



ORGANISATION OF PROVISION
TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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**Developing a support service for learners with visual
impairment**

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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education



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PREAMBLE

The Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education project is being undertaken by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education from 2011 to 2014. The key question for the project is: How are systems of provision organised to meet the needs of learners identified as having disabilities under the UNCRPD (2006) in inclusive settings within the compulsory school sector? The themes to be explored include:

- Inclusion as a quality issue – the presence and participation of all learners in the school/classroom community enhances the quality of the educational experience.
- Strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools to respond to diverse needs (including developing the role of specialist provision as resources to support the mainstream sector).
- Collaboration and networking – effective provision of educational and multi-agency support within the mainstream sector.
- Funding and resourcing – targeting support to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.
- Leading the change process.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

1. A Literature Review: this provides the conceptual framework for the project and includes a review of research literature post 2000 on project themes as well as an analysis of past Agency projects.

2. Country Information: a questionnaire has been circulated to Agency member countries to gather information on how provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools is organised and evaluated.

3. Identification of examples of practice: Five sites in Sweden, Austria, Germany, Slovenia and Malta will be visited in February/March 2013. A report will be produced following each visit.

4. Thematic seminars: Following collection and analysis of data from the visits, a series of seminars will be held in autumn 2013. The seminars will explore in detail the factors that have an influence on the success of inclusive education, taking into account different country contexts. A report will be produced following each seminar.

5. Project synthesis report: The report will draw together evidence from all project activities and, following an analysis of key issues, will provide a series of recommendations and potential quality indicators for the organisation of provision and implementation of new practices to improve systems of provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

6. Leading the change process: A practical tool to support policy makers in leading change towards more inclusive policy and practice will also be produced.



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Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role played by members of the Project Advisory Group, Agency Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators who took part in the visit and provided additional support.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides information about the study visit conducted by the Agency team to Ljubljana, Slovenia in March 2013.

The Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted children was selected, along with other four sites, from practice examples provided by Agency Representative Board members and their networks as part of the Organisation of Provision project questionnaire.

The Agency team in collaboration with the Project Advisory Group (PAG) members identified criteria for the selection of the sites that should be followed up to provide relevant information for the project. The criteria were: relevance of the site; clarity of the information provided and evidence of the following: quality assurance; system leadership and the management of change; collaboration and partnership; sustainability and a variety of support systems (different approaches to and ways of organising support). Overall, the examples selected also needed to reflect diversity of geographical location and learner needs.

The Institute was selected for its work on developing the role of the special school. The visit theme was: ***developing the role of special schools as resources to support mainstream provision.***

The focus of the other study visits were:

- Flensburg, Germany – ***how do inclusion networks support the needs of learners with disabilities***
- Vienna, Austria – ***inclusive education as a quality issue – a collaborative approach to quality management***
- Essunga, Sweden – ***strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools – changing practice to improve support for learners with different needs (in particular those with disabilities)***
- Valetta, Malta – ***organisation and resourcing of in-class support (with a focus on the roles of school and multi-agency staff).***

After presenting a short summary of the lessons learnt from the study visit to Ljubljana, this report will describe the different supports provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream settings and the different factors that contributed to their development. Information about the management of change, transformation strategies and sustainability will also be included.



HIGHLIGHTS

- A special school now works to provide a learner-centred service for learners with visual impairments in mainstream schools as well as providing for those with more complex needs.
- Specialist teachers provide support for learners, families and schools, professional development for teachers and specialist aids and equipment, as well as an early intervention programme.
- Some learners with visual impairment make good progress in mainstream schools and also receive specialist inputs when needed.
- Including learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms is believed to have improved teaching and learning for all learners.
- Effective leadership supports teamwork and collaboration with schools, parents and other services.
- The change process has been carefully researched and evaluated to inform future decisions.
- Attitudes to disability are slowly changing the work of the Institute and the commitment of staff play a part.

CONTEXT

The project to develop an existing special school into a resource centre for learners with visual impairment (VI) was an answer to the new situation in the field of education for learners with VI in Slovenia, brought about by international developments in inclusion and human rights. More and more learners with special needs and disabilities now attend mainstream schools and kindergartens all over Slovenia. The inclusion process has forced education leaders to start thinking about new support programmes for learners with VI, their parents and teachers and also about a new way to organise the Institute for Blind and Partially-sighted Children (the Institute) in Ljubljana.

The Institute is the only institution in Slovenia that provides adapted pre-school and school programmes for learners with VI and also for multiply-disabled learners with VI, aged 0–19. However at present, only 33 learners attend the Institute. About 112 learners with VI are supported in mainstream kindergartens and schools.

The resource centre aims to provide a holistic approach for learners with visual impairment, including developmental work, counselling, training and support. It works to:

- prevent or reduce the impact of visual impairment on the development of each child or adolescent;
- guide and support the family, school and wider environment to ensure the professional treatment of young learners with visual impairment;
- provide individuals with the necessary skills and competences to ensure successful inclusion into their chosen school programme and allow them achieve the required standard of knowledge.



Work began in 2008, supported by a grant from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism and funding from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport in Slovenia. A two-year project was conducted with support from the Huseby Center, Oslo.

During the two year programme, staff at the resource centre:

1. Prepared programme documents and content to support early intervention and inclusive education in kindergartens and schools;
2. Made adaptations in schools;
3. Made a sensory garden at the resource centre;
4. Created working conditions to start the development of the resource centre, including staff training.

The documents and programmes were very important elements in the early development of the centre, as they were designed for practical use in inclusive education. During the school year 12 courses were held for teachers, 16 different courses or meetings organised for parents and 20 different activities organised for learners with VI. Experts from the resource centre regularly visit learners with VI in their school or kindergarten and provide special education (for example orientation and mobility, braille, computer work, etc.). Learners may attend the resource centre for other specialist programmes.

The project has had many benefits for learners with VI, parents, other students, teachers and local communities. These benefits include:

- Programmes to support all levels of education including early intervention;
- Programmes for learning special skills: braille, orientation and mobility, communication, socialisation, ICT, maths etc.;
- Programmes for parents;
- Programmes for teachers;
- Adaptations to the Institute (new windows, lighting, repainted classrooms, renovation of toilet facilities);
- Technical aids (computers, etc. which were lent to the mainstream school);
- Toys for early intervention.

From September 2010 to August 2012, a further project was conducted to develop the Institute into a resource centre to support inclusive education for learners with VI. Project Groups were appointed at the National Education Institute (NEI) and the Institute for Blind and Visually Impaired Youth (IBVIY) to guide and support the project.

The project objectives were:

- to determine how learners with VI progress with regard to their independence when included in mainstream education with support and to assess whether they reach required standards of knowledge;
- to recognise changes in the level of self-esteem of learners with VI who were included in mainstream education;
- to determine changes in the level of satisfaction of learners with VI in the second and third cycle of primary school and secondary school with regard to inclusive education;



- to identify changes in the knowledge of special needs and the attitude of classmates towards learners with VI (third cycle of primary school and secondary school);
- to determine the state of interpersonal relationships and the social structure within the class, where a learner with VI has been included (third cycle of primary school and in secondary schools);
- to identify changes in the level of specific knowledge and changes in the attitude of parents of learners with VI included in early intervention and pre-school education;
- to determine the changes in the competences and attitude of pre-school teachers, teachers and school counsellors;
- to determine the efficiency and adequacy of the organisational structure and the educational activities carried out by the resource centre for people with VI.

The main participants in the project included:

- 4 pre-school organisations – 4 learners with VI;
- 9 primary schools – 9 learners with VI;
- 2 secondary schools – 2 learners with VI;
- 3 learners with VI in early intervention;
- parents, (pre-school) teachers, school counsellors, headteachers, classmates and centre experts.

By August 2012, following the second project, the transformation from special school to resource centre was complete, with a different organisational structure, consisting of four units:

Unit for diagnostics and early treatment

This unit carries out diagnostics for all individuals with VI and early treatment for those who have not yet entered the education system, together with support for parents. The unit establishes the vision status, functional vision and possible developmental issues. Experts work directly with children to prevent developmental lag and work with parents individually, with other staff and through seminars. They also advise on the child's environment, including spatial adaptations at home and didactic aids. They prepare kindergartens and familiarise local environments with the needs of learners with VI.

Unit for inclusion support

This unit plans, organises and carries out activities and programmes to provide learners with VI with opportunities for all round development training and support to reach educational goals. The work includes special education (tiflopedagogy); mobile support and monitoring in mainstream schools; teacher and staff counselling on lesson planning, adaptation of methods, teaching aids and specialised equipment; seminars for teachers, parents and public; courses, workshops, sporting activities and camps for learners with VI.

Unit for teaching materials

This unit produces textbooks, computers and other equipment and didactic aids and is responsible for the sensory garden. There is a lending library and training seminars are held to teach the use of ICT equipment, aids, etc. The sensory garden is used for mobility and orientation training, sensory development, play, sport and as a barbecue area.



Development unit

This unit is a forum for employees and associates to propose, evaluate and implement new guidelines and disseminate knowledge. The objectives are: the efficient implementation of new scientific, technical and expert findings in Slovenia and abroad, collaboration in a project that provides opportunities for professional development and the implementation of developmental strategies and conditions for research by the Institute.

The efficiency of the organisation depends on the functioning of each unit as well as the centre as a whole. Units cannot be successful without mutual co-operation and the efficient management of the whole centre – co-ordinated actions require careful planning, co-operation and leadership. The transformation will continue in the future with the agreement of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport.

The main project findings are that:

- Learners with visual impairment feel happy and welcome in their respective schools. All of them show quite a high level of general self-esteem. All of the learners involved have a complex eyesight dysfunction and require special educational approaches. Within two years, they have made progress in all of the competencies, although some older children and adolescents are not progressing in their social skills as well as in other areas.
- At the beginning of the project, parents were already relatively well acquainted with their children's development. During the experiment, however, they have obtained a lot of specialised knowledge to help them in everyday life and have developed a more positive attitude to their children and acceptance of themselves as parents of children who are visually impaired.
- The classmates of learners with visual impairment are generally in favour of them being included in their classes. Most of them are familiar with the adjustments that learners with visual impairment need during the educational process.
- Interpersonal relationships and the social structure within classes is good: learners with visual impairment in primary school are relatively well, or at least sufficiently, socially integrated. While they do not have a very extensive social interaction with classmates, the existing interactions in many cases are mutual, strong and long lasting.
- In the case of adolescents with visual impairment in secondary school classes certain difficulties arise, not necessarily connected to the social integration of students into classes, but it has not been possible to verify these factors.
- During the project, the majority of expert staff (pre-school teachers, teachers and counselors) gained certain knowledge which enhanced their perception of themselves as being competent to teach learners with visual impairment. A positive trend has also been seen in changing attitudes and perceptions, but it is clear that this is a long-term process.
- The majority of expert staff (pre-school teachers, teachers and school counsellors) support the inclusion of learners with visual impairment into mainstream educational programmes and believe that these learners are relatively well accepted in the group or class.
- Their suggestions for improvements are as follows:
 - more knowledge on the methods of teaching learners with visual impairment



- wider availability of facilities and equipment
- lower number of pupils in classes
- continuous expert help
- assistants – especially for blind children in kindergarten and primary school.
- The experts from the resource centre have been effective in executing their tasks. Headteachers, teachers and counselors consider that their co-operation with the resource centre is necessary and has been effective, with the expert support receiving high marks in an evaluation.
- While the experts from the resource centre support its organisational structure and objectives, the provision of sufficient technical aids and didactic materials remains a problem.
- During the 2-year project, the tested model has proved to be effective. The findings of the follow-up have shown that the establishment of the resource centre for providing help to learners with visual impairment is reasonable and viable.
- Special emphasis has been placed on an effective and systematic organisation of developmental, educational and other operational activities to provide public support for blind and visually impaired persons in Slovenia.

At present, in the school year 2012/2013, the resource centre has 53 members of staff – 40 professionals and 13 technical staff. It caters for learners from pre-school, through compulsory basic education (aged 6–15) who meet the national standard. Some learners participate in special programmes. The centre also caters for learners from upper secondary, aged 15+ (including vocational programmes in administration and economics). The centre has a residential facility and organises residential camps and courses for learners.

There are currently 33 learners in the Centre and support is provided for 25 learners in early intervention and 112 in inclusive schools (23 kindergarten, 58 in compulsory school and 29 in secondary school). Financial support has been agreed from the Ministry to maintain the Centre for 10 years following the project (including the sensory garden).

The learners remaining in the Institute are mostly those with the most complex disabilities whose needs are met through a specialist VI programme not available in other types of special schools (e.g. for cognitive disability). Itinerant teachers of learners with VI do not currently work in special schools, although the new law may provide greater flexibility for such teachers to work in different locations and enable more effective long-term planning.

Key influences of the country context

In Slovenia, there has been a trend towards inclusion since the year 2000. The fundamental objectives and principles in the education of children with SEN are underpinned by the following principles and objectives contained in the Guidance of Children with Special Needs Act (2000 with amendments in 2006, 2007):

- the principle of equal opportunities whilst taking into account the diversity of children;
- maintenance of a balance between different aspects of the child's physical and cognitive development;
- the integration of parents in the education process;

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- provision of appropriate conditions for the optimum development of each individual child;
 - guidance regarding the most suitable education programme at the right time;
 - organisation of education at the location closest to the home of the child;
 - individualised and also an inter-disciplinary approach.

The Act defines groups of children with SEN as follows: children with mild and moderate learning disabilities; speech and language impairments; physical disabilities; long-term illness; learning problems in specific fields of education; emotional and behavioural disorders; blind children and children with visual impairments; deaf children and children with hearing impairments. The Act is also based on the principle that a child's needs must be recognised as soon as possible and subject to a programme of early childhood intervention.

Due to several recent changes in Government, new education legislation has been in preparation for several years and the proposals for this have changed along with the government. However, new laws should be introduced in September 2013¹ and it is hoped that, although the final details are not known, these will implement the development of resource centres through two Education Acts – one on finance and one on law. Due to the economic situation, there is pressure to reduce the cost of the current system of support.

European developments such as ET 2020 have influenced national equality legislation – for example, there has been an Act on equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in 2010 and an Action Programme for Person with Disabilities 2007–2013. However, while a move from a medical model to rights model is underway, awareness of the UNCRPD is not widespread and there remains a well-established special school system designed around categories of disability.

In Slovenia, there is a prescribed National curriculum and national standards, with tests for learners in Grades 6 and 9, overseen by the National Evaluation Centre. The National Inspectorate (under the authority of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport) also has some responsibility for learners with special educational needs/disabilities.

More information, including further information on special schools, can be found in the country overview at: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/slovenia>

¹ This may now be delayed until 2014



THE PROJECT VISIT

A team of Agency staff and project advisory group members visited Ljubljana on 18–20 March 2013. The visit theme was: ***developing the role of special schools as resources to support mainstream provision***. The visit provided opportunities to hear first hand about the developments in Ljubljana, to observe lessons and interview different stakeholder groups. Interviews were conducted with: 2 headteachers from mainstream schools, 1 deputy headteacher, 1 special school headteacher, 3 mainstream teachers, 2 specialist teachers of learners with VI, 1 special educator from mainstream school, 1 support assistant, 2 school counsellors, 1 psychologist, 5 learners (with and without VI), 1 representative from a voluntary organisation, 1 university lecturer/teacher educator, 1 parent and 2 representatives from the National Institute of Education (Commission for Guiding Children with Special Needs).

Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the 5 project visits. All interviews were recorded for later analysis. In addition, relevant documents were collected prior to and during the visit. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.

INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLES

Values and beliefs

During the visit, the view was expressed that the basic principle of inclusion is providing children with special needs with the same opportunities for education in mainstream schools as are given to their peers who do not have special needs (Kobal Grum and Kobal, 2009: 39). It is also recognised that adequate expert support and preparation is needed for the implementation of this principle if conditions for new forms of discrimination are not to be created (Rutar, 2010: 21).

While encouraging inclusive practices in schools, calls for substantial changes of the education system as a whole, the modification of world views and the behaviour of everyone included in the educational process are of particular importance (Peček, Lesar, 2006: 204).

There is a belief in inclusion and an awareness of the benefits but also a concern that mainstream schools are not prepared – in particular for learners with cognitive disabilities for whom greater adaptations are needed. This was referred to by one headteacher as ‘inclusion with big letters’.

School leaders interviewed were motivated and committed to inclusive practice, and stakeholders interviewed were aware of the limitations of the medical model and of the distinction between inclusion and integration. During discussions it was stressed that there was a need to be open-minded and to work with learners with different needs in order to learn from experience. To quote the representative from the voluntary organisation: ‘inclusion starts not in the mind but in the heart’.

Attitudes

The learning support assistant working in one school with a learner with VI told us that ‘inclusion is for all children’ and a teacher in the same school expressed the view that ‘everyday is a challenge but we need experience to learn’.



One of the itinerant teachers from the Institute/resource centre told us that teachers used to question why children with disabilities should attend the regular school but that they now realise that inclusion is better for all children. The benefits noted at Oscar Kovacic School include the fact that children are more sensitive to others and to disability issues. The learners were also very positive about having a learner who is blind in their class and said 'we all help each other'.

Specialist staff are aware of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and recognise that it should be a lever to change the attitudes of those teachers who still feel that learners with disabilities are not their responsibility and see only increased workload. In some cases specialist support teachers can be seen more in the role of inspectors than colleagues and supporters. Some special educators also show some resistance to inclusion, fearing the closure of special schools.

One parent representative feels that younger people are more inclusive – that they do not see problems and accept difference more readily. Society is therefore changing slowly and increasingly parents will not feel afraid of stigma attached to disability but will be well supported in their local community.

Collaboration

One of the representatives from the National Institute of Education stressed the importance of collaboration in moving towards more inclusive practice saying: 'It has to be teamwork, otherwise it is not possible'.

The expert staff from the resource centre see good relationships with learners and their families as essential for their work. They also consider that their work in schools helps a wider group of learners – not just those with visual impairment.

Effective collaboration is also vital between learners, parents, school staff and visiting teachers. The team meetings held 3 times per year involve headteachers (if needed), psychologists, special teachers, class teachers and counsellors, as well as parents and learners to review progress and plan future work.

There are also informal links between special schools and mainstream schools in local communities, for example through visits and activities but such collaboration can play an important role in introducing both learners and teachers to young people with disabilities.

Finally, on a national level, collaboration is evident in the assessment process (by the Commission), which involves a team of experts from a range of agencies (health and education) and also in the support from the National Institute of Education for the development of the resource centre.

TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

In line with international developments, Slovenia has been moving towards more inclusive practice. Following the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act in 2000, social segregation of children with special needs and disabilities was reduced and opportunities for inclusive education were increased.

Although recent changes in government have led to some further changes in policy, there is a commitment to inclusion that involves the transformation of the network of expert centres. Levels of awareness regarding the UNCRPD vary. While it appears to have



influenced recent policy developments, practice is changing with little awareness of the Convention among teachers in schools. The commitment of staff and practitioners rather comes from the fact that including learners with disabilities is the 'right thing to do'.

New legislation is currently being agreed for implementation in September 2013 and it is widely believed that this will support more inclusive practice, although there are concerns about the level of resources that will be available.

Pinteric and Cankar (2012) note that transforming specialized institutions into resource centres is a demanding and complex task and that specialized institutions' role with regard to inclusion is closely connected to each country's educational system. They also believe that resource centres for people with visual impairment not only have an educational function, but also set expert guidelines in assisting blind and visually impaired people and preparing them for independent life' (p. 1).

The transformation of the Institute into a resource centre began with support from the Huseby Centre in Oslo in 2008. From 2008–2010, documents were prepared to support inclusive approaches, adaptations were made to the Institute and working conditions changed to prepare for the development as a resource centre. Courses were organised for teachers and parents as well as activities for learners. By 2010, the background work had been completed but the change from school to resource centre had not yet taken place, so from 2010 to 2012 on the initiative of the Institute, a further project supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport was conducted by the Institute of Education of the Republic of Slovenia.

The project was set up involving around 15% of the learners with VI in Slovenia from all educational levels to examine the efficiency of the resource centre organisation. Clear goals were set for the project and initial data/information collected to support monitoring and evaluation in relation to these goals at the end of the 2-year time frame. The aim was to analyse in detail the functioning of the centre and to upgrade this to form a new resource centre. A range of evaluation instruments and questionnaires were put in place including:

- Assessment of rehabilitation competencies for blind and visually impaired (2 versions);
- Self-esteem scale for blind and visually impaired (Harter);
- Questionnaire for learners with visual impairment about their satisfaction in mainstream schools;
- Questionnaire for classmates of learners with visual impairment;
- Questionnaire for the measurement of interpersonal relationships in the classroom;
- Semi-structured interview for parents of learners with visual impairment;
- Questionnaire for teachers, educators and counsellors;
- Self-evaluation form for the work of the Centre;
- Questionnaire to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the organisation of the Centre.

It was proposed that the centre was structured into 4 units (described on page 7 above) – the unit for diagnostics and early treatment, unit for inclusion support, the teaching aids unit and the development unit. This was undertaken by August 2012. The second project had succeeded in showing that the Institution could work successfully as a resource centre and support inclusive education for learners with visual impairment through support to



mainstream schools, advice and training for parents and teachers and the provision of adapted materials and also conducting a programme for early intervention.

The work was evaluated by the Council of Experts for General Education which was very positive about the process and outcomes. Although some further developments were recommended, these have not been possible due to financial constraints, although some further resources have been made available for the Early Intervention programme due to private donations. Work continues within existing resources, with staff at the Institute being trained for the wider role of work in the Resource Centre and in multi-disciplinary teams.

The staff at the Institute and partner schools and organisations believe that young people with visual impairment should be provided with appropriate support in mainstream schools. The idea of a resource centre to support such practice came from the Institute staff, focusing on the needs of learners – and has been developed due to commitment and hard work of all concerned, despite a lack of resources.

In summary, the key actions supporting the change include:

- Detailed planning and documentation of policies and procedures to support the development of the resource centre;
- Engagement of all staff at the Institute – and the wider stakeholder group;
- Preparation of buildings and resources;
- Training of all staff involved for wider, advisory and training roles and technical support;
- Close monitoring and evaluation of developments to provide evidence for future decisions;
- Commitment of school and local/national leaders to the principle and practice of inclusive education.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Support structures in the community

Local communities across Slovenia provide support for learners with disabilities by paying for additional resources. In the case of one learner, the local community funds an assistant as this resource would not usually be provided for learners with visual impairment. Local communities also fund itinerant teachers from the resource centre to support young learners with VI in local kindergartens, avoiding long journeys for families who would otherwise attend the Institute in Ljubljana.

Support structures in the school

Under new law (due to be implemented in 2013/2014), staff ratios are likely to change. The special education teacher from one of the schools visited explained that there are, at present, 37 learners in school each needing 3-5 hours extra support, currently provided by 4 peripatetic pedagogues. She feels that parents will not be satisfied if the level of support is reduced.

Schools are not yet fully equipped to meet the specialist needs of VI and itinerant teachers from the resource centre in Ljubljana provide additional support. These teachers provide



advice to school leaders, teachers and counsellors. Following assessment, the specialist teachers prepare glasses to simulate each learner's visual impairment. This raises the awareness of staff and peers. The glasses also contain a summary of key points to keep in mind when working with the learner. The specialist staff also run workshops for learners, work on a 1 to 1 basis, provide assessments and monitor progress. The importance of working closely with the resource centre was stressed by the schools visited who did not have previous experience of learners with visual impairment. In particular support is needed at times of transition, for example from primary to secondary school.

Every learner with VI has his own visiting teacher who has a coordinating role in the education process. The same teacher may work with a learner for several years, for example through kindergarten and transition into primary, so that learners may have 3 or 4 teachers during his/her school career. The number of children allocated to each special teacher differs according to the number of hours of help needed by each individual. However, teachers may work with 7 children or as many as 23 per week.

The itinerant teachers provide learning support - in particular in subjects such as mathematics, languages and art that may provide particular problems for learners with VI. Teachers often spend time preparing aids such as tactile diagrams, texts etc if these are not already available from the centre. They also provide training such as orientation and mobility, sensory training and daily living skills although many learners travel to the centre in Ljubljana for these activities outside of school hours.

Within each school, a special educator supports both children and teachers and works closely with the teachers of learners with VI and those from other specialist institutes e.g. for learning disabilities etc. As one special teacher told us: 'Teaching is a constant process'. This highlights the fact that a responsive system is needed, in particular for learners with VI, to enable staff to prepare resources in time for lessons.

The hours of support from visiting teachers are outlined in the statement/guidance order that children and parents receive from the Commission for Guiding Children with Special Needs (part of the National Institute of Education). Additional support is provided by school counsellors. There may be one or two counsellors in each school, who may have a background in social work, psychology or education. The counsellors oversee the individual education plans and are a key member of the team that meets three times a year to review the plan and set new goals. These meetings will also involve the special teacher, teacher of VI, psychologist, class teacher and parents. The schools visited stressed the importance of the participation of all involved in the education process, including the learner. The psychologist in school also provides support for learners with disabilities and works with teachers and parents .

For learners who have some additional learning needs but do not have official recognition (e.g. through a statement/guidance order), teachers differentiate their teaching. All teachers have one hour per week to prepare for these learners and also for more able learners. School staff are committed to meeting the needs of all their learners and try to be flexible, for example through timetabling lessons in suitable rooms to minimise the moving of specialist equipment for learners with VI etc. However, there is a perception among practitioners that legislation and policy are not realistic, in particular given the current level of resources.

Support structures in the classroom

The Commission for Guiding Children with Special Needs allocates support to each learner. Up to 5 hours additional support per week can be provided in school plus up to 3



hours out of school, for social/other activities. The new law proposes that the Commission will no longer allocate time but just adapted curriculum and equipment.

The special teachers, psychologist and counsellor in each school prepare an individual plan. This includes a plan for the time spent with specialist staff and all IEPs are reviewed 3 times per year. The IEP may include: hours of support, staff responsibilities, parents input, school input, co-ordination, sight assessment (with a pedagogical emphasis) preferred font, size of print etc., individual work and additional needs e.g. mobility training, ICT. As teachers try to avoid taking *learners out of lessons, mobility, ICT etc. are often provided out of school time.*

During the visit, the team observed a history lesson of the class in which a learner with visual impairment was included. The class were all involved in small group work, and learners organised themselves, allocating roles as appropriate. The learner with VI took notes on his PC and read these to the class as part of the feedback. Such an interactive approach ensured that there were opportunities for all learners to be fully involved and to contribute to the lesson.

Curriculum and Assessment

National goals are set in the curriculum and are the same for everyone with an emphasis on factual knowledge. The goals can be adapted for learners working at a slightly lower level but for those unable to reach the knowledge requirements there is an adapted programme in the special schools.

Teachers interviewed during the visit felt that schools should have more autonomy and flexibility and that there should be a more 'open curriculum' to meet individual needs. The knowledge requirements are set out in 3 year blocks (formerly they were set out on an annual basis) but are still difficult for teachers to differentiate. In addition there is too little preparation for social and life skills and citizenship.

There are national tests at the end of grades 6 and 9 and at the end of secondary school. Papers can be adapted for learners with visual impairment but this is time consuming and not easily done due to security and time constraints.

On-going assessment is by teachers in the school and, for learners with IEPs by the teacher and school team at regular meetings.

Support for professional development

A new course for teachers of learners with VI was started at the University of Ljubljana 2 years ago. There is little input on VI (or any other special educational needs/disabilities) in mainstream teacher education courses. The need for further development of initial teacher education courses was raised during the visit by many stakeholders. A widely expressed view was that a gap exists between the current teacher education and the reality of the classroom – in particular the variety of needs that teachers now encounter. One of the itinerant teachers expressed particular concern that special needs and disability was seen as a subject but that students and teachers lacked experience because they do not meet any children with disabilities. Mainstream teachers agreed that teacher education is too theoretical and that more practical experience is needed. One headteacher said: 'Teachers are not afraid of challenge but they feel they do not know enough'.

Teacher education in the University has been re-organised since the Bologna process was introduced at all levels - undergraduate, master and doctoral programmes. The Faculty of Special Education has tried to educate others and all teachers have a module on Inclusive Education in their final year of study. This amounts to 5 credits of the pre school programme, 6 for primary and 4 for secondary. Current courses also categorise teachers



quite narrowly in terms of who they are qualified to teach. For example, a special pedagogue/English teacher can only teach up to 6th grade (12 years of age) in mainstream.

There are full time or part time programmes for different specialisms – learning disability, VI, HI etc. and also in-service courses and some e courses. At present, there are many applications for the Masters in Special Education and there is good collaboration with the resource centre regarding placements for students on the VI course. It is widely agreed that more work on inclusion is needed throughout all teacher education courses.

The Institute/resource centre provides support for professional development by:

- Providing advice for teachers – in advance of learner placement where possible This may take the form of whole school VI awareness as well as subject specific courses;
- Preparing and evaluating individualised education programme for learners with VI together with school staff;
- Running seminars/lectures for teachers and educators (but these are not compulsory);
- Holding seminars for specialist teachers (science, social studies, mathematics, physical education etc.);
- Coordinating a study group for teachers of learners with VI;
- Providing support for after-school teachers of sport, music etc.

The headteacher runs group meetings to provide on-going support for the itinerant teachers from Institute. However, one parent commented that some teachers from the resource centre would benefit from additional support to integrate themselves more effectively into the mainstream system. This may help to include more of the 'additional' programmes into the regular school and lead to a less demanding schedule for learners with VI.

Although there is no formal training for learning support assistants, on the job training is provided as assistants work alongside the learner with the itinerant teacher. One assistant has learned Braille in this way and also developed skills in ICT. Assistants also join any training provided for teachers at school, although this may be on a voluntary (and unpaid) basis.

There is at present a programme of training for headteachers. This focuses on leadership, management and administrative issues with no input on special educational needs or inclusion.

Support for learner and family involvement

Support for learners and their families is provided by the Institute/resource centre. The key tasks include:

- Visiting children with VI at home;
- Running seminars for parents of children with VI;
- Holding meetings, workshops and training for parents (of pre-school children and those in compulsory basic education) and providing support by e mail;
- Providing intensive tuition for learners with VI on mobility and orientation, computer skills and typing and self help and independence.



Parents are able to choose the regular school for their children but only if the learner will be able to meet the national standards. If children have a more severe cognitive disability (and are not able to meet the goals of mainstream school), they will attend a special school. Parents make a request to the Commission for Guiding Children with Special Needs, who make a decision about the school, the level of additional support to be provided and what the school needs to do. Parents can appeal to the Commission about the decision and get a second opinion. If a school does not provide the help set out by the Commission, parents can talk to school inspectors. Parents would like decisions from the Commission to be made more quickly and feel that they should be more involved to further develop their confidence in professionals.

Children can go to a regular school without a decision/additional support from the Commission and currently schools tend to accept all learners as their numbers are low. Parents can also decide to educate their children at home.

The 2 learners with VI interviewed by the project team enjoy school. Patricia, in particular found that the tactile models made by itinerant teachers and school staff really help learning. She said that her classmates are friendly and help her every day e.g. carrying her PC between classrooms.

Staff at Patricia's school (the deputy headteacher, in particular) stressed that she participated fully in all school and leisure activities and enjoys positive relationships.

One parent representative interviewed told us that parents sometimes feel alone and don't know what to do or who to talk to. They may be passed from person to person before any support is received. Prior to the development of the resource centre, early support was non-existent and the parents of one blind child had travelled to Graz in Austria to seek help. This same parent feels that the UNCRPD is influencing change – but that, although politicians may know about it, it is not high priority. When resources are allocated, there is little follow up regarding how it is spent. The supply of adequate books for school – at the time they are needed - is a particular problem and source of discrimination.

While the new law (for September 2013) says that children have a right to choose special or mainstream school, this parent says that: 'this is not the right right'. What is needed is implementation of the right to support and to resources. Under the current system, the Commission focuses on quantity of support – not quality.

Most parents now support inclusion and want their children at home rather than in a residential school. Additional support is provided through self-help groups and the Union for the Blind also run an annual camp for children with VI and their parents. While this gives children contact with other children with similar disabilities, parents also have the chance to meet. Separate activities are organised to increase the children's independence.

From a parent's perspective, some important factors in making inclusion work are:

- the availability of a teaching assistant (supported by law);
- the teacher's sensitivity to learner needs;
- increased flexibility of support time (e.g. time used to teach priorities such as independent travel, needing daily input, while specialist teacher only visits once per week);
- a more responsive system to produce resources for learners with VI with funding from Ministry.



One parent interviewed felt strongly that some parts of the curriculum were not useful for her son and that there should be more flexibility to meet the needs of individual learners in areas such as life skills. She did however greatly appreciate the e-mail contact with teachers and the fact that they were responsive to any suggestions that she made.

A final point was raised regarding after school support for learners with disabilities. At present school can finish as early as 13.00 and there are no activities available. This can have an impact on parents who may have to reduce their working hours.

Resources for learner support

With regard to the provision of support to learners and families throughout Slovenia, a problem, in particular with a low incidence disability such as VI, is the small number of learners spread over a large geographical area. Formerly, resources for this group were concentrated in Ljubljana and learners from other areas could make use of the residential provision. Now however, a model is needed to resource support in local schools.

The Commission for Guiding Children with Special Needs assesses the needs of learners. They currently work with the 9 recognised categories of need including children who have: intellectual disabilities, speech and language related issues, physical disabilities, long term illnesses, special educational needs in any area of learning, emotional and behavioural disorders or who are blind and partially sighted or deaf and hard of hearing. A final group is children who have multiple disabilities. Autism was formerly considered to be a long-term illness but the new law (September 2013) includes autism as a separate category.

The Commission processes and assesses applications from learners needing support and prepares professional statements. The 23 district commissions all benefit from the professional advice of a core senate – 3 members including a psychologist from health or education, a special pedagogue and a doctor. If necessary, the senate is extended by psychiatrists or specialists in different disabilities.

The process of obtaining support is as follows:

Parents hand in an application form to the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia

The Commission assesses/tests a child and writes a decision or statement setting out: the school, special equipment, hours of special help (at school and/or at a specialist Institute), ways of testing/assessing, adaptations needed etc. This statement may be for one year or longer. For younger children the statement may be for a shorter period, in particular if the child's condition is likely to change.

The Commission recognises the rights of learners to an education that includes:

- Professional assistance for additional lessons – 1-5 hours weekly
- Physical help for learners with a severe physical disability
- Additional aids/equipment
- An individual educational plan (drawn up by the school based on the recommendations of the Commission).

At present support assistants are only provided for learners with physical disabilities. The new law, due in September 2013 may change this and provide such support for learners with other disabilities. This is widely considered to be a priority for learners with VI as such support has a big impact on the quality of provision for such learners and is currently provided only for some learners by their local municipality.



The need to use staff resources with care is, however also recognised. One special teacher pointed out: 'the aim of being included is being as much as possible independent.' Although parents want an assistant for their child, they don't realise that this can cause isolation. The Union of the Blind feel that the assistant is a second teacher for whole class and note: 'who wants to play with a child who has an adult with him all the time'.

In the case of learners with VI, the school contacts the Institute/resource centre to arrange support from the visiting specialist teachers. The new law may increase the working hours of itinerant teachers to 40 hours per week. Travel time is not included in this total and teachers often work additional time at home on e mails, calling parents and preparing materials.

The staff of Oscar Kovacic School feel that the support and additional resources provided for learners with VI (such as tactile models and diagrams) are good for all learners. However, more such resources are needed – also Braille and audio books and technical aids – as there are difficulties in meeting the needs of learners with VI across a number of schools. At present, schools pay the Institute for resources without additional funding, although technical aids may be funded by health insurance or by the Institute of Rehabilitation.

Stakeholders interviewed during the visit also felt that resources should be available to provide additional/specialist support during school time. At present, many learners with VI attend extra classes such as orientation and mobility after school, in some cases travelling to the Institute in Ljubljana, which leads to a demanding programme, in particular as tasks such as homework also take longer for these learners. One parent told us that her son has to catch up with homework at weekends and that this can have an impact on his social and leisure activities.

INCLUSIVE OUTCOMES

The changes made to the Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted children to provide a resource to support learners in mainstream has had many positive outcomes. The support provided is enabling learners to attend local schools and participate in the full range of curricular and extra-curricular activities, enjoying the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. In addition, the learners can receive the necessary specialist support and tuition from itinerant teachers from the Institute. Follow-up has shown that learners have made good progress in mainstream schools, both in academic and social learning and in the development of self-esteem.

This approach is raising awareness of disability in schools and communities throughout Slovenia as well as providing valuable professional development for staff from both the mainstream schools and the Institute, as both have been required to develop new skills and knowledge. A change in attitudes and the development of new competences have been noted in teachers and learners in the mainstream schools. The classes that include learners with visual impairment are said to be more considerate and sensitive with all learners more willing to help each other.

The new role of the Institute has also strengthened support for parents, although this cannot always be provided on a local basis. Overall, these developments have shown the value of working collaboratively within and across schools and services. Teamwork in school and with services beyond the school is considered essential for learners to be effectively included.



SUSTAINING THE INCLUSIVE PROCESS

The work carried out at the Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted Children has been monitored and evaluated at National level and outcomes used to inform further work. This research-based approach can be used to support further moves towards inclusion. Other research is underway on the inclusive classroom, early language teaching, developing an effective learning environment for learners with VI and early intervention.

All of the stakeholders interviewed during the visit were very positive about the new role of the Institute and felt that this model could also work for learners with other disabilities. Such a model requires more localised support centres to enable learners and parents to receive support in their local community and reduce the travel time of itinerant teachers, who may be travelling for up to 5 hours per day on top of their teaching hours, and covering up to 400 km per day.

It is widely agreed that early intervention plays a key role in the process of inclusion as this enables experienced staff to work with parents and plan with learners. The benefits of regular schools can be explained to parents, in particular the importance of social-emotional development. Close co-operation between Ministries and effective communication are seen as essential for the development of early intervention services which should be regarded as an investment, resulting in potential savings in the long term.

Further work is also needed to develop the capacity of teachers to meet a wider range of needs in the classroom and as one special teacher said: 'build their awareness of their own capability to work with diversity'. Particularly when resources are in short supply, it is not possible to have a teacher for every category of disability in class – even if this was seen as desirable. There is therefore a need for all teachers to have some knowledge of different needs – but also to realise that these learners have more commonalities than differences and that diversity is a fact of life and an asset in the classroom. Further professional development for teachers is needed (both initial teacher education and continuing professional development) supported by adequate resources to allay teachers fears about workload associated with inclusion.

Overall, there is a need to maintain expertise in areas such as low incidence disabilities (e.g. visual impairment, hearing impairment, multiple disabilities), including the knowledge and skills to apply these specialisms in subject contexts. Finally, flexibility is needed regarding the input from specialist teachers in order to make the most effective use of their time and expertise with greater flexibility in schools to enable them to respond readily to the needs of all learners.



KEY LEARNING POINTS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

The transformation of the Institute to a resource centre has highlighted a number of key points that would benefit from further discussion:

1. There is a need for services to be provided in local communities. While this is not an easy task for low-incidence disabilities – or for a country with a relatively sparse rural population, the ideal is to have a range of services in each region to address the needs of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools and to support parents and teachers. This should also include school places for learners with more complex needs close to home without the need for residential provision.
2. The use of learning support assistants requires further consideration. Currently assistants are provided only for learners in need of physical support. Clearly, there are many other learners who would benefit from such support and this raises an issue about the allocation of resources according to categories of disability. However, if assistants are provided, the method of working must be carefully planned to ensure that they work as a support to the class as a whole without segregating the learner with disabilities or over-protecting him/her so reducing independence.
3. In order to develop and sustain more inclusive practice, further attention is also needed to the issue of teacher education – both at initial and in-service levels. Increasingly teachers need to take responsibility for all learners and see dealing with diversity as a natural part of their work. There is also a need to maintain the expertise currently located in the special sector.
4. To further facilitate inclusive practice, more flexibility is also needed in terms of the curriculum and standards (in particular for learners with learning disabilities) and the allocation of resources – focusing on quality rather than quantity to ensure that each learner receives appropriate support.
5. For learners with VI, a central agreement should be put in place to ensure the adaptation of texts used in schools. Publishers should also be requested to supply e versions of books (for use solely by learners with disabilities). Although this may require some amendment to the copyright law, similar campaigns are running throughout Europe. (See links provided in the references section). Support for such action is provided by Section 9 of the UNCRPD which points to the need for governments to take appropriate measures to ensure that information, communications and other services are accessible.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

The changes made at the Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted Children in Ljubljana are making an impact on the opportunities available for learners with VI and more widely on attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Motivated by their own attitudes and beliefs rather than national legislation or international conventions, staff are highly committed to meeting the needs of learners and their families through inclusive practice, thereby increasing awareness and reducing discrimination.

From the schools visited, it was evident that the inclusion of a learner with VI in a class was beneficial to all learners as they learn to give clear explanations, to support others and accept difference. As well as this essential learning for their peers, inclusion also prepares learners with VI for life in a more holistic way and, as one of the itinerant teachers explained: 'We are working for life – not for one lesson'.

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Information on Books without Borders

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