

Literature review for IO1 (Slovenia)

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Key question

Which competences, including professional values and reflections, are needed/considered important for creating innovative approaches to socially inclusive ECEC (for 0-8 years old children) in urban environments in Europe?

Pulec Lah and Košir (2015) underline that for better social inclusion (of students with special needs) a specific mode of collaboration between general education teachers and special educators is necessary, namely the so-called collaborative or team teaching. The importance of collaboration between different professionals was stressed also in the work of S. Pečjak (2008, p. 84): “as a rule, the most effective form of assistance in order to enhance social inclusion is possible through joint, consultative work of the expert - usually a school counselor - and a teacher.”

Although Pulec Lah and Košir’s (2015) research was focused on collaborative work of teachers and special educators in elementary schools, working with students with special needs, a parallel can be drawn with creating innovative approaches to socially inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) practices. In order to create socially inclusive ECEC practices, as it is already well known from the CoRe report (Urban, Vandebroek, Peeters, Lazzari & van Laere, 2011) that teachers/ECEC institutions cannot be left alone in developing a competent system, but also team work is considered as an important factor of its development, also in this case ECEC teachers need support from other professions and colleagues. This becomes even more important, since Pulec Lah and Košir (2015) report that teachers often assess their work as not being enough trained for inclusion of children with pronounced special needs, so “the collaboration between general education teachers and special educators is therefore considered one of the most important and crucial factors for creating an inclusive learning environment and meeting various needs of a larger number of students in inclusive settings” (Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 288).

In the work of Pulec Lah and Košir (2015) it is also stressed that one of the factors which contribute to the successful social inclusion of children with special needs is a teacher with his/her beliefs, knowledge and practices in relation to children with special needs. In order to promote social inclusion, affection is important, which is modelled in everyday teaching, interaction with students and in the feedback given to students (Schwab, Gebhardt, Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2013, in Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 290; van Garderen, Stormont & Goel, 2012, in Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 290), and last but not least in relation to professionals who offer assistance to students with special needs (Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 290). But on the other hand, Slovenian teachers have often a feeling, that they “remain alone in a class with a diverse population, and they find themselves not sufficiently trained

to work with students with pronounced disabilities" (Magajna, Pečjak, Peklaj, Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Bregar Golobič, Kavkler & Tancig, 2008, in Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 291; Pulec Lah, 2013, in Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 291). One of the important factors that could contribute to raising the competence of teachers to work with students with special needs, it is therefore "carefully planned system of support for teachers" (Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 291), as well as "intensive development of specific knowledge and skills and gaining practical experience in team-teaching" (Pulec Lah & Košir, 2015, p. 305) already at the level of initial training of future professionals (ibid.).

On the level of ECEC and being competent to work with children with different backgrounds, Jager (2013) have researched the provision of social inclusion of disadvantaged children in connection to pre-service training of ECEC professionals. Based on a review of relevant literature, research, and other documents, Jager (2013) stressed that high-quality ECEC programs and competent professionals, who are sensitive to issues of social inclusion, significantly contribute to ensuring social inclusion of disadvantaged children – this started to prove (also) during 3-years project *The increase of social and cultural capital in areas with a Roma population*.¹ The contribution of ECEC in this context is more specifically described in the scientific monograph *Let's start at the beginning: the contribution of ECEC programs for social inclusion of Roma* (Vonta, 2013), in which authors are describing different strategies and approaches towards ensuring social inclusion of Roma. During the project, different activities were implemented in a way of action research project, e.g. programs for empowerment of Romani parents for supporting their child's development; activities for children, who are not enrolled in ECEC institutions and for their parents; 'getting-to-know-you' days; development of culturally and linguistically appropriate materials for children; professional development activities for ECEC professionals; monitoring and mentoring activities. At the end of the 3-years project, an external evaluation was made, which proved that "early education of socially disadvantaged children in the context of quality ECEC programs, ECEC institutions and local community can contribute the most in regard to tackling social exclusion, as it has already started to show during the implementation of this project." (Gril, 2013, p. 350).

Some of the factors, argued in the article of Jager (2013) as important for ensuring social inclusion and associated with the provision of social inclusion, are (1) respect for diversity, inclusion, equal opportunities, justice in education; and (2) child-centered and culturally, developmentally and individually appropriate practice. Jager (2013) made a review of competencies of graduates of Early Childhood Education study programs at all three Faculties of Education in Slovenia, which they develop during studying on the first level, and can be linked to provision of social inclusion of disadvantaged children. Author has focused only on those competences that can be linked to the provision of social inclusion of disadvantaged children, namely on competencies that can be linked to respect for diversity, provision of inclusion, equal opportunities and equity in education and training, and to a child-centered and culturally, developmentally and individually appropriate practice. Based on the review of competences that students are developing during their 3-years study, the author (Jager, 2013) concludes that in particular, competences in the field of understanding, considering, and respecting the characteristics of families and their (families') involvement in the educational process should be extended, especially in terms of taking into account their (families') opinions on child's development and learning, and involving them (families) in decision-making. Future ECEC

¹<http://www.khetanes.si/en-us> (13. 2. 2017)

professionals should develop also greater awareness about understanding the child as a competent and active individual who initiates learning and makes suggestions for himself/herself. Because the individual, at the time of the study period, can never be fully prepared for the demands that he/she will be facing in the process of pursuing a profession, Jager (2013) emphasise also the need for continuing professional development and reflection, which both enable adaptation to changes, with which educators are facing.

On the level of ECEC and being competent to work with children with different backgrounds, Jager (2015) had researched also the attitude of ECEC institution principals, ECEC staff and representatives of local communities towards implementation of ECEC programs for disadvantaged children – not separately and inclusively only for this group of children, but inclusively together with other children. With using the term ‘disadvantaged children’, Jager (2016, p. 150) tends “to comply with the classification of the OECD Directorate for Education (OECD, 2006, p. 98), where category C – children with special educational needs – includes children whose special educational needs arise primarily from socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. These children have a common background, generally recognised as disadvantaged, which the education strives to mitigate or overcome. In this group, the OECD (2006) includes children at risk of poverty, Romani children, migrants and others.” In the context of Jager’s research (2015, 2016), “these are disadvantaged children due to family social situation, Romani children, children with a migrant background (/.../, children whose parents are immigrants due to poor economic conditions in the environment from which they emigrated, refugees or representatives of minority cultures (Frederickson & Cline, 2010)) and other disadvantaged children” (Jager, 2016, p. 150). With the term ‘ECEC programs for disadvantaged children’ Jager (2015, 2016) considers them as “shorter programs for disadvantaged children (legally defined duration from 240 to 720 hours per year); activities for disadvantaged children who are not enrolled in ECEC institution (e.g. fairy tales, sports activities, creative workshops, etc.); activities for disadvantaged children who are already enrolled in ECEC institution (e.g. activities to promote learning a second language, home visits, etc.); other ECEC programs for disadvantaged children (participants in the survey were asked to state what those other programs are)” (Jager, 2016, p. 151).

Data was obtained on a representative sample of Slovenian ECEC institutions principals (29.94% of all ECEC institutions principals in Slovenia) and on 203 early childhood teachers by means of quantitative pedagogical research. Besides that, data was obtained also by means of qualitative pedagogical research (35 interviews; semi-structured and focus groups interviews), with 59 respondents (ECEC institutions principals, early childhood teachers, and representatives of local communities). Here we present only a few results relevant to the selected topic, namely ECEC institutions principals were saying that early childhood teachers are not so well trained to work in contexts of diversity as they think they are trained for the ‘regular’ work (Jager, 2015). This results are in close connection with the research of T. Vonta and A. Gril (2014, p. 117), who found out that ECEC institutions principals see competencies of teachers to operate within the contexts of diversity as important, but on the other hand, they are saying that early childhood teachers are not sufficiently trained to work in a context of diversity. The same was found out from self-assessment of early childhood teachers about how well they are trained to work in contexts of diversity: again, the self-assessment is lower as compared to self-assessment for the ‘regular’ work (Jager, 2015). In this regard, T. Vonta and A. Gril (2014, p. 64-65) have found out that early childhood teachers statistically

significant estimate that during training for the profession (pre-service) they develop significantly less competences than they need them to practice the profession or they acquire them predominantly at the level of *what and why* (knowledge) and *values* (it is important, it is necessary etc.) and to a lesser extent they develop competencies at the level of *practice* (I know what, why and I know how).

We can say that ECEC institutions principals and early childhood teachers are self-aware about lack of knowledge for working in contexts of diversity, but on the other hand they expose also the importance of intrinsic factors, which are important when working in such contexts, for example inner motivation for self-education, (past, gained) experiences of teachers, empathy, sensibility, 'love for children', 'feeling for children' (Jager, 2015). What is also important to stress is the necessity to be a professional in terms of working with families with different background, or as one early childhood teacher said in a focus group interview (Vonta, 2013, p. 122): "In modern times, we cannot deal with prejudices! When you enter the ECEC institution as a professional, you have to be able to 'erase' them!"

In research (Vonta in Gril, 2014; some results presented already above), which was focused on how important are for Slovenian teachers and for ECEC institutions principals the contemporary teacher's competences and how much they were present in the process of preparation for their job (education), a research was done on stratified sample of 110 ECEC institutions (ECEC institutions principals) or approximately one third of all ECEC institutions in Slovenia, and 320 early childhood teachers at those schools (Vonta and Gril, 2014). On five-point scale, early childhood teachers and ECEC institutions principals evaluated each item from CoRe list of individual competences regarding holistic development, learning strategies, communication and participation, parents and local community, team work, context of diversity, early childhood education in broader context, health, care and social care (Urban, Vandebroek, Peeters, Lazzari, & van Laere, 2011) for importance and presence in education/preparation for job (pre-service training). Individual competences were listed randomly but separately for knowledge, practice and values. For each category, inner reliability was measured, and new variables were calculated: average evaluations for each category (24 for importance and 24 for presence in education). As not all distributions of new variables were normal, nonparametric statistical tests for testing hypothesis were used.

Most important according to teachers' and leaders' opinions are categories of competences that are directly linked with the work in the classroom (holistic development, strategies of learning, communication and participation). As statistically less important categories of competences, they evaluate competences that are not directly related with the work in the classroom but represent foundation for quality work in the classroom and connecting children and staff with real world outside the institution (like for example: parent and community involvement, context of diversity, broader context of ECEC). Those competences that are for them less important nowadays were not enough present in the process of education for job. It means that we need changes in programs at Educational Faculties that prepare future early childhood teachers for job and continuous professional development system especially in regards to:

- cooperation with parents, community members and colleagues and institutions;
- context of diversity and broader context of early childhood education and care in order to be responsive on social justice questions in ECEC, and to be open and proactive towards diversity, social inclusion, multiculturalism;

- connect all three levels of competences (knowledge, practice and professional values) with reflection and be involved in team work and broader context of early childhood education and care.

Disharmony in evaluating importance of the same competences' categories on the level of knowledge, practice and values was also found out. For example, teachers and headmasters evaluated that it is important to have knowledge and values in category 'context of diversity', but importance of practices in the same category were evaluated as less important. In other words, for them it is important to know about diversity and to appreciate diversity, but not so important to know how to cope with it in everyday life in ECEC institutions. It can be concluded that this kind of opinions are reflecting in our practice.

It was also found out that ECEC institutions principals evaluated the importance of different competences just a little bit higher than teachers did. It is hard to expect that ECEC institutions principals in this case will be able to create conditions for opening the school towards the life in a community and to be able to drive ECEC towards the professionalization.

Authors of this research (Vonta & Gril, 2014) asked themselves: '*Are our teachers prepared for new challenges in ECEC?*' They concluded that there are gaps in their readiness to open their spheres of activities towards parents, community and life outside of the institution and towards contribution of ECEC to social cohesion. But the burden for those changes should not be put only to the teachers' shoulders: we need changes in leadership on the level of ECEC institutions, and also changes in pre- and in-service training regarding topics and methods.

Sub questions

Which national academic debates on social inclusion (if any)? (definitions, ideas, critiques)

In general, Slovenia is not among the countries with high levels of inequality, but there is visible discrepancy between observed poverty and subjective perception of inequality. This is confirmed also by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, where they are increasingly faced with the issue of poverty and social exclusion of Slovenian citizens, with particular emphasis on the needs of children and young people. Poverty and social exclusion of children and young people is treated in conjunction with the general level of poverty and social exclusion in society and in close relation to poverty and social exclusion of their parents (Podgornik, 2014, p. 202-203). Children from such families generally do not receive adequate incentives and support. Since they drop out of school, they lack the necessary confidence and are often socially less-equipped, with fewer opportunities for personal development, and more difficulties to obtain a proper education, they are less integrated into society and have fewer employment opportunities (Cvahte, 2004, in Podgornik, 2014, p. 203).

In Slovenian context, academic debates or research on social inclusion exclusively are quite rare, also if we cross 'social inclusion' with 'education', we find only a few works, mainly diplomas of undergraduate students about 'social inclusion of children with special needs'. Works or research on 'social inclusion and ECEC' can be found even rarely. There are more examples of works or research on 'social exclusion', mainly on 'social exclusion of pupils with special needs/disabilities, young people

(youngsters), disabled persons, elderly people, prisoners, unemployed persons, Roma', and more can be also found under 'social integration'.

'Social exclusion', as defined in *Socialni razgledi 2006 (Social Views 2006)*, is important to understand in relation to (and this also applies to social vulnerability), "closed association with inappropriate access to opportunities and education and training institutions, bad position at the labor market and low income. The basic assumption is that unemployment and reduced social spending threatens social participation and integration as well as the social inclusion. Unemployment and lack of income are causing further deprivation and disadvantage in other areas of life" (*Socialni razgledi 2006, 2006, in Vehovar, 2011, p. 114*).

In 2011, a scientific monograph with articles of Slovene authors on 'social cohesion in education' was published, and was (among others) edited by three Slovene authors (Borota, Cotič, Hozjan & Zenja, 2011). This monograph, as written in one of the book reviews, »is a thorough and widely conceived consideration on social cohesion in education« (Rener, 2011, p. 8). As the term 'social cohesion' includes also 'social inclusion', we will draw some examples how different authors in this scientific monograph understand and implement this term.

The term community cohesion has recently become highly considered and is associated with the concepts of inclusion and exclusion and differentiation of human beings. In order to achieve cohesion in the community, it is necessary to take into account a wide range of issues, such as: access to education and employment, poverty and social inequality, social and cultural diversity, etc. In accordance with the socio-reproductive function of education, the concept of social cohesion is introduced also in the educational space. Regarding social cohesion in education, there are not only concerns about access to a variety of educational programs and the possibility of acquiring a level of formal education, but questions arise also about (in)direct realization of educational goals. So thinking about social cohesion in the field of education raises questions such as: development of social skills, empathy and altruism in children and adolescents, developing talents, care for children and youth with special needs, etc. (Hozjan, 2011, p. 38).

Authors Opara, Kiswarday, Kukanja Gabrijelčič and Rutar (2011) have dealt with terminological issues and dilemmas in ensuring social cohesion in education. By speaking 'social cohesion', all individuals and all social groups are mentioned; children and adults with special needs, gifted individuals, immigrants, Roma, different sexually oriented, all representatives of the majority culture, all representatives of all minority groups, from all cultural environments, and all generations. Social cohesion is the society's ability to hear all and each of them (Opara et al, 2011, p. 48). In this regard, they expose consideration about the use of 'labels', e.g. children with special needs, gifted pupils etc., especially, if they are value-oriented. Labels often strongly influence the development of subjective, exclusionary theories of teaching that can be implemented on a level of hidden curriculum. Subjective theories of teachers include beliefs, attitudes, values and expectations, which tend to be lower for children with special needs (include fear, pity, weakness, etc.). If a teacher does not reflect and change inadequate subjective theories, he/she can hamper the child's development of autonomy, a sense of self-worth and efficiency, and limits him/her in providing opportunities for active and initiative participation in the group (Opara et al., 2011, p. 59).

Last but not least,

»school system should with additional rights and measures through the provision of education opportunities in the long run exercise its part in creating the conditions for social cohesion. Among general objectives of the educational system, in the White Paper (2011, p. 28-29) also highlighted also the inclusiveness and the process of inclusion of children with special needs and integration of children who could have been excluded due to ethnic, social or any other differences. Education, which follows several times mentioned generally accepted civilizational values and norms - human rights and responsibilities, tolerance, respect, promoting mutual assistance and solidarity, concern for the environment that supports the knowledge and respect of intergenerational differences etc. - supports the goals of inclusion and integration.« (Krek & Vogrinc, 2011, p.92).

Which national and municipal education and policy contexts?

Early childhood education and care in Slovenia

ECEC in Slovenia is aimed at children aged 11 months to six years of age or to the starting age of compulsory primary education, and it is not compulsory. It is up to parents to decide whether to enroll their child in ECEC setting or not. Children remain and receive ECEC in the same institution (called "vrtec") until they start basic school (Taštanoska, 2015), so in Slovenia, there are no different services for young children in relation to their age.

ECEC in public ECEC institutions can be implemented in three different types of institutions (Odredba o pogojih za ustanavljanje javnih vrtcev, 1999, article 1):

- as an independent ECEC institution (*samostojni vrtec*) as public institutions;
- as a ECEC setting's unit located in a primary school (*vrtec pri osnovni šoli*);
- as a unit of ECEC institution - one or a few classrooms located in buildings away from the main ECEC institution (*enota vrtca*).

ECEC institutions may implement as to the needs of parents and children and in agreement with the municipality various programs: full day, half-day and part-time programs. The programmes are carried out by Early Childhood Teachers and Early Childhood Teachers' assistants (Taštanoska, 2015).

Early Childhood Teachers should hold an advanced former two-year studies education (ISCED level 5, abolished in 1992), a higher education degree (ISCED level 6) in early childhood education (in place since 1995) or a university degree (ISCED level 7) in early childhood education or from some other field (pedagogy, art, humanities, sociology) with a specialisation in early childhood education.

The required qualification for an Early Childhood Teacher's Assistant is an upper secondary vocational education in early childhood education (ISCED level 3) or general upper secondary school and passing a vocational course on working with young children (Zakon o vrtcih, Article 40).

Additionally, in environments with populations of Romani children, a profile of Roma assistant is involved in ECEC institutions and elementary schools (Strategija vzgoje in izobraževanja Romov v Republiki Sloveniji, 2004). Thus, in our ECEC institutions we can find staff with very different qualifications.

Challenges

In Slovenia, the number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is rising due to recent economic crisis and migration trends. According to the opinion of the ECEC institutions principals, children with disadvantaged background are enrolled in approximately 80 % of all public ECEC settings. But on the other hand, only 30 % of ECEC institutions implement ECEC programs for disadvantaged children. What is also surprising is the fact that children with disadvantaged background live in more than 80 % of municipalities, in which ECEC institutions operate, and not all of disadvantaged children are enrolled in the ECEC settings, but only 10 % of ECEC settings provide/implement activities for children, who *are not enrolled* the ECEC setting (Jager, 2015), even though those children are the most in need for quality ECEC programs, and the most in danger to become socially excluded.

The reasons for this situation are different, and one of them is for sure not enough free spaces in ECEC institutions, especially for children aged 0-3; but starting from Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), this should not be a reason for not doing anything for those children. Secondly, the rules for acceptance of a child into the ECEC setting are in majority based on the needs of employed parents (which means that a child of employed parents has an advantage in enrollment process if there are waiting lines to get in, unless a socially disadvantaged family brings a certificate from the governmental body that they are 'at risk', but this means they have to get this certificate and 'get labeled' again). And the third issue is low level of awareness of ECEC professionals about the importance of the early years of a child's life. The qualitative research (Jager, 2015) showed particularly low level of awareness of ECEC professionals about the importance of the 0-3 age period and quality incentives in this age period for a child's further development and success.

Low level of enrollment rate is significant especially for Romani children: in school year 2009/2010, only 50 % of Romani children were enrolled in ECEC setting one year before entering elementary school. What is even more surprisingly is the fact that many elementary schools do not pay any kind of special attention to the ECEC education of Romani children, and approximately 30 % of elementary schools do not have any data about ECEC education of Romani pupils (Vonta and Jager, 2013). This shows that elementary schools are not focused on activities, in which they could get prepared for future pupils.

Another issue is that more and more families are facing with financial difficulties, especially the ones from the disadvantaged backgrounds, whose children are the most in need for quality ECEC, and the most endangered to become socially excluded. But the paradox is that families can get higher child allowance, if a child is not enrolled in an ECEC setting. If this is the only source (or the biggest source) of money in the family, the question is how much of it goes for a child's development.

Which pedagogical approaches to social inclusion are recommended or used?

Lesar (2010) points out, that in the context of respect for diversity, the realization of equal opportunities, promoting inclusion, ensuring equity in education and training is needed to provide or create a school² as inclusive oriented institution. If we strive for the creation of such schools, we must ensure that the curriculum, teaching methods, classroom and school climate, etc. are not exclusive

² By using 'school' we mean all educational institutions, including ECEC institutions.

for any child. The role of teachers, who are daily faced with children who come from different backgrounds, families, cultures, are of different nationalities, socio-economic status, speak a different language, etc. is very important. In this context, each teacher must be capable of a high degree of responsibility and sensitivity for each child, as a joint education contributes to "the development of open societies and individuals capable of respectful coexistence and cooperation with others" (ibid.).

Inclusive school can be considered as a school, which aims to child-centered approaches in education, taking into account the cultural, developmental and individual appropriateness. Focusing on children, in the culture of teaching and learning "refers to approaches that in the center of the learning processes and what is happening in the school, put a child" (Vonta, 2009, p. 82). This approach is also consistent with the rights of the child, as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The role of the teacher in the child-centered approach is focused on designing learning experiences that stimulate children's development and co-development of physically secure environment and learning, and also psychologically safe community. The teacher is one who promotes choice, development of independence and cooperation, and stresses the cooperation and involvement of parents in the education process (Vonta, 2006: 6).

When revised national curricula for ECEC institutions was introduced, »the three-year undergraduate early childhood study-programme equipped the student teachers with those competences that correspond solely to the application of the multicultural approach.« (Turnšek, 2016, p. 54) Later on, a two-year postgraduate early childhood study-programme at the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana was introduced. Within the *Antidiscrimination and Diversity Training*, future ECEC teachers were provided with the »competences for transition to the intercultural and the anti-bias approach.« (Turnšek, 2016, p. 55).

Today, all three approaches are carried out in Slovenian ECEC institutions, and most common is still a mixture of multicultural and intercultural approaches (Turnšek, 2016, p. 61). But even though ECEC institutions »celebrate cultural diversity, they fail to address the real life problems of children from vulnerable (minority) families« (Razpotnik, Turnšek, Rapuš Pavel, Poljšak Škraban, 2015 in Turnšek, 2016, p. 62). But still, Turnšek (2013) is proving changes in terms of conceptual shift in professional practice grounded in the anti-bias approach. *Antidiscrimination and Diversity Training* »was evaluated and proven to have made a decisive impact on 1) teachers' understanding of the mechanisms of social construction and reproduction of social inequality; 2) their ability to design ECEC programmes that ensure equal opportunities for all children, and 3) knowledge and competence to actively oppose discrimination« (Turnšek, 2013, in Turnšek, 2016, p. 62).

Which practices open up the schools to parents and local neighborhoods?

Preschool Curriculum, national document in the field of early childhood education, outlines several objectives of preschool education. One of them is *improvement of information and cooperation with parents* (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007, p. 10). Preschool Curriculum (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007) identifies also principles for realization of the objectives; one of them is *principle of cooperation with parents (principle 2.11)*, referring to various aspects of cooperation with parents: providing parents with written and oral information about the programs in preschool, the right of parents to exchange information about their child, the right of parents to in-depth meetings with educators and

counsellors, the right of parents to gradual introduction of a child in a variety of preschool programs, and the right of parents to participate in planning of life and work of a preschool (ibid.; Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010). In doing so, educators must obey the Personal Data Protection Act, parents' right to privacy, and provide parents with continuous and systematic information about their rights and responsibilities (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007).

Cooperation among parents and ECEC institutions is an important aspect of quality early childhood education. Pre-School Institutions Act (Zakon o vrtcih, Official gazette of Republic Slovenia, 100/2005) explicitly requires cooperation with families. Preschools have to list forms and programs of cooperation with families in their yearly work plan. Parents have the right to participate in planning of life and work of a preschool and in children's classes in agreement with educators. They have also the right to participate in educational work, while respecting the professional autonomy of a preschool.

Involvement of parents in the educational process³

In this form of cooperation, parents and families are involved in the educational process itself. In most cases, parents or grandparents spend a day with their children in an ECEC setting, based on advanced joint planning between teachers and parents, for example: presentation of parent's profession, creating with clay, presentation of games from the past, etc. Or, teachers involve parents in planning of activities for the whole school year in advance, and in evaluation of implemented activities at the end of school year.

Migrant families, families with a minority background, socio-economically disadvantaged families are mainly invited (only) to present their language, culture, and country from which they come from.

Within the *Step by Step Network for Changing Quality*, coordinated by the Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education at the Educational Research Institute, some additional forms of involving parents in the educational process are encouraged. Among them, also home visits, provided by professional staff of an ECEC institution at the child's home, which have pedagogical function of getting to know the child's home learning environment and modelling activities that parents can use to encourage a child's learning and development. Home visits are intended also for building trust between the family and practitioners.

Additionally to description of the home visits above, in the scope of *Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education's* work, also visits and activities for children and families in Romani community are implemented. Special attention is paid to connect ECEC institutions and EC teachers with the Romani community members and families in the community. It is not necessary, that all children and their families from particular Romani community, in which this visits and activities are provided, are already involved in ECEC institutions (Vonta, 2013). The main objective of those activities is to build trust, which is particularly important in this kind of context.

³ Reference: the analysis, conducted in the scope of a European project *Enhancing quality in early childhood and care through participation* (Erasmus+; 2014-2017); Educational Research Institute is a partner in this project and the analysis was made by ERI.

In which ways do professionals deal with transitions in and out of pre-schools?

Even if transition period between different educational environments is very important factor which affects welfare of the child, in Slovenia this topic is usually overlooked or under emphasised. Connections between ECEC institution and elementary school are mostly limited to only a few (single) activities that take place between ECEC institution and elementary school, which is clearly insufficient for children (and parents) to actually gain the trust toward the new institution. Those activities are in most cases held on formal basis (parental meetings with elementary school teachers), or take the form of one-off visits of children from ECEC setting in elementary school (and vice versa).

When thinking about vulnerable children, especially Romani, situation with transition is even less favourable. Romani children often do not attend ECEC settings, so when they enter elementary school, they came there directly from home environment. The school environment and their home environment usually very differ one from another. Despite this fact, in the national evaluation study *The success of Romani pupils in Slovenian elementary schools* (Vonta et al., 2011), which was used to determine factors of school success of Romani pupils, we have found out that schools with Romani pupils conducted solely classical forms of cooperation and even more - schools argued that in the case of cooperation with Romani parents they do not make any differences. Only a handful of them carried out home visits, which would be from the perspective of establishing trust between practitioners and families needed a lot before entering primary school (Vonta and Jager, 2013, p. 145).

Based on the findings from the evaluation study *The success of Romani pupils in Slovenian elementary schools* (Vonta et al., 2011), staff at the Educational Research Institute (particularly dr. Tatjana Vonta) have developed an action research oriented project in the frame of a wider, ESF project *The increase of social and cultural capital in areas with a Roma population*.⁴ In this action research oriented project, focused on ECEC as a factor enabling social inclusion of Roma, several different project activities were developed. Although the whole project was aimed to soften transition among different learning environments (home – ECEC setting – elementary school) and contexts (majority – minority), activities in the framework of Introductory days ('getting-to-know-you' days) and Activities aimed to children and families not yet enrolled in the ECEC setting, were concretely focused on exploring ways how to reach trust of Romani parents and children and in such way contribute to soften the transition among various environments and contexts. All activities were taking place in 10 environments (ECEC settings/elementary schools) from September 2011 to August 2013.

Lepičnik Vodopivec (2009), in her article about cooperation with parents in shorter ECEC setting's programs, was interested in how ECEC institutions invite parents or their children to the enrolment, how ECEC institutions cooperate with parents of children included into a shorter ECEC program, and how parents assess shorter programs. On the basis of the results analysis, most independent ECEC institutions and ECEC institutions next to elementary school are in favour of personal invitation, whereas private ECEC institutions mostly practise 'open door days'. Children's gradual introduction as a manner of cooperation is identified in independent ECEC institutions as well as in private ones.

⁴ <http://www.khetanes.si/en-us> (13. 2. 2017)

Which government structures and policies support socially inclusive approaches?

White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (Krek & Metljak, 2011), as 'a steering document' in the field of education, in the chapter, in which presents the general principles of education, emphasizes the importance of respecting the right to non-discrimination of, emphasizing "especially non-discrimination of persons or children from culturally and socially disadvantaged backgrounds and immigrants, non-discrimination in the difference among genders and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities" (ibid., p. 13). It draws attention to the importance of positive discrimination for eliminating unfair disparities and creating equal opportunities for all. The concept of 'equality of educational opportunities' is often understood as equity in education, while "equality of opportunity of someone is in the society heavily dependent on his/her potential for education" (ibid., p. 14). It follows that the State in its efforts for a just society has to provide a wide range of measures that provides anyone with equal educational opportunities, such as: positive discrimination for children from socially and culturally disadvantaged backgrounds, providing free education to the same extent for each individual, enabling individualisation of the school system and teaching, ensuring inclusion of children with special needs, if this is more useful than education in special schools, etc. (ibid., p. 14-15).

In public ECEC institutions, national ECEC curriculum (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007) is implemented. National ECEC curriculum represents a professional basis for work in ECEC settings, and is based on analysis, proposals and solutions, which have framed the concept and system of ECEC in the ECEC institutions. Also, it is based on principles and objectives of the substantive reform (in 1995-1996) of the entire education system (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007, p. 7).

Turnšek (2016), in her recent article, explains what revised national curricula (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007) has brought into ECEC practice in terms of multicultural and non-discriminatory practices, which can be linked to approaches that promote social inclusion. The author wrote that "subsequent revised national curricula /.../ brought respect for human rights, especially those connected with cultural (language, religious, ethnic) identity and gender, as the key innovation. The curricula emphasised the importance of raising awareness of the individual and group differences, as well as the commitment to equity and 'non-discriminatory treatment' (Bahovec et al., 1999, p. 10), which provided an important incentive for the transformation and innovation of teaching practice." (Turnšek, 2016, p. 54)

Implementation of the curriculum and its objectives is based on principles which derive from a wide range of rights to choose and diversity. The principles for implementation of ECEC curriculum's objectives are the following (Bahovec et al., 1999, 2007, p. 11-17):

- The principle of democracy and pluralism (it means different programs, different theoretical approaches and models, different methods and ways of working with young children in kindergarten, flexibility in spatial and temporal organization of life and work in a ECEC setting, a varied selection of facilities and activities)
- The principle of openness of the curriculum, autonomy and professional responsibility of professional staff in ECEC institution (curriculum should be open to the enforcement of the various peculiarities of the environment, children and parents, to enforcement autonomy of ECEC staff and to be able for adaptation to different changes, to have a structure which will represent a sound basis for the highly professional work)

- The principle of equal opportunities and respect for diversity among children and the principle of multiculturalism (it means to take into account the characteristics of the development period, providing equal chances for the optimal development of each child, taking into account the principles of diversity and multiculturalism at the level of the selection of content, activities, and materials to enable children to experience and learning about world's diversity, ie. the things, people, cultures)
- The principle of allowing choice and diversity (programs for young children, of which parents can choose, the choice between the various activities in the ECEC setting, which does not mean the choice between activity and inactivity, between the targeted activity and free play)
- The principle of respecting privacy and intimacy (eg. the organization of space and time, which allows the withdrawal of a child from the group routines or to express individuality in their various activities)
- The principle of balance (balance between child development characteristics, on the one hand, and the curriculum on the other, between the different aspects of the child's physical and mental development and activities in specific areas)
- The principle of professional validity of the curriculum (in terms of the specific characteristics of the development and learning of children, as well as in terms of the differences between the two age periods, in terms of knowledge of science to identify areas of the curriculum, in terms of knowledge, educational sciences and cultural studies)
- The principle of conditions for the introduction of a new curriculum (continuous professional development of all ECEC staff)
- The principle of horizontal integration (integration of different fields of activities in the ECEC setting)
- The principle of vertical integration or. continuity (integration between family and ECEC institution, the ECEC institution and elementary school)
- The principle of cooperation with parents (publicly available written and oral notice to parents about the various offers of programs in ECEC setting, right to gradual introduction of a child in ECEC setting, respect of the private sphere of the family, its culture, language, worldview, attitudes, practices)
- The principle of cooperation with the local community (taking into account the diversity and possibilities of use of natural and socio-cultural learning resources in the immediate environment of an ECEC institution)
- The principle of team planning and implementation of early childhood education and professional training (of professional staff within the classroom, between classrooms and within ECEC institutions)
- The principle of critical evaluation (at the level of everyday interpersonal interactions in the classroom, at the level of planning of individual areas of activities in the ECEC institution, content and methods of work)
- The principle of development-process approach (at the forefront of early childhood education is the child's universal, i.e. mental and physical development, and in this context, the acquisition of basic knowledge of specific disciplines)
- The principle of active learning and providing opportunities for verbalisation and other means of expression (a constant concern for the ongoing provision of a comfortable and

supportive environment for learning that permit the educators' both planned and unplanned guidance, as well as taking into account the child's own-initiative, facilitating and encouraging the use of language in different functions).

The level of implementation of those principles in practice is hard to assess. From some research work (Vonta, Balič, Jager & Rutar, 2010; Vonta & Gril, 2014; Jager, 2015) we can conclude that the principle regarding equal opportunities and multiculturalism, team working, diversification in approaches represent a huge problem for practitioners.

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