



INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT


EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: SLOVAKIA

1. Abstract

The concept of inclusive education is a continuation of the integration efforts made during the second half of the 20th century. Inclusion in Slovakia has not been fully mastered, as the results of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) observations illustrate. However, despite the fact that inclusive education in Slovakia is only just beginning and that many systematic measures create obstacles to real inclusion in Slovakia, there are kindergartens whose philosophy reflects the principles of inclusive education. One example is the Kindergarten Centrum Zvolen. The aim of this kindergarten is reflected in its motto 'the sun shines equally for all'. All staff in the kindergarten follow a commonly-agreed aim: to bring up healthy, self-confident children, who have a positive attitude towards ethical and human values and principles, understand the meaning of their own being and understand the outside world, interacting with nature, objects and people. The educational process places particular emphasis on the personal experience of the child and the child's own emotional experience of reality. The starting point for this process is the individuality of the child and the acknowledgement of the child as an active learner who enriches the group or society. Education and care in the kindergarten are based on the national curriculum (state educational programme International Standard Classification of Education – ISCED – 0, pre-primary education). They guide children towards the achievement of optimal perceptual-motor, cognitive and emotional-social skills as a preparation for school and life in society.

The framework education objectives in line with the ideals of Kindergarten Centrum are:

- meaningful and systematic development of a child's personality and their learning capabilities in a supportive and creative atmosphere;
- personality development of children with regard to their individual abilities;
- the acquisition of ethical and universal human values on which our society is based;
- respect for the various socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of children;
- development of independence and the ability to demonstrate their own personality within their surroundings;

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- the acquisition of personal independence and abilities to demonstrate an independent personality who can enrich their environment or society;
 - developing habits related to a healthy lifestyle, with emphasis on the need for physical exercise, a healthy lifestyle and wellbeing;
 - acquisition of a positive attitude towards personal health protection and the protection of our environment.

Non-disabled children attend Kindergarten Centrum, together with children with special educational needs and children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who are placed in mainstream classes or in a special class. In order to ensure better support for children with special educational needs, a specialist teacher is employed alongside qualified class teachers. A physical therapist provides rehabilitation, counselling and medical care for children with physical disabilities and the skills of an ophthalmologist are provided to all children. This team tries to recognise and respond to each child's individual needs and they realise the importance of intensive team co-operation for each child.

2. Inclusive features

Education and care in Kindergarten Centrum is available to all children. The kindergarten is situated in a housing estate zone called Zlatý potok. It can be easily accessed by public transport which is provided by the regional town of Zvolen. The kindergarten capacity is 160 and children come from different parts of Zvolen. Parents and the general public are informed about this provision and what it offers through the [kindergarten website](#) and the [Zvolen town website](#), as the Zvolen local council is the kindergarten founder. The kindergarten is unique in that there is a special class for children with special educational needs in addition to mainstream classes. When necessary, help and support from specialist teachers is provided for children with special educational needs. Support also comes from the Bureau of Labour, Social Affairs and Family which helps to employ teaching assistants and personal assistants for children. Two such employees are permanent staff of the kindergarten.

The educational programme of Kindergarten Centrum is based on the state educational programme and is designed for all children, including non-disabled children, children from different socio-cultural backgrounds, ethnicities and religions, children with special educational needs and high-attaining children. The school curriculum is based on a holistic concept, where differences are accepted simply as individual characteristics. The kindergarten curriculum leads to the holistic development of a child's personality in all its aspects (cognitive, psycho-motor, emotional and social). The main aim of the kindergarten is to provide the joint



education of all children in mainstream kindergarten. In the educational process children are active entities that can regulate their own learning.

The most natural activity for children is play, which is viewed in this provision as a medium for holistic development. The staff in the kindergarten understand play as a facility for a child's own self-creation. Emphasis is therefore put on spontaneous play and play also has a solid and strong place in intentional learning (learning which is introduced by the teacher). Teachers intentionally implement different types of didactic games, using a lot of drama activities and structural play in the educational process. Play allows each child to experiment with different objects, learn about the outside world and understand it. Children can create and confirm their own theories about a wide range of objects and phenomena through experimental play. The kindergarten staff carefully plan playful activities, integrating them into thematic projects. Staff are aware that children's learning needs to be interconnected with life and with ordinary situations close to children's understanding. Understanding play and interaction creates opportunities for meaningful learning for all children.

The aim of the Kindergarten Centrum is to ensure holistic development in all aspects of personality (in cognitive, socio-emotional or psycho-motor areas). National legislation is gradually adjusting the platform and conditions for inclusive education in kindergartens. In Slovakia these adjustments develop gradually, as shown in Kindergarten Centrum where the process is in movement. Therefore, although Kindergarten Centrum is in some aspects closer to and in some aspects further from true inclusive education, change of thought has begun there in the recognition of the need to ensure qualified and highly professional staff (inclusive team) that can recognise and respond to the individual needs of each child. Catering for the individual needs of children requires close co-operation between kindergarten teachers, as well as co-operation with teachers and other professionals who provide advice and intervention, particularly for children with somatic problems and children with visual disabilities and communication problems. In the educational process all children are equals and there is a respect for specific individual learning needs. Each child is seen as a unique personality with their own individual needs and abilities which must be respected and nurtured to allow every child without exception to live their own life. Kindergarten Centrum creates equal opportunities for the education of all children.

3. Inclusive highlight

Kindergarten Centrum has been providing training and education for children aged 2 to 7 years since 1976. For more than 15 years there has been a special class established for children with special educational needs (SEN), which was initially intended for children with physical disabilities. Gradually, the focus of this class



changed in order to meet the needs of parents and their children coming to the kindergarten with different problems that required a special approach. Currently, the education of children with SEN takes place in the special class as well as mainstream classes as a part of the inclusion programme, depending on the type and degree of disability. Mildly visually impaired children, children with mild physical disabilities or children who are socially disadvantaged are educated in mainstream classes along with other children. The rest of the children, whose degree of disability precludes their education in regular classes, are placed in the special class and their education is carried out according to their individual needs. However, the aim of the staff in the kindergarten is to integrate as many children as possible from the special class into the wide spectrum of activities practiced together with the rest of the children, with assistance from personal care aides.

Training and education in the special class takes the form of half-day care and education with the possibility to involve parents, personal care aides or support teachers in the education process, depending on advice from doctors or other specialists who monitor the health status of the child. The specifics of every child's personality are considered in the education process, including low levels of concentration ability, immobility, the need for assistive devices (compensation aids), impaired memory, impaired communication ability, hyperactivity, muscle spasm, hypotonia, inappropriate emotional reactions, irritability, defiance, delayed social skills due to movement restrictions, etc.

In the education of children with SEN, Kindergarten Centrum follows individual educational programmes developed in co-operation with professional staff members of the Pedagogical-Psychological Counselling and Prevention Centre and Special Educational Counselling Centre, using educational programmes for:

- physically disabled children
- visually impaired children
- children with impaired communication ability
- autistic children or children whose compulsory school attendance was postponed.

The programmes take into account the type and degree of a child's special educational needs. As the kindergarten is attended by immobile children or children using assistive devices, emphasis is placed on guaranteeing children's safety of movement. The main goal of the programmes is to develop children's abilities and skills according to their age, individuality and health status and as such the content, extent and forms of education are individualised. This endorses their individual personal, emotional, cognitive and psycho-motor development.



Every child is perceived as an individual and therefore an individual approach is applied in their training and education. Individual education programmes are created based on co-operation with specialists who monitor the children's health status and development with the intention of stimulating the areas which need developing and rehabilitating the most. In Kindergarten Centrum, learners are supported not only by specialist teachers who provide training and education for children with SEN, but also by two other specialists, namely a physiotherapist and an orthoptic nurse, who provide intervention and rehabilitation for all children.

Kindergarten Centrum is well equipped and offers use of a gym, physiotherapy room, sauna, hydro-massage bathtub, hydro-massage tools and other tools used in locomotive, rehabilitation, orthopaedic or positioning exercises for children. There is also a Snoezelen white house available, where staff work with children using multi-sensory methods, various relaxation techniques, music therapy or light therapy. To improve children's health daily outdoor activities take place in the spacious garden with play areas and a traffic playground, which is located on the kindergarten premises. The conditions for further education, inclusion and a fulfilled life for all of the children are created in this institution in co-operation with the team of specialists and parents.

4. Other evidence of quality IECE

All teachers working in Kindergarten Centrum are fully qualified. The majority of the teaching staff have completed either undergraduate, postgraduate or higher education qualifications in Pre-Primary and Elementary Pedagogical Study programmes or Pre-Primary and Inclusive Pedagogical Study programmes. Additional full time (or part time) employees of the kindergarten are support teachers, an orthoptic nurse and a physiotherapist.

Kindergarten Centrum co-operates closely with various specialists such as an ophthalmologist, a clinical speech and language therapist and paediatric doctors, as well as institutions like the Pedagogical-Psychological Counselling and Prevention Centre and Special Educational Counselling Centre.

Methodological and advisory guidance for parents of children with SEN is also offered, along with consultation aimed mainly at co-operation with various specialists and guidance on the effectiveness of individual education programmes and changes in education. The most effective procedure of adaptation is designed, in which the parents are deeply involved by their presence in the classroom.

Kindergarten Centrum co-operates closely with the parents of all children, regularly discussing various problems. They meet at events and use written or electronic communication in closed groups on social networks created only for the parents of



children attending the kindergarten.

Kindergarten Centrum organises various meetings with parents and children and celebrates many significant cultural and social events which are focused on preserving folklore traditions specific to the Zvolen region and its history. They present their openness with regular open days, at which parents and newly enrolled children have the opportunity to take a look not only at the kindergarten premises, but also at the internal organisation, operation and training and educational process. At parents' request, a day of open lessons can be organised, where parents can acquaint themselves with the organisation and education process during the day, therefore creating a better picture of their children's everyday life.

Kindergarten Centrum is often visited by teachers from other kindergartens, or by pre-primary teaching students who are interested in acquainting themselves with the operation and organisation of the school. Kindergarten Centrum co-operates with the University of Matej Bel in Banska Bystrica and regularly provides teacher training for students.

As previously mentioned, Kindergarten Centrum has started its journey towards inclusive education, but progressive changes in the educational process and quality improvements cannot be achieved without the presence of evaluation. The staff, and especially the kindergarten management, are fully aware of this fact. Improving the quality of the kindergarten occurs through the application of both external and internal evaluation. This includes internal and external evaluation of the educational process, the school educational programme or curriculum and children's achievements in relation to their personal development.