



INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: SLOVENIA

1. Abstract

In Slovenia, pre-primary education is considered a separate level of the education system. The country has established an integrated approach to preschool education, combining education, play and childcare in preschool institutions. The basic tasks of preschool education are to support parents in comprehensive care for children, to improve the quality of family life and to create good conditions for optimal development of children's physical and mental abilities.

Preschool education is divided into two age groups of children: one to three years and three to six years of age or until their school admission.

As an example of good practice, we present Kindergarten Jelka – VRTEC JELKA from Ljubljana. Kindergarten Jelka is a public preschool organisation. It performs daily planning of early childhood education that includes education, upbringing and nutrition for children.

The kindergarten's primary goal is to provide and to take care of children's foundational needs and wellbeing. Furthermore, it offers opportunities for children's optimal development and provides equal opportunities for everyone, irrespective of their gender, social and cultural origins, religion or nationality. Education is based on understanding, tolerance, friendship, sincerity and sensitivity for others. The children are included in a safe and supportive environment for play and optimal development with high appreciation of their individual needs and capabilities.

Kindergarten Jelka is located in an urban environment. It takes care of 500 children, in 29 groups. The institution employs 103 workers, 63 of whom are professional staff. It has established strong co-operation with the parents, the local community and international partners. A great part of the kindergarten's philosophy and vision relates to continuous professional growth and development of the staff, teamwork and excellent co-operation at all levels of the kindergarten. Through teamwork, innovation, project work and international co-operation, it successfully extends its mission and co-operates with the local and the international community.

There are also 24 children with special needs who are included in regular groups and receive additional individual attention from special needs professionals, such as special pedagogues, a speech therapist and a psychical therapist. All children with special needs have adaptations according to their individual programmes. The kindergarten has developed systematic and strong co-operation with children's



families and other support advisory services for the families of children with special needs.

Various disabilities are present in the kindergarten, with children who have physical disabilities, those with learning disabilities, children with autistic spectrum disorder and others. A blind girl and a girl with diabetes have additional support assistants to help them overcome physical barriers.

The institution pays special attention and care to children from different social and cultural backgrounds, children from foster families and safe houses. Furthermore, the number of immigrant children is also increasing.

Individual adjustments of educational programmes for children with special needs in the kindergarten are prepared and carried out in co-operation with all the professionals, counsellor service and parents. The advisory and observation process currently includes 66 children with distinct developmental problems.

Kindergarten Jelka represents a model of good professional treatment of all the children involved, not just those with disabilities. In this way, the institution introduces expert-based upbringing educational work for socially vulnerable groups of children and their families in the field of early childhood education in Slovenia.

2. Inclusive features

Preschool accessibility

In Slovenia, preschool is easily accessible to all users. In accordance with the law (Kindergarten Act of 1996, officially consolidated text, Official Gazette of RS št.100 / 05 and the Law on the Placement of Children with Special Needs 2011, ZOUPP-1), parents can choose between a programme with the regular curriculum and programmes with adapted implementations. Kindergarten Jelka follows the regular curriculum programme for kindergartens. Children with special needs are included in regular groups, with a maximum of two in any one group; consequently, the number of children could be as low as six.

Children from the local community, those from socially disadvantaged families and children with special needs have priority for admission to the kindergarten.

The integration of children with special needs is based on the principle of inclusion. In the process of working with children with special needs, the emphasis is on various educational needs – particularly on children’s strengths – and less on their weaknesses.

In the process of adapted programme implementation and additional professional assistance for children in the kindergarten, the team of experts collaborates with other institutions involved in monitoring the development of individual children. Professional assistance is provided to some parents even as early as the time of the child’s enrolment in the kindergarten. The process continues in the co-operation with professional workers during the child’s lead-in period. The process of providing a child with adapted programme implementation and additional professional assistance abides by the principles of voluntariness, mutual agreement and data confidentiality for the welfare of the child and their family.

Active participation of all children

Active participation of all children is guaranteed through the children’s active involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating educational processes according to their chronological and developmental age.

Children are provided with a supportive learning environment and individual, joint and collective forms of work according to their individual needs and strengths. The educational work is process-oriented and ensures compliance with the developmental characteristics and individual needs. It takes place in working playing corners and in the implementation of daily routines.

Emphasis is placed on the importance of spontaneous children’s play, various learning environments and guided learning activities where all children, including



children with special needs, are enabled to actively participate on their own initiative and without any specific additional support from adults. All the children, including those with special and various educational needs, have the opportunity to express themselves through their strengths and are able to choose the content they are interested in. Great importance is placed on promoting positive self-esteem and self-confidence with respect to children's competencies.

Through the development of a process approach, the child's holistic development is at the forefront. Furthermore, there are no right or wrong answers, but there are a large range of various strategies, perception, expression and thinking. It is of great significance that children reveal strategies which help them learn about the world in which they live.

The professional staff prepare individualised programmes for all children with special needs, which contain certain adjustments according to the child's disability. Furthermore, individualised programmes are also prepared for children from different social and cultural backgrounds. Children's individual characteristics, abilities, interests, motivation, strengths and weaknesses are taken into consideration while planning adjustments and individualised programmes. Moreover, great importance is placed on planning possible forms and methods of work, allocating responsibilities, monitoring progress, working with parents, forms of necessary adjustments and collaboration with experts in relevant fields from other institutions (health, school, etc.).

Curriculum for kindergartens

The [curriculum for kindergartens](#) (1999, Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sport – in Slovenian) is applied when organising preschool educational work which ensures the application of the basic principles of educational work with preschool children.

The underlying principles are that of **equal opportunities and respect for diversity among children** and **multiculturalism**, which provide equal terms and conditions for each child's optimal development and the age group's characteristics, as well as individual differences in development and learning that should be taken into account. This principle ensures optimal conditions for the expression of differences arising from gender, social and cultural background and worldview. It enables children to select the content, activities and materials and allows them experiential learning through which they can learn about the nearby and wider environment.

The principle of active learning and providing opportunities for verbalisation and other modes of expression allows children to be active in learning. Each child is an individual, with their own way of learning, researching and exploring. Activities for children in kindergarten offer various opportunities to find their own answers to their questions and the same time require that they listen to each other. The child's



expression is an important independent activity which gives us guidelines for further planning and designing new objectives.

There is a constant commitment to the on-going guarantee of a comfortable and supportive environment for learning that facilitates both planned and unplanned guidance for the educators, as well as children's own initiatives.

The principle of co-operation with parents is also considered. Parents are the ones who can provide suggestions and concrete activities to enrich the kindergarten's work. When working with families, their privacy, culture, identity, language, worldview, values, beliefs, attitudes, habits and customs should be recognised.

In accordance with the instructions to the curriculum for kindergarten programmes with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance for children with special needs (adopted at 57. meeting SSSI, 17.4.2003), principles of integration and inclusions are also implemented. Furthermore, children with disabilities are provided with the normalisation of conditions in terms of life without exclusion and a common education in an appropriate environment. Special attention is dedicated to early detection and diagnosis and to providing appropriate support to the child.

In Slovenia, the education of children with special needs is based on the objectives and principles laid down in the laws governing individual fields of education and on the following objectives and principles:

- Equal opportunities and respect for a diversity of children
- Maintaining the balance between different aspects of the child's physical and intellectual development
- Parents' involvement in the education process
- Ensuring appropriate conditions that enable each child's optimal development
- Timely referral to an appropriate programme of education
- The provision of education and training as close as possible to the place of residence
- The integrity and complexity of upbringing and education
- Individualised approach
- Continuity of education programmes
- Interdisciplinarity.

Kindergarten Jelka conducts all of the above. Furthermore, it provides all its



professional workers with additional knowledge and additional professional training, ensuring continuous teamwork, experience sharing and networking with relevant advisory services and institutions.

3. Inclusive highlight

Kindergarten Jelka includes children with special needs with a variety of disabilities – such as intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, physical disabilities, learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorder – who need special implementation of programmes for preschool children with additional professional assistance. A blind girl and a girl with diabetes receive additional support assistants to help them overcome physical barriers. The kindergarten also includes other children who have different difficulties and the need for individual programme adjustments, such as children of immigrants, socially disadvantaged children and children from foster families and safe houses.

All children with special needs have adaptations according to their individual programmes in the following ways:

- A reduced number of children in the group.
- Additional individual professional assistance and support is carried out in specific groups according to the type and degree of disability, or disturbances in the department or outside the department, but also individually in the department or outside the department.
- Advisory professional assistance.
- Adaptation of the site and facilities in accordance with the instructions tailored to programme implementation and in accordance with special educational needs.
- Space adjustment: ensure adequate space (intimate playing corners) for individual work, special equipment (e.g. a special chair for children with physical disabilities, various orthopaedic aids, accessories for feeding, communicator, wheelchairs, etc.).
- Physical assistance: an assistant is provided for children with physical disabilities.
- Time adjustment: anticipating additional time in various functions, movement and integration of verbal description with their own sensory/motor experience. Enabling the corresponding transitions between different activities, constant routine. Checking a child's understanding.
- Adjustments in the programme implementation: the use of additional



teaching aids to promote and graph motor skills, visual resources, and other incentives.

Some examples of adjustments for children with visual impairment:

- A constant assistant to overcome physical barriers and encourage independence.
- Spatial adjustment: permanent space planning, tactile markings for orientation on fences, doors and floors. Adjustments to the playroom for free passage.
- Marking paths for guidance, tactile markings, and different tactile structures (floor mark from the entrance of the kindergarten to the playroom, the playroom entrance, bathroom and toilet; a permanent place in the group is established).
- All the children's names indicated in Braille in the dressing room.
- Toys that develop all the senses and compensatory skills.
- Application of specific natural materials, designs and models.
- Allowing extra time for characterisation, demonstrations and familiarising themselves with new content, in facilities and movement, and integration of verbal description with their own sensory-motor experience.
- Communication: verbal announcing, concrete orientations, description of events.
- Specific experience and active learning: allowing various multi-sensory experiences, tactile guidance with verbal support and explanation.
- Additional training of all professionals who works with the visually impaired child, best practice exchange, observation lessons and regular visits to Ljubljana's Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted Children.

The kindergarten not only includes children with special needs, but also those with various additional educational needs who need more help and individual treatment.

Such adjustments are performed for immigrant children, first- and second-generation immigrants and refugees. Children come from Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Bulgaria, USA, Serbia, the Czech Republic and the other countries. The professionals make sure to create a positive, welcoming environment for acceptance and inclusion of the newly arrived children and adults. In preparing the adjustments, they take into account the child's characteristics, language understanding, social inclusion and parents' involvement. Teaching the Slovene language is the domain and responsibility of all professionals



in the kindergarten. In doing so, they pay particular attention to the fact that the child's culture is preserved and that they strengthen the child's personal cultural identity, as opposed to assimilation. They encourage all children and adults to engage in intercultural communication. Children are encouraged and supported to present their own culture and language to their peers on various occasions. Professionals make sure to provide documents translated into the languages of immigrant children included in the group; they take care to prepare decorations, applications and write the names of all children in a foreign language. They encourage visits from parents, grandparents, various cultural associations, civil initiatives from the children's countries of origin and together they celebrate, sing, dance, prepare desserts and learn about different cultures.

The kindergarten enables individual treatment of children who come from socially disadvantaged families, children of parents with lower intellectual abilities and gifted children. It also includes children from abusive families and whose mothers have resorted to the safe house, children whose parents are drug addicts and families where one of the parents is in prison. Furthermore, the number of cases of children whose parents are in the process of separating and cannot agree on custody is increasing.

The kindergarten provides all professionals with on-going additional training and networking with relevant support institutions, such as health centres, developmental clinics, mental health centres and social work centres. They are well aware of the importance of the early detection. Good teamwork, co-operation among teachers, assistants and advisory workers, regular observations and early detection facilitate necessary adaptations to the programme. An internal questionnaire that helps to detect deviations and systematic observation and evaluation of children can also be used for help. Parents are actively involved in the process.

4. Other evidence of quality IECE

Kindergarten Jelka is well aware of the importance and impact of the environment in which it operates. It is located in the Bežigrad district, which is part of the municipality of Ljubljana, the capital city of the Republic of Slovenia. It benefits from the advantages of the urban environment, such as proximity to the urban infrastructure and institutions that are part of the surrounding area. It overcomes limitations in an innovative way, as there are garden plots in all kindergarten units, and the children are taken on trips and are actively connected to the wider environment.

Kindergarten Jelka was awarded a plaque by the capital city of Ljubljana in 2008,



which is the highest recognition in Ljubljana. The plaque was awarded for the kindergarten's work, which promotes the capital city of Ljubljana and presents it as a city of progress, co-operation and personal and collective growth for people of all generations.

The plaque of the capital city of Ljubljana was rewarded for following project activities:

- Early integrated English language learning
- Attainment of the certificate of ECO-Schools and Eco-flag and awards for outstanding achievements in improving the environment of the school and the local community by the European Eco school
- Representing Ljubljana at the children's international carnival in Opatija, Croatia
- Humanitarian actions to help children at home and abroad (collecting toys and urgently needed supplies for orphaned children in Bosnia, raising funds for children with cerebral palsy, children with physical disabilities, etc.)
- Collaboration with senior citizens and people with disabilities
- Co-operation with other kindergartens (Mengeš, Izola, Škofja Loka, Maribor, Ptuj and Kranjska Gora)
- Raising awareness about the importance of healthy living among young people, their parents and grandparents in terms of intergenerational integration.

It is proud of the sports programme Gibalček, under which it co-operates with the University Rehabilitation Institute, Soča, which is Slovenia's central institution for rehabilitation, the Institute of Sport Planica, Faculty of Sport, Sport Alliance of Slovenia, the Ski Club-SD Journalists, Sport and Youth society. It has actively participated in preparing a national sports programme, entitled *Mali sonček* (little sunshine).

Kindergarten Jelka has received many awards for quality work, including the award for Best Sports Kindergarten from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports for the following school years: 2005/2006, 2006/2007, 2007/2008, 2009/2010, 2010/2011, 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015.

Parents have praised the management for employing a highly educated workforce and promoting teamwork, continuous professional training, exchange of experiences and transfer of excellent practice.

The kindergarten is active and well recognised at the local as well as at the international level. It co-operates actively with the founder of the municipality of



Ljubljana and the competent ministries.

It has engaged in international co-operation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since 2011, enjoys international status as an Eko kindergarten and has been a Planet Earth-friendly nursery since 2013.

In co-operation with its partners Neuron d.o.o. and Pro Eco d.o.o., in the framework of the Ministry of Education and Sport and with financing from the European Social Funds, the kindergarten prepared and produced e-learning materials called *Igraje z Jelko* (Playfully with Jelka). The material is aimed at preschool children from the age of four, with the assistance of adults for learning, consolidating and upgrading educational content, which is the subject of the curriculum for kindergartens. The [material is available to users](#) free of charge online.

In co-operation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of the Republic of Slovenia and the Slovenian Beekeepers Association, the kindergarten participates in the annual pan-Slovenian campaign Traditional Slovenian Breakfast. At the Ministry's initiative at the event in 2012, it hosted the President of the Republic of Slovenia.

As an example of excellent practice, in September 2015 it hosted Dejan Zidan, the current Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of the Republic of Slovenia, and Marian Jurečka, the Czech Minister of Agriculture. The purpose of the visit was to present the Czech delegation with a way to show the children the benefit of bees, the work of the beekeeper and honey breakfast, which was introduced to Europe by our ministry. More information is available in the [news article on the Ministry's website](#).

For over 20 years, the kindergarten has been conducting integrated early language learning for children age three and upwards, in an innovative way.

In co-operation with the National Education Institute it carries out the following innovation projects:

- Playing English (2009–2014)
- Therapy dog to visit children and support for early mathematics learning (2010 onwards)
- Emerging literacy (2013 onwards)
- Children's play in a multilingual and multicultural environment (from 2015 onwards).

Since 2001, Kindergarten Jelka has been actively involved in international projects and partnerships:

- 2001–2004: Co-ordinating Socrates-Comenius-School development project:



‘Young learners – Integrating second language at early age’ in partnership with Bulgaria, Italy, Germany, Poland, Romania, Spain (Palma de Majorca), Spain (Canary Islands), Finland and Malta.

- 2004–2007: Co-ordinating Comenius-School Partnerships: ‘Playfully Europe’ in partnership with England, Finland, Poland, Spain and Turkey.
- 2007–2009: Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP)-Comenius partnership: ‘[The Earth – Our Common Home](#)’ in partnership with Bulgaria, England, Finland, Romania, Poland, Hungary, Turkey.
- 2009–2012 LLP-Leonardo da Vinci partnerships: ‘[On the job learning in social profit](#)’, in partnership with Belgium, Bulgaria, Austria and Spain. Star Project award.
- 2012–2014: LLP-Comenius Partnership: ‘Let’s make our world more green and clean’ in partnership with Greece, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, England, Italy, Romania, Spain and Turkey.

The kindergarten continues with international co-operation in the framework of the **Erasmus+ programme**:

- Key Action 1 – mentoring kindergarten for staff training for HIVSET-professional technical school in Belgium, March 2016
- Key Action 2 – strategic partnerships for the transfer of excellent practice and innovation: ‘**Professional and organisational growth & work based learning**’ in partnership with institutions from Belgium, Austria, Finland, Great Britain, Ireland, Bulgaria, Romania and the Czech Republic from 2014 to 2017.

It hosted four Comenius assistants from Greece, Finland, France and Lithuania, as well as volunteers from France and Egypt.

Active and continuous collaboration also takes place with the following institutions:

- Pedagogical Institute: Step-by-step programme (conducted in three units of the kindergarten), staff training, active participation and presenting our model of professional development for preschool educators at an international conference in November 2015.
- Ministry of Internal Affairs: co-operation with police, sports department and police academy.
- Faculty of Ljubljana and Koper:
 - Department of Preschool Education: teaching practice, exemplary performances, visits, practical performances and practice of students



- Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation.
- Preschool Education School and Gymnasium of Ljubljana, Koper, Jesenice and Kamnik, with teaching practice placements, practical performances and practice of students:
 - intergenerational co-operation
 - performances and workshops for children
 - therapy dog visiting kindergarten in conjunction with mathematics innovation project.
- Secondary School of Nursing: carrying out voluntary work.
- Primary schools surrounding the kindergarten through various forms of work with a view to a smooth transition to school and a single co-ordinated operation of:
 - the use of the gym in Bevk Elementary School and Sava village
 - children's visits
 - performances for children.
- Health Care Bežigrad, Centre of Social Department, National Institute for Public Health, National Centre for Mental Health:
 - dental education and health prevention in kindergarten
 - co-operation with variety of experts.
- Special Education Centre Janez Levec
- Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted Children, Ljubljana
- Youth and the Society for Inclusion
- Library of Ljubljana
- Institute for Sustainable Development: school eco garden.
- TVU – week of lifelong learning
- The Association of Slovenian Sports People with Disabilities
- Homes for elderly people.

Work force

Each group of children has one direct preschool teacher and preschool teacher's assistant. In the first age period, with children aged one to three, they must be simultaneously present at least six hours per day and in the second age period for at



least four hours a day.

In accordance with the law (Kindergarten Act of 1996, official consolidated text, Official Gazette of RS št.100 / 05), the preschool teacher and preschool teacher's assistant implement the educational programme. Furthermore, the kindergarten employs an advisory worker, special needs teacher, an organiser of the health hygiene regime, an organiser of the diet, and technical staff such as cookery staff, a laundry worker, and cleaning and maintenance staff.

Kindergarten preschool teachers have degrees or diplomas obtained through education or study in the field of early childhood education. Alternatively, they have pursued higher education in the appropriate area and completed the education or study programme for advancement in the field of early childhood education.

Assistant preschool teachers have secondary education obtained through the educational programme for preschool education or have completed the fourth year of gymnasium and a professional course for work with preschool children.

Advisory workers must have a university degree in an appropriate field and pedagogical qualifications.

The organiser of health hygiene regime and the organiser of the food must have at least higher professional education in the appropriate area.

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