroll their child either in a either a mainstream or, under the old system, a special school. The expert opinion of the guidance committees is only a recommendation, the decision is up to parents. Since the introduction of inclusion, former special schools have the status of majority schools, where neurotypical students can also enroll, but this remains a choice only on paper, because nobody wants to send their children to them because of the stigmatization.

Students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools spend most of their time learning together with their peers, following their individualized objectives within an Individualized Education Program 2 (IEP 2). This IEP is designed for pupils with more pronounced special needs and is prepared by a team of professionals, similar to our own. As observed, the objectives in IEP 2 within individual subject for students with intellectual disabilities are individualized and suitable to their developmental stage, since they cannot achieve the academic goals of the regular curriculum. Students with SN are supported by personal assistants in larger numbers than in our institution, and for a few hours a week they are also provided with additional support by mobile specialists from the School “Milan Petrović”.

Due to its status as a regular school, the School “Milan Petrović” offers subject-specific classes. Students attending the school (those with more pronounced special needs and those with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities) also study subjects such as physics, chemistry and foreign languages. School lessons last 30 minutes and teachers rotate for each subject. Based on observations while we were in classes, I believe that the Slovenian special education program allows for more interdisciplinary connections and flexibility for students because the same teacher is teaching the group throughout the day, adapting the daily routine according to the classroom dynamics. Students receive higher quality teaching that is more focused on developing skills that they will need to be as independent as possible in life.

I was impressed by the excellent facilities with an extremely diverse range of services at the School “Milan Petrović”. Unfortunately, these resources are under-utilized, as both their and our institution's population of students with intellectual disabilities has changed a lot in recent years.

Many students begin their education in mainstream schools, where they face numerous challenges, such as inappropriate curriculum, mainstream teachers' lack of expertise in the field of special needs, the need for pedagogical assistants, and the social exclusion of students with SN. According to the school's professional staff, there has been an increased enrolment in their institution in recent years, especially an increase in the number of students transitioning from class teaching level to subject teaching level.

Based on what I saw at the “Milan Petrović” School, I would like to see that students in our institution could also have access to facilities and services such as a swimming pool, a music room with adapted instruments, a salt room, a sensory garden, a room for developing sensorimotor skills, a wide range of workshops and our own farm outside the hustle and bustle of the city, instead of facing the extreme space constraints we have been dealing with in recent years. I also see added value in educational workshops, dedicated to practical lessons, which have access to the street, allowing customers from the local area to benefit from their services for a minimal fee.



Based on the inclusive practices that I observed in different European countries, I believe that the optimal form of inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities, who do not have such pronounced special needs that require the extensive specialised support and adjustments that can only be provided within special schools, would be inclusive classrooms within mainstream schools. The added value of such classrooms lies not in their location within the mainstream schools, but in the possibility to transition between educational programs and actively seek opportunities to partially integrate students with intellectual disabilities into the mainstream school curriculum, based on their strength and interests. When evaluating the success of inclusive education, the focus should shift from academic achievement to social inclusion, students' well-being and their identification with the school they attend.

My visit to Milan Petrović School confirmed that professionals from both schools share a similar view of the challenges of inclusive education and face similar inclusion-related problems in practice. Both institutions, within the limits of their capacities and school legislation, seek diverse opportunities for the inclusion of people with special needs in the local environment, provide them with many opportunities for social inclusion and strive to be inclusive at different levels. Both institutions are united by the commitment of their professionals to their profession and to providing a supportive learning environment to maximize the independence of their students.

Andreja Gamser Abram, Teacher at the Inclusive Unit of Centre Janez Levec, Elementary school Vide Pregarc





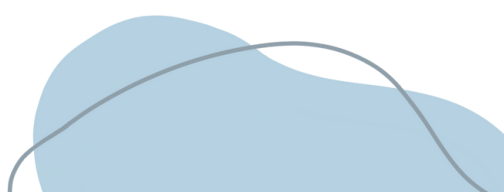
Students with special needs are still too isolated

Visits to other educational institutions are often an excellent opportunity to compare and exchange opinions on the work of the same field, especially since we always look forward to examples of good practices. The professional excursion to the “Milan Petrović” School for Elementary and Secondary Education encouraged me to think about the strengths and weaknesses of the Slovenian and Serbian school systems, while also critically assessing where we stand in the field of inclusive education in Slovenia.

Over four days, our colleagues from Serbia presented us with the organization of elementary and secondary education at the »Milan Petrović« School Center. In professional discussions, we exchanged experiences, compared our school systems, and explored possibilities for improvements in both systems. First and foremost, I was extremely positively surprised by their spatial capacities. In the elementary school, we saw several rooms for individual treatment, or rooms where students can retreat (e.g. sensory rooms and music rooms with adapted musical instruments).

Since 2009, when inclusive education was introduced by law in Serbia, all children with special needs have been able to attend regular schools, specialized schools as such no longer exist. Teachers informed us that children with intellectual disabilities are mostly enrolled in different elementary schools, but later a significant portion of them are transferred to the Milan Petrović Elementary School. An increase in enrollment is observed in the 5th grade, specifically during the transition from class teaching level to subject teaching level. This is especially notable for students with moderate intellectual disabilities, which I noticed already during my visits to the school when I observed the population of children in the hallways, gymnasium, and the classrooms. Similar practices are said to be present also in the other parts of Serbia. Evidently, the "former specialized" schools in reality are still more adapted in terms of better spatial conditions and various adaptations, have smaller norms (5-10 students) and offer more opportunities for individualized treatment for students.

The majority of students with special needs attending elementary and secondary schools have personal assistants. Additionally, there is a support system of fifty special education teachers from the school, who visit schools to provide assistance and guidance to teachers working with diverse student needs. In elementary schools, there are also teams for professional orientation that help or advise eight grade students in their transition to secondary school.



We also spent one day at the Milan Petrović High School, which also impressed me in terms of its spatial capacity and good equipment. Unfortunately, we saw empty workshops, and almost no students in the hallways, only a few gathered outside the school. During the tour, I stopped by a teacher who proudly showed a poster on the wall of his workshop, which featured three of his former students, all now employed in construction companies. "We no longer have such students, as most of them went to other high schools," he said. According to him, most students with mild intellectual disabilities are enrolled in other high schools, while students with typical development are generally not interested in these career paths. 20-30% of students with special needs, due to their inability to complete high school, enroll in the so-called "daycare centers", whereby they lose their personal assistants, which they would have during their secondary education.

Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to visit any of the other primary or secondary schools where students with typical development and students with special needs are included, in order to see how inclusive education is carried out. Additionally, we also lacked enough time to discuss possible reasons why, despite the good support system mentioned by our colleagues (effective teamwork, personal assistants, professional orientation teams, "mobile" special educators, etc.), a proportion of students transfer to other schools or even return to the Milan Petrović School. Is inclusion even suitable for all children and adolescents with special needs?

Lastly, I would like to share my opinion about the Slovenian education system. I believe that, in general, it is good. However, our education legislation emphasizes educational standards that include some students in a certain program and exclude others. Schools are too focused on academic knowledge acquisition and, consequently, pay significantly less attention to social integration and practical skills, which are important for independent living and entering the job market after schooling. In this regard, I find the Serbian education system more relatable, as students are not measured only by the achieved knowledge standards.

In Slovenia, students with special needs are enrolled in various programs and, in my opinion, are still too isolated from the rest of their peers. If different programs were implemented within the same school, we could enable the transition of students between programs. For example, students with intellectual disabilities could also participate in other programs and extracurricular activities, naturally taking into account their interests and strengths. This way, all students would acquire invaluable social skills among their peers and learn to respect diversity among people.

As for improvements, I would refer to the program prepared by our foreign colleagues. Overall, the program was well planned, but I hoped that we would visit at least one regular primary or secondary school to learn about examples of good practices for integrating students with special needs into mainstream programs.

Lea Đaković, Teacher at Inclusive Unit of Centre Janez Levec, Elementary School France Bevk.

The visit to Novi Sad was extremely informative and motivational, even inspiring.

The first obvious advantage compared to our CJL was the exceptional material provision and the well-maintained facilities of Center “Milan Petrović”. The center is incomparable in terms of space, equipment and didactics, and truly offers the possibility of individualization of education down to the smallest details. It provides a wide range of therapies and activities, both didactic and sensory materials and tools which invite pedagogical creativity.

As such, the center is capable of accompanying individuals with intellectual disabilities from the earliest years (the first therapies are offered to babies as young as a few months old), through their entire education (kindergarten, primary school, secondary school), and into adulthood, all the way to the end of life (work centers, residential communities), providing continuous and consistent care for their needs and development, while ensuring a high quality of life.

Another very obvious difference is the weight of their individual plan for the adolescent's education and development. Information about the child's specifics, functional assessment, adaptation needs and development opportunities are passed on throughout the child's schooling, from the first contact with the center onwards. Everyone involved in the child's development within the center, participates in creating the Individual plan and following this document is imperative. Through this, the center ensures that the individual receives individual treatment and attention at all points of development, while at the same time coordinating the curriculum cross-circularly so that the student can learn about a topic from the perspective of all areas and thus, better grasp the basic concepts.



An interesting consequence of the change in legislation about a decade ago is that the CMP, which was basically designed as a centre where individuals with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Slovenian classification, no longer used in Serbia) can develop their skills to the point where they can succeed in the job market, has now become an institution, that primarily cares for and develops mainly individuals with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities (again, based on the Slovenian classification), which, although it offers them the best possible support in developing their abilities, sometimes these are so limited that the parents' goal is not independence and the job market, but rather a higher quality of life gained through activities. For example, it happens that, because certain support benefits do not legally belong to individuals who finish their education, parents enrol their children in secondary school programs and then they drop them out half a year before graduation, so that the child doesn't officially complete their education and parents can legally justify the need for further support.

At the same time, the population that could have been adequately trained in certain skills to enter the job market within high school programs, enrolls in regular secondary school programs, where they are provided with fewer adaptations, and therefore find it more difficult to remain in school. When questioned about why this population isn't enrolling in CMP, we learn that parents have the final say in their child's education, often wanting/expecting the most from their children and not wanting to enrol their child in a school where there are so many children with developmental disabilities, not realising that it's primarily a school with a high degree of flexibility and opportunities for adapting the curriculum to maximise the individual's success.

Given the situation in which we have observed CMP a decade after the change in legislation due to 'inclusion', we can argue that academic inclusion is a highly complex issue that cannot be solved with simple and abrupt measures like changes in legislation. Before tackling it, it is a good idea to ensure first physical and then social inclusion. The question of how to achieve this, has yielded numerous answers, project ideas and contacts and collaborations.

There were desires for greater collaboration among colleagues within CJL, and for harmonization of goals, and for greater coherence and validity of our IEPs, with requests for adaptations also being taken seriously for individuals with mild disabilities who follow adapted programs at secondary program. We were also impressed by the CMP's circular economy, where their workshop, in addition to external orders, also take care of certain needs of the center itself, such as soap making, recycled paper, etc., which gave rise to the idea of connecting our VDCs to each other as well as with our centers (CJL, IG, etc.) and attempting to establish a circular economy at this level (which is a rather complex project, but in the long run, it would undoubtedly have many advantages).

There is a strong desire for collaboration between children from CJL and children and young people from mainstream educational institutions, but not in the context of 'helping' them to help ours, but through equal socializing and sharing experiences. Therefore, many projects are desired whose main goal is socializing through equal participation in the creation of something. Ideas emerged of having sections for children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities within mainstream schools, where, on the basis of detailed individual plans, adolescents with identified higher abilities in certain areas could take specific subjects in those areas within the regular curriculum (of course, such a system would require huge adjustments throughout the school system, and would be a very long-term and complex goal that would require much more than just an idea and an initiative, but we can dream).

In any case, the inclusion of the population with intellectual disabilities (as well as any other marginalized population) within a normatively, profit-oriented, simplifying modern society is a multifaceted, detailed and complex issue that requires not only systemic adjustments to legislation and regulations, but also a great deal of listening and openness to all small initiatives and efforts, to steps in this direction, to any networking, to any upgrading. Most people working with such population will have ideas, suggestions and desires to create links and build an inclusive society together, whether automatically or certainly with encouragement, such as trainings, projects and excursions like the one in Novi Sad.

However it is very important that the system provides a space where all these ideas and suggestions can be evaluated, elaborated upon and implemented, so that the enthusiasm and motivation do not fade away in the face of systemic rigidity and inability to change.

I am grateful for this experience and I recommend it to everyone.

Teja Maksli, Educator, Centre Janez Levec Dormitory



I have a good impression from Slovenia. My brain, mind and soul are at ease due to clean air and nature. I love how there is snow on the mountains in the middle of March. I enjoyed it when the group and I played instruments together. I am happy that I was at the concert with the group and that I got to know the employees. And, not to forget, I met Lea Cok, or rather Lea „Cmok“, as we might playfully say, and took a picture with the band. Unfortunately, while travelling in the van, I was feeling literally dead. All my nerves, cells and all my organs shut down, but when I arrived, I came back to life and I was happy.

Vuk Prodanović, High School Student, ŠOSO Milan Petrović

Inclusion in Serbia was moving in the direction of students with special needs being included in the regular school system

In a very pleasant atmosphere during the visit to the Janez Levac Center, the hosts allowed us to get to know their system and form of inclusive and special education and to get to know their characteristics in the field, i.e. in practice, and to notice the differences in the support system for students with special needs between Serbia and Slovenia.

We participated in various activities at OVI "Jarše", where we got to know the facility, the structure of the population that attends this institution and the way of working in it, with a detailed explanation from their director Nataša Blaj. We noticed that the institution is attended by students with a higher degree of independence, cognitive and motor abilities compared to students in our elementary school. The Slovenian National Commission issues a Decision directing the child/student to enroll in this school, while in Serbia, the Interdepartmental Commission issues an opinion for enrollment in a school for students with developmental disabilities. Additional support for students in Serbia is most similar to mobile teams in Slovenia. Although it does not function in the same way organizational way, it essentially has the same goal in terms of content: supporting students in mainstream schools and kindergartens.

What particularly fascinated us in this institution is the ease and fluency of transitioning from one activity to another, their adeptness in managing time, content, methods and tools in work, the professionalism of the teaching staff and the high degree of student

satisfaction during each of these activities. The difference is that in Slovenian schools there is a special work program for students with disabilities, while in Serbia a regular program is mandatory along with work according to the Individual Education Plan for students with learning difficulties. The special program for students with special needs in Slovenia includes encouraging the development of students in the perceptual, motor, emotional, mental, speech and social development through different areas of work (such as school subjects) and appropriately, non-violently follows the needs of the population for which it is intended, respecting all their specificities and differences. We visited several activities and confirmed that this is an exceptionally functional and effective program.

Regarding this program, it is adapted to the population for which it is intended, putting all the knowledge into practice, promoting independence and increasing the level of self-help, as well as self-confidence. We enjoyed pancakes prepared for us by the students, cheered passionately on the competition field during the physical education activities and took home a souvenir made by the students during work education activities.

Then the hosts introduced us to the PPVI at "Vide Pregarc" elementary school, where the special education teacher Andreja G.Abran led us through several activities within her group, with our students participating in two joint activities. The language barrier disappeared thanks to well-designed workshops where all students actively participated in mutual interaction.

A music workshop accompanied by multimedia tools and the preparation of fruit salad were an excellent choice of activities that were enjoyed equally by both teachers and students. It was explained to us that they have their own space, where they hold classes according to a special program. They occasionally collaborate with students from regular schools, organizing joint trips and activities at the school and community level. The student structure in this group is heterogeneous, so that preparation implies an individualized approach to each student.

Excellent cooperation with regular school teachers goes in the direction of reducing obstacles, prejudices and increasing the tolerance among all students towards diversity and acceptance. I gained the impression that it includes the initiation of all resources in the school, family and social environment. Support resources are found in: students, parents, positive changes in school culture, policies and practice as well as increased support from the community.

In previous years, we had a larger number of such classes in Novi Sad, but the inclusion was moving in the direction with the goal that such classes would gradually disappear, and students would be included in the regular system. We realized that Slovenia is preparing to open even more such classes, while in Serbia the number of such classes is decreasing, which is another difference we observed.

On the last day, we found ourselves at the "Play with Me" festival. Since we ourselves had been long time participants of this festival and closely follow the events, we took the time to attend numerous inclusive activities at the square, as well as many workshops from different institutions. Our students met old friends from the Center "Janez Levec", and we were happy to see familiar faces, teachers, acquaintances and colleagues that we meet every year, gathered around this festival. The mutual joy, the opportunity of being able to hug a loved one again and exchange a few friendly conversations full of pleasantness, warmth and love, was precious and priceless.

In the hope that we will continue to cooperate well on various programs, exchange different professional and personal experiences, we invited the representatives of the Slovenian delegation to visit Novi Sad with the desire to strengthen this friendship bond, which is so important, so necessary, supportive, and above all, filled with love and joy.

Aleksandra Todorov Nešić, Graduate Defectologist - Oligophrenologist, ŠOSO "Milan Petrović" Novi Sad



The fellowship and impressions that our students and teachers took away from Ljubljana are a priceless treasure.

By following a very constructive visit plan, our hosts allowed us to get to know their system and forms of inclusive and special education in practice.

The first meeting was with the staff and students of OVI "Jarše", where the director Nataša Blaj introduced us to the work and organisational structure of the institution. There we found out one very important difference compared to our system, which is that in Slovenia, their committee makes a decision about enrolling a child in school, which significantly simplifies the enrollment process and places expertise in a significant position.

I have to praise the sustainability of the special program implemented in Slovenia, which is significantly seen in the ease and wide range of application of that program in all areas of students' lives. The special program contributes to the natural monitoring of each student's needs and significantly helps in their independence and development of functionality for students in the future.

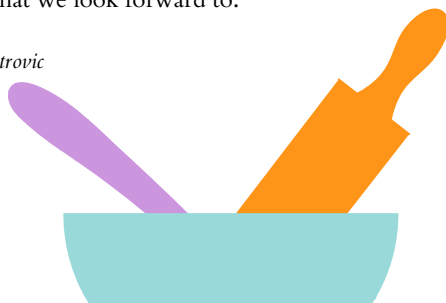
At "Vide Pregarc" Elementary School, we attended a music creative workshop with our students. Students prepared a fruit salad together, socialised, sang and danced. Language quickly ceased to be a barrier, and music contributed to socialising and a cheerful atmosphere. The students became a homogeneous group with the same goal – socialising.

My biggest impression is that students use the spaces of regular elementary schools, because they lack space in their special schools. They have excellent cooperation with their colleagues from regular schools and involve their students in all events. This was once our practice as well, and I believe it is something that contributes to the inclusion, development of empathy, solidarity and visibility of students with special needs.

As a relaxing end, on our last day we spent time at the "Play with Me" festival, where we traditionally participate with great joy. We watched numerous inclusive performances at the square, and we participated with several musical acts.

The experiences and impressions that our students and teachers brought from Ljubljana are invaluable wealth and just a step in further collaboration that we look forward to.

Svetlana Matić Morović, Special Education Teacher, ŠOSO Milan Petrović



*Play with Me Festival
Ljubljana, May 2023*



Inclusion doesn't just happen because of words in laws passed overnight. School is a wonderful training ground for life – also in the sense of awareness of differences, coexistence. Is it even possible?

I took part in the »Mile for Inclusion« mobility project primarily to get a glimpse of full inclusion in the Serbian education system – to see 'up close' how the move towards an inclusive culture in the school field is reflected in practice. Due to the long-standing mutual collaboration between CJL and ŠOSO Milan Petrović, I had already received a lot of information from my colleagues before my departure, and they pointed out the positive sides of the whole center – especially in terms of spatial and other material facilities, as well as the development of services offered to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, I went there with fairly well-developed plan of what I could pay attention to. However, I was not aware that this visit would trigger a more profound reflection on the perception of inclusion and the ways of implementing inclusive education.

The School »Milan Petrović« brings together a huge number of organizational units and activities within them; during our visit, they emphasized the kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, student dormitory, and day centers, work center, residential communities and also the Čenej farm in more detail. The description of the entire center acts as a strong structure, which has a significant impact on the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities (and various associated disabilities) as well as on the wider local public, which consciously or unconsciously comes into contact with them through the various external services offered by the School Milan Petrović in Novi Sad.

At the start of our discussion in the staff room, our colleagues from Serbia used the following words to outline the context of their classroom experience: "We have to follow the primary school curriculum – we have physics, chemistry, mathematics, history, English, home economics, native language, biology..." They explained that the regulations prescribe three types of individualized education programs, IEP 1, IEP 2 and IEP 3. The first one mainly determines the provision of spatial conditions and adjustments to teaching methods and aids. While IEP 2 provides, in addition to all the above, for the adaptation of the content of one, several or all subjects. IEP 3 is intended for gifted students.

This was followed by an extensive description of some of the dilemmas and challenges brought about by the rapid transition to 'inclusive schooling' in 2009. Schools are obliged to accept every student, but some do not have the space and facilities to even implement EIP 1. If a student requires EIP 2, it takes a lot of 'creativity' to get close to the strict learning objectives of each subject. When accepting EIP, not only teachers, but also parents play an important role. They highlighted cases where parents wanted their child to have a "school feeling" (bringing home notebooks, worksheets, homework), and they also want to extend the period of schooling and, of course, realize the idea of their child acquiring a profession.

The current education system allows parents to do all this, and they often disagree with the professional teams' opinion that inclusion in a day center would be more suitable for the child after completing primary school. After finishing primary school, each student can enroll in any secondary school, where with the parents' consent, the IEP must guarantee success, as it should be considered that "if a child has a negative grade, it is assumed that the EIP is poorly prepared.". They also pointed to the fact that a Law on Mandatory Secondary School is being prepared in Serbia. They also described cases where children with disabilities can be quite well integrated among their peers in 1st and 2nd grade, but problems can start to arise as early as 3rd grade, when children are likely to start noticing and becoming more aware of developmental differences in different areas.

Some parents transfer their child to the Milan Petrović Primary School – although it has exactly the same status as any school in Novi Sad or Serbia as a whole, there remains a wider awareness that it is a well-equipped institution with rich experience and a wide range of activities in the field of education of children with special needs. In transferred children, they noticed that due to the experience of "inclusion", emotional and behavioral disorders more frequently develop in them. With all that has been said, a warning followed: "Inclusion happened overnight here. We were not prepared... Don't let this happen to you. Resist. Some professors at Milan Petrović Secondary School also highlighted negative perceptions of the consequences of introducing inclusive education. They described the major changes that had taken place within secondary education... Many students are now enrolled in more demanding secondary school programs, which they successfully complete according to the EIP. "In this way, we are getting a large number of young people who graduate from, for example, economics, and are capable of doing it independently. We no longer have skilled carpenters, bakers, painters, shoemakers", pointed out one of the professors, who went on to tell success stories from the pre-inclusive education era, highlighting examples of students who had successfully performed the jobs they had learned at their secondary school.



When implementing changes into the school environment, it is good to have a common view of what inclusion is trying to achieve, alongside clear criteria for measuring the success of its implementation; there is therefore a need for ongoing evaluation of how the program's is being implemented, and for reflection on how we can improve to address the needs of individuals more concretely and more effectively. Colleagues from Serbia presented a number of situations where they perceived that there were problems, and these can be a starting point for further exploration of how to do the work differently in order to follow the values of inclusive education.

From their stories, I can see that it is really difficult to make big changes in a short time. Educators should be given the opportunity to learn about many examples of inclusive practices before implementing changes and to clearly formulate guidelines for their work on this basis. Inclusive education requires a lot of questioning of one's own views, and the diversity of these naturally makes it difficult to agree on what inclusion is trying to achieve – my experience shows that teachers/professors are willing recognize equal opportunities for all students, but when it comes to adapting learning objectives to the child's abilities, there are more reservations. The IEP in Serbia is more powerful than in Slovenia and more directly protects the child and obliges teachers to be more committed to adaptations.

eachers should be provided with education in the field of adapted teaching methods for children with special needs. The purpose of this is to reduce the need to return to specialized institutions, which can take over the role of educators due to their wide range of skills. It is important for teachers to understand the challenges these children face and enable them, in addition to adapting methods and learning objectives within the classroom, to use their knowledge to promote awareness and acceptance of diversity, to teach solidarity with one another and to make coexistence a pleasant experience. All of this is the basis for developing an inclusive society, whose task is to constantly ask how to enable the individual with special needs to make the most of his or her potential.

Mirzeta Dorić, Educator at the Centre Janez Levec Dormitory





We went to Novi Sad. We drove with Marja. It was Monday, April 3rd. We saw the city, the bridge and the castle. We visited the Milan Petrović school and the farm. There I met Neja, Manca and Marko. I enjoyed Novi Sad. I liked the city at night the most.

Adriana, student at Centre Janez Levec

ŠOSO Milan Petrović is a great institution in every respect, as it has the opportunity to care for its wards from early childhood to old age. It is large and advanced not only because of spatial solutions, but mainly in terms of content

At the beginning of October I had the opportunity to visit Novi Sad and one of the largest educational institutions in Serbia, ŠOSO Milan Petrović.

My expectations were not entirely clear, even though my colleagues who had visited the institution a few years ago told me that they had "everything" there and that I would have a lot to see. It turned out that the concept and the content were even more than that.

But I will start at the end. Why? Because I think that the 30-minute event, organized by the 18-30 year old users of the school as part of their project "Breaking down barriers, building bridges", was a wonderful, heartfelt demonstration of their inclusion in life, of their cooperation, of their tolerance of each other. Undoubtedly, a lot of time and effort from all participants was required in preparing for the event. The performers were rewarded with a visit from students from some of the other schools, which meant a lot to them. With their visit, they became equal and equivalent to everyone else.

This is where inclusion came into sharp focus.

If I understand correctly, there are no more schools in Serbia with adapted or special programs. All children and adolescents are enrolled in mainstream education, both in primary and secondary school. Parents or guardians decide which school to enrol their child in, and based on the Individualized educational program (IEP) 1,2 or 3 (similar to our individualized program), goals are set for the child to achieve in each period. If the goals are set well, the child succeeds and continues his/her education according to his/her achievements and chronological age. At the end of school, the child receives a certificate and a work ability assessment.

This has raised a number of questions and dilemmas for me, but also enthusiasm for good solutions and ideas.

The school "Milan Petrović" is a large institution in every aspect, because it has the opportunity to care for its clients from early childhood to old age. It is large and advanced not only in terms of space, but above all in terms of content. In addition to classrooms and some workshops (weaving, sewing, pottery, etc.), subject teaching classrooms and offices for professional stuff (physiotherapist, speech therapy, early intervention, music room), they also have a large sensory garden, a snoezelen, a salt room and a swimming pool. All adapted and accessible for people with physical impairments.

There are several workshops at the secondary school (painting, metalwork, graphic design, woodwork, weaving, baking...). Some workshops are also open to external users, such as hairdressing and shoemaking. In the day center, they make their own soap for the whole institution, have their own laundry and ironing room, herb garden, paper recycling, etc.

A wide range of work opportunities, but it requires appropriate staff.

The staff who teach at the subject level are professors with special education qualifications. All those who teach and lead the workshops come from their own profession (seamstress, shoemaker, carpenter, etc.). Many of the clients have assistants who are required to undergo certain training before they begin working, a process similar to what we do in Slovenia. The special educator fulfils the rolls of a teacher, counselor and coordinator.

Parents of children with special needs, especially those with moderate and severe disabilities, autism spectrum disorder or mobility impairments, in the Novi Sad region and beyond, mostly enroll their children in the Milan Petrović School. An individualized educational program, EIP 2 is designed for them.

The institution has about 3000 users of different ages, from a few months to almost 70 years old. This includes those attending kindergarten, primary or secondary school, as well those in day centers and residential communities in the Novi Sad region. It's a large number, perhaps even too large.

I wonder if this is still inclusion? Is it what a child needs to be included, successful and happy in the society they live in while contributing their share for the common good? Or is it perhaps just a form of segregation? According to discussions with colleagues from Serbia, 'average' students, or more accurately students without special needs are not enrolled in the institution. Not even those who have deficiencies in specific areas or a mild intellectual disability who, with some adaptations (EIP1), can still follow their peers without major difficulties. Likewise, not a single gifted student enrolled who would follow a program based on their individualized education program (EIP3).

All these children are enrolled in other primary and secondary schools, even though these are located further away from their homes. And I think for many of them this is a much more inclusive approach. It's a better way of social inclusion, of learning from a model and acquiring life skills. Special education teachers visit these schools several times a week, teaching the children and advising teachers and parents.

However, some more than others need the safer environment of specialized institutions!

Nevertheless, in Milan Petrović school, they also have that in a way.

Children can be enrolled in the institution from a very young age, just a few months old. They have the option to choose a personal doctor in the school clinic, which falls under the healthcare system. They have access to early intervention from a physiotherapist, pediatrician, speech therapist and special education teacher. Their development and progress in all areas is monitored by all those who work with the child, from primary to secondary school, in day centers, during employment and in residential communities. Parents are involved and sign a consent form and all professionals have access to all documentation. They have everything in one place, in one institution.

In our country, the transition from one institution to another (from kindergarten to primary school, or from primary school to protective work centers/ Employment centers) is likely more stressful, both for children and adolescents as well for their parents. The flow of information is fragmented. Time is often wasted on reevaluations and observations. The professional service needs to obtain parental consent during enrolment, then request documentation from the previous school (individualized program, sports card, various expert reports, etc.). The whole process can take several months. For data protection reasons, some of the data or reports, targets in the Individualized plan are only stored by the professionals and the class teacher has to ask for access and information. Which again requires time and coordination.

I am very much in favor of the idea that a child's development and progress, their strengths and weaknesses, the adjustments needed, behavioral specifics, guidance in specific tasks, job opportunities, etc., are compiled into a shared document that travels with the child, accessible to all professionals involved. I think that something similar (transition folder) is also in preparation here in Slovenia, within the CJL.

The adjustments that students have to make, based on the curriculum are very big. The students have all the subjects according to the curriculum, like their peers without special needs, including physics, history, biology, foreign languages... These adaptations are written in their individualized plan (IEP 2). But these are only adaptations within the existing curriculum. How to adapt the learning and understanding of the periodic system or connect historical facts?

We also had the opportunity to visit their library. We were shown their textbooks and workbooks, which are standardized throughout the country. The only adaptation in this area is a slightly larger format and some textbooks in Braille.

Colleagues from Novi Sad said that they found much of the content unnecessary and too complex. They have made a proposal to adapt the curriculum at three levels, but the Ministry has rejected it. Special education teachers wish that someone would listen to them and help them, because in practice the program is difficult to implement and the important question is: is it really all for the benefit of the child? They regret that they transitioned so quickly from the previous system to full inclusion. There was no time to prepare the staff, teaching aids, facilities, teaching materials, etc.

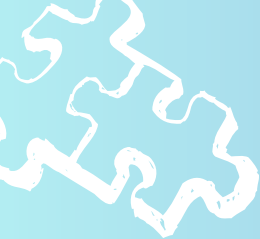
In summary, Milan Petrovic's school visit in Novi Sad was an interesting and valuable experience for me. I think that at the Janez Levec Center we are right now on the threshold of some changes that will lead to a better and more effective inclusion of our students. I hope that in doing so, we will be able to use our own experience and that of our Serbian colleagues, take the time for discussions and exchange views, to listen to each other and to keep what is good and effective.

Thank you to the management and project office of the Center Janez Levec and especially to our Serbian colleagues who welcomed us so warmly and guided us through their daily lives!

Helena Jeršan Kojek, Teacher at Centre Janez Levec – Dečkova Unit







Observations of Teachers whilst abroad

A student with an autistic spectrum disorder, who exhibits a lot of behavioural problems at school (loud, disturbing monologues, stereotypical play-fighting), did not exhibit any disturbing behaviour during the entire time on the exchange. He used strategies learned at school, (unexpectedly) socialized with unknown students and adults and played board games with them.

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One of the students is known for having difficulty waking up in the morning. This did not happen on the exchange, and besides, in the morning, he was willing to get up on his own initiative and help weaker students (whom he doesn't even know) to carry their bags up the stairs (without teacher having to accompany him, but he got involved himself - which usually does not happen, especially if he does not know the persons).

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A student with major behavioural problems - which were pointed out by the parent teacher and also the class teacher, adhered to all the agreements very well during the exchange and there were no problems. Before the exchange, my colleague and I discussed everything with him, and although we assumed that it would be necessary to repeat something several times during the exchange and warn him, this did not happen (e.g. smoking, using the phone, behavioral outbursts, non-cooperation in workshops, etc.). Although he did not like it in some places, he expressed his concerns, but he was always willing to cooperate and behaved respectfully to all stakeholders in certain situations.

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The student, who speaks very little or almost nothing, spoke more during the exchange and also spontaneously joined the conversation during dinner, having a drink in a bar, on a walk across town to the train station...



In Serbia, many questions arose and expanded aspects in the field of special pedagogy and education. The new point of view resulted in a change in one's own perspective on inclusion and delving into the unexposed details of the Slovenian school system.

At a first glance, Novi Sad seems to be just another ordinary city in Serbia. But it isn't. You can quickly notice signs on the streets in two different languages, an Orthodox church near the synagogue and a large advertisement for Hungarian goulash right next to a restaurant famous for its barbecue and »cevapi« (Serbian sausages). All these little things left an impression of a distinct social heterogeneity.

Later, I confirmed my hypothesis. Talking to the locals, I saw in their stories an openness of mind and spirit in their stories and found that they embrace differences with open arms. They claimed that Novi Sad is a mosaic of nationalities, arts and cultures. For 300 years, people have accepted other nationalities, cultures, and ways of thinking and languages as their own, normal, first and equal. Differences are accepted, even desired, because people are used to them. From this it can be assumed that Novi Sad has all the conditions for an inclusive society. Inclusive education was defined by law in Serbia in 2009 and began implementing it in 2010.

Many things have changed since the law was introduced in education. Schools that provided adapted education programs have been designated as regular primary schools. Special education teachers who worked in adapted programs were awarded the diploma of teachers and professors. Students attending adapted programs were given new subjects such as chemistry, physics, English, etc. So, in summary, children who didn't speak were attending regular primary school and learning the grammar of not just one, but two languages.

We must not forget the parents, who are an essential part of the education system, who have acquired the title of experts by law, allowing them to freely decide who and how will teach their children. Many parents took advantage of this right and opportunity to finally become equal, not different. They rushed to the nearest schools and enrolled their children in new schools and classes where regular teachers would teach their children, and where their child would be treated equally. Children with special needs were also assigned an assistant who will help him/her with daily tasks and with understanding and explaining the material. Furthermore, each child received an Individualized Program, in which individual objectives were set for the child to progress to the next grade. Based on these individual objectives, the teacher is obliged to adjust the material and explanation for the student and to assess them accordingly.

In practice, this means that one teacher teaches 28 children in one way and explains a certain subject, while a student with special needs is taught different material in a different way. So, did parents achieve their goal? Educators will disagree, as there is a reasonable counter-argument that all students should be taught in a way that is appropriate to them and teacher should adapt to each student individually. I wonder whether teachers are capable enough for such a task and how they feel about it. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to find out the answers to these questions first hand, because I didn't have contact with teachers who teach in such an environment.

It also raised the question of how the students feel in such an environment, since they are enrolled in a class of about 30 children, where the teacher is explaining material that the student with SN doesn't understand, it is very obvious to all classmates that this student needs additional explanation or even an additional person (an assistant) in the class. Classmates might not understand why he has different assessment criteria, etc.

Even if the academic conditions for inclusion are met (the teacher adjust the explanation and the material to each individual student), it is reasonable to ask how the social conditions for inclusion of children with special needs have been addressed in Serbia. Does the child in an inclusive classroom feel included, or quickly noticed a glaring disconnect between his or her life and that of his or her peers? So have the parents achieved their goal?

In my opinion, a major problem with the systemic regulation of education in Serbia is precisely the equation of parents with professionals, since they have an absolute and unconditional right to choose their child's educational institution, despite the lack of relevant knowledge about academic education and the possibilities offered by the system. This means that a child with a profound intellectual disability can enroll at the Faculty of Education and, in a few years, obtain a teaching diploma. Parents are not aware of the material, personnel and educational conditions offered by educational institutions; they only know their child and want the best for them. In Slovenia, we have proven that more than two-thirds of children with mental development disorders are directed to an overly demanding program with an equivalent standard (Rovšek, 2013), while the commission for the direction of children is responsible for determining the appropriate educational program for each child. This brings us to the question of who is most competent to determine a child's needs and treatment.

In summary, my time in Serbia has raised many questions and broadened my perspectives in the field of special education and pedagogy in general. This new perspective has resulted in changing my own perspective on inclusion and a deeper understanding of the subtle details of the Slovenian school system. It is clear that there is a huge gap between the formulation and realization of inclusive education in Serbia, which I find to be a missed opportunity given the naturally created conditions for inclusion in Novi Sad. It seems to me that forced integration can lead to division.

Ajla Cerić, Head of the Companionship Programme, Association of Inclusive Culture

ROVŠEK, M. (2013). Characteristics of the guidance of children and adolescents with mental development disorders: doctoral dissertation [Doctoral Dissertation]. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education



In Novi Sad, I had a good time. I danced. I liked the visit to their school a lot. Also the workshops.

Matic, student at Centre Janez Levec



Our students actively joined the activities (preparation of fruit salad and music workshop) and fit in really well, participated in the activities, communicated, and the language barrier was not an obstacle.

This was my first visit to the Janez Levec Center and also my first visit to Slovenia, which left me with extremely positive impressions.

In a pleasant atmosphere, the hosts introduced us to their system and forms of inclusive and special education as well as the characteristics in practice.

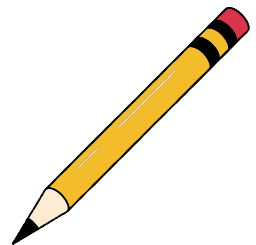
We visited several facilities attended by their students. We participated in some of the activities realized by special education teacher Andreja G. Abran within her group. Our students also joined these activities (making a fruit salad and a music workshop) and they really fit in well, participated in the activities and communicated. The language barrier was not an obstacle. In conversations with colleagues from Slovenia, we noticed the differences regarding enrollment in school/institutions, where in Slovenia their National Commission issues a Decision directing the child/student to enroll in their school. In Serbia, the Interdepartmental Commission issues an opinion (recommendation) but not a decision for the enrollment of a student in our school, or the possibility of receiving additional support for the child (student) from a special educator and speech therapist if they attend a regular school in Novi Sad. It is up to the parents to decide whether their child will attend our school or a regular one.

There is a big difference in the program between our school and the school in Slovenia. In Slovenia, a special program is applied for special schools, while in Serbia, a regular program is mandatory, which is adapted to each student's abilities (an Individual Education Plan).

Students of our secondary school (hairdressing department) participated in the "Play with me" festival, where they made beautiful hairstyles for other children and participants. We also visited the stands of other schools and institutions. This was a really useful and successful visit with many new acquaintances and experiences.

I hope for further good cooperation.

Jelena Knežević, Graduated Defectologist - Oligophrenologist, "Milan Petrović" School Student Dormitory, Novi Sad





The excitement and newfound knowledge they gained at the Congress Square will remain with them as a valuable legacy, fueling their curiosity and desire for lifelong learning. I believe that such an international festival should also be organised in the Republic of Serbia.

The students from Milan Petrović School had the privilege of participating in the festival in Slovenia, creating priceless memories through the abundance of educational activities.

One of the most exciting places they visited was Congress Square, the recognizable center of Ljubljana. On that beautiful square, students participated in various workshops that had an educational character. They had the opportunity to participate in interesting workshops in the fields of science, technology, innovation and sustainability. Experts from various fields guided them through inspiring presentations and practical exercises, providing them with a deeper insight into the importance of these topics in the modern world. Students actively participated in discussions, asked questions and exchanged ideas with other participants.

These educational workshops inspired and encouraged them to further explore and develop their skills. The excitement and newly acquired knowledge they gained at Congress Square will remain with them as a valuable legacy, fostering their curiosity and desire for lifelong learning. I believe that such an international festival should also be organized in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, to ensure that needs of our children are acknowledged.

Dragan Kaurin, Teacher of Theoretical Classes at "Milan Petrović" School, Student Dormitory

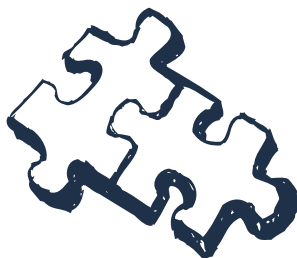


How people with special needs are included in society through the festival

From May 29 to May 31, 2023, four students from the "Milan Petrović" School in Novi Sad accompanied by five teachers, participated in the festival "Play with me" in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The organizers made an effort to show the festival's visitors how individuals with special needs integrate into society through various creative workshops. Our attention was first drawn to the booth, where our students and teachers had the opportunity to participate in very interesting chemical experiments.

Then, we visited a booth, where friendly hosts introduced us to the world of the blind and visually impaired people, allowing us to walk using a "white cane", tie shoelaces and solve puzzles while blindfolded. Our students had the opportunity to meet and socialize with students from Slovenian primary and secondary schools and give their creative input by making crafting interesting cardboard figurines, colorful bracelets and more. They also tried driving specialized vehicles, competed in table tennis, table football, dance and other interesting sports activities. As a reward, the students received delicious pancakes from the festival's organizers.

Željko Davidović – Teacher, "Milan Petrović" School with a Student Dormitory



The festival "Play with me" tells us that in today's society all people are accepted

On May 29, 2023, we headed to the International Festival "Play with me" in Ljubljana, Republic of Slovenia. I accompanied second-year high school students with the educational profile of hairdresser to the festival. After arriving in Ljubljana, we attended a lecture on the topic of inclusion, during which we learned about the working methods applied by our colleagues in Slovenia.

The following day, on May 30, we visited the coastal town of Piran. We showed the students the city's landmarks, and they enthusiastically walked through the narrow streets of the old town. Their greatest joy was evident while walking by the sea. We spent our last day on May 31 at the festival. The »Play with me« festival traditionally takes place at Congress square in Ljubljana. We participated in various workshops, with our favorite being the one dedicated to the lives of blind individuals. There we had the opportunity to try out the tools aids that blind people use.

We were able to see how the lives of people with disabilities and developmental challenges changes and improves in quality. The other workshops were also interesting and adapted to our students, as well as other participants and visitors of the festival.

This festival gives us the message that, in today's society, all people are accepted. Methods and new tools and techniques are being found for the successful and high-quality work and lives of people with disabilities and developmental challenges.

Tatjana Lazić, Practical Education Teacher, ŠOSO Milan Petrović



Such projects raise awareness in society

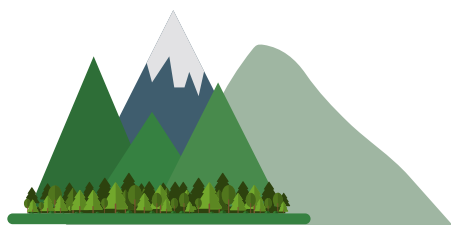
During the period from March 21 to March 23, 2023 we stayed in Slovenia as part of the Erasmus+ project within the framework of an exchange between two countries, Slovenia and Serbia. The stay itself was excellently organized and the activities we participated in were interesting and meaningful. The first impression that came to me when I entered Slovenia was the environmental awareness of the people who inhabit this area. Nature appears untouched, and I had a feeling like I could live here forever.

The first day of our stay was reserved for meeting the hosts and settling into accommodation where we stayed. We stayed in Ribnica in Pohorje, in the center which is used as a hotel for tourists during the winter season.

On the second day, we went with our hosts to Slovenj Gradec, where an event called "Be an Artist" was taking place in the gallery. It featured the presentation of 600 works, chosen by the gallery curator. With the help of all the visitors of this event, the works were affixed to the walls after joint workshops led by special education teachers and other experts. After that, we had a snack and enjoyed a cultural and artistic program. As part of this program, our four-member musical band, composed of two teachers and two students, performed a composition for the audience. After this program we had lunch and went bowling, concluding the day in our apartment getting ready for tomorrow's return. The next day, after breakfast and a walk, we said goodbye to our hosts and set off for Serbia.

The main impression I carry from this interesting journey is the importance of such projects and workshops, which sensitize the environment to accepting individuals with disabilities without any prejudices and with enthusiasm for participating in all activities that such projects entail. I am glad that I was part of such a story and I hope for some new gatherings with friends from Slovenia.

Mladen Stanković, Graduated Defectologist, Teacher at ŠOSO Milan Petrović



PLAY WITH ME

Go to bed on time,
get up early,
become an artist,
play with me!

Use all
that is given to you,
become an artist,
play with me!

Decorate the board
with your pictures,
now you are an artist,
play with me.

Mirko Stančetić, Serbian Language Teacher, ŠOSO Milan Petrović



The students returned full of impressions and fond memories

I attended the exchange voluntarily. I joined afterwards, after the professional team had already completed their previous meeting. This time, we were actively involved together with the students. The event went ahead as planned under the leadership of Marja Medved. The students came back full of impressions and good memories, especially of the good local care, meals and pleasant accommodation. In my opinion, perhaps there could have been more cooperation between the students/young people from our institution and the local institutions, which might have made it feel less like just a tour, for example, visiting a farm. The Day Centre for People with Autism did their best with the catering and workshops, where the cooperation was even more evident. Personally, I regret not having seen the Milan Petrović Primary School, as I heard there was something worth seeing there. In general, the guided gathering of our young people and theirs was good, but perhaps some less structured socializing or relaxed fun could have been included. Our team was excellent, both teachers and students, as well as the leader. I respect everyone's dedication and willingness to organize such projects, because it takes a lot of work and effort.

Iva Sinanović Topolnik, Teacher at Centre Janez Levec, Accompanying Person

The students cooperated with each other and connected even more

In my opinion, the excursion should be evaluated from two sides: from the teacher's and the student's side.

Personally, I found it extremely interesting to learn how children are taught outside of Slovenia. What impressed me the most was how much emphasis there is on practical work with students. A whole series of workshops: wood, metal, art, for working with clay, for making paper, and two were open to the public (shoe and hairdressing). This is something that I really miss in Levac. I also liked the accommodation where we were quite independent and pretty much took care of ourselves.

Regarding the children, I can say that the journey itself was interesting to them. It was very exciting for them to go on such a long journey. They also liked the accommodation. They cooperated with each other and thus became even more connected. The hosts prepared a whole series of workshops for us, but they were perhaps too short. Also, I may have missed more socializing of our children with their peers from the M. Petrović center.

Definitely an extraordinary experience for children and teachers. Nevertheless, I think that it is a big responsibility of teachers, who should be better rewarded.

Manfred F. Kelt, Teacher at Centre Janez Levec, Accompanying Person

We can still learn from each other, based on the rich experiences our institutions have with working with our population

My many years of experience and love with children with special needs, as well as my long-term cooperation with the inclusive center "Janez Levec" in Ljubljana, which has lasted for about 10 years or more, I can say that I learned a lot from my colleagues from Slovenia and their system of love, which is very effective and expedient for the improvement and advancement of their users through a variety of work that covers their independence in schooling and life at home to independence in learning, preparation for the greatest possible independence of the user, introduction to various simplicity of operational work and many other things.

As I mentioned, we visited the OVI school "Jarša" and got acquainted with their rad system, which the school has everything from facilities, didactic and technical material for the rad itself; this was studiously explained to us by the director of the institution, Nataša Blaj.

Attending these two days, I confirmed that their users have stronger intellectual abilities than our users from elementary school, are much more independent and functional. This is still for discussion, how we function with our inclusion, but that is not the topic of this discussion. I think that this program used in Slovenia is much more functional because the activities are more varied (special program) for special schools, but in Serbia a regular program is mandatory.

I would conclude in this form of observation that we can still learn from each other, from the rich experience of working with this population and to exchange the good and bad sides of working with children; and that we get what is most important to us, but this is not the result but the satisfaction of the child through various programs, but this can be: physical, musical, artistic, gastronomic and many other activities that can only satisfy the child, which is the most important thing in this business of ours.

Saša Sekulović, Sports Teacher, ŠOSO Milan Petrović



Final thoughts

Milan Petrović and Janez Levec (are) for Inclusion or MILE (not just a step) FOR INCLUSION

ŠOSO Milan Petrović Novi Sad and Centre Janez Levec Ljubljana were named after two pioneers of pedagogical work, who devoted their lives mission to the progress and development of schools, education, and pedagogy. dr. Milan Petrović, professor, pedagogue and social worker, including the president of Serbian Matica, and Janez Levec, school administrator and headmaster of the IV boys school in Austro-Hungarian times, who paid special attention to children with intellectual disabilities and founded the first department, the so-called auxiliary schools.

It is probably no coincidence that the two largest institutions, large school centers, with many support activities in the upbringing and education of students with intellectual disabilities and other associated disorders, are named after warm-hearted and development-oriented pedagogues. It is also probably no coincidence that each institution is the largest, most modern and most advanced in its country, and thus represents a kind of example for other related institutions and special pedagogical practice.

Cooperation between the two institutions has been taking place in regular meetings for more than a dozen years, especially Serbian friends are regular guests of activities within the framework of the International 'Play with Me' Festival. We, too, visited them several times on different occasions. More than half a dozen years ago, they hosted our entire bus in their schools and workshops, where they presented their center, activities, material possibilities and their everyday working life. For some time, there has been a desire from both sides to deepen our cooperation and knowledge, to take more time for quality discussions regarding systemic, pedagogical, didactic and other differences in the pedagogical work between us, whilst identifying the strengths and weaknesses of our practices and capabilities.

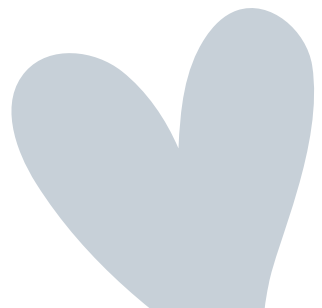
We wanted to spend several days together in pedagogical processes or longer than a daily visit allows. To merge together in practice both in Slovenia and Serbia and thus identify those elements of pedagogical practice, approaches and systemic obstacles or stimuli that are absent in normal, daily, superficial contact. We wanted to establish in-depth cooperation and work and to learn about the key circumstances, competences and also the differences in our daily work with students and also involve the students themselves in the process.

We have set an ambitious cooperation plan within the Small Partnerships project of the Erasmus+ program. We have included in the project three different levels of cooperation and groups, which are interwoven with each other even in everyday pedagogy. Starting with students, professionals, as well as the management of both institutions. Namely, in the 19 months that we were involved in the project, the participants, from two different countries, languages, despite extremely large and complex institutions in terms of the structure of their operation and systemic (laws in the field of education) diverse predispositions, managed to bring to a new level of cooperation among us.

We learned a lot from each other, but above all we expanded our horizons and awareness of the complexity of our situation in the light and effort of developing inclusive motives, concepts and practices in school and outside it. There was also awareness of the general state of inclusion or the inclusion of persons with special needs, the influence of society, economic conditions and the social context and powers that a nation needs to carry out the otherwise extremely noble idea of inclusion. Especially when they encounter the practical and extremely painful obstacles of the most vulnerable children – our students. All of this together fills us with the awareness that consideration and reflection are needed.

Quo Vadis? Where are we traveling? And how all these changes in school, education, pedagogy, country, society affect our work and consequently our students. Especially when we are talking about the most vulnerable. These are children in their own right, but if nature has deprived them of certain developmental achievements that are taken for granted by other children, then their possibility of inclusion in a demanding and productivity-oriented society is extremely limited. Almost none.

As the head of the Department for Project Activities of the Janez Levec Centre, I have been cooperating with the sister institution ŠOSO Milan Petrović since its establishment. So perhaps I can take this opportunity to write that in all the years of mutual cooperation, I really learned intensively and got to know the mutual differences, strengths and weaknesses of both institutions. Mainly more intensively through the MILE FOR INCLUSION project, which also ends with this publication.



However, I am always surprised by the reactions of people, professionals involved in projects, and this one is no different in this respect. Namely, they are predominantly more critical of their existing school system and the environment in which they operate, of the capabilities it offers them, and as a result, they primarily see obstacles in their own pedagogical work. On the contrary, they see the foreign school system and circumstances as well as capabilities and context as more advanced, with better possibilities and vision. This is probably some kind of positive projection that a good pedagogue must have in himself, so that he can identify the best opportunities for progress and the strongest areas of action for development in others. As such (a true pedagogue), he always critically assesses himself, so that he could add something to his teaching work and contribute to a better result (pupil progress).

I would like this publication to be read by as many colleagues as possible, and even more so by decision-makers in institutions such as the Ministry and professional services, such as the Institute of Education, the Pedagogical Institute... So that the voice of practitioners is heard and their point of view is taken into account. Again and again they underestimate the experience and experience of practicing educators. In general, and even more so, it makes sense to take this into account, if only you get the wonderful opportunity to compare two such different systems and practices. Their findings and reflections are valuable. Valuable for everyone and should also be properly heard and considered. Only together will we achieve more. And only together is it possible to implement inclusion in an appropriate way – worthy of a child, a student, a human being.

That's the only way Dr. Milan Petrović and school administrator Janez Levec, would be proud of the progress and the work we do together. They left us some pioneering spirit and a rich heritage, the rest is up to us.

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