

City Impression Ljubljana

Slovenia

Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia. Slovenia has 2,067,284 Inhabitants and Ljubljana has 289,518 inhabitants. The ethnic population breakdown in Slovenia as a whole is as follows: the majority, 83.1 %, is Slovenian; members of the Hungarian (0.3 %) and Italian (0.1 %) national communities are recognized national minorities. Every sixth person in Slovenia (16.5 %) declared himself or herself a member of a different ethnic group: nearly 2 % Serbs, 1.8 % Croats, 1.1 % Bosnians and 0.17 % Roma.

In the Republic of Slovenia, the education system is organized mainly as a public service delivered by public and private institutions and private providers holding a concession, which implement officially recognized or accredited programs. By law, public schools are secular and the school space is autonomous; in public schools, political and confessional activities are prohibited. By law, it is allowed to establish private educational institutions that provide their own programmes; thus one may opt for education in line with one's worldview.

Public kindergartens, primary schools, halls of residence for pupils, music schools and adult education organizations are founded by municipalities.

Pre-school education is aimed at children aged from one to six or the starting age of compulsory primary education and it is not compulsory. Public kindergartens welcome children aged 11 months or more. Children remain in the same institution and receive pre-school education and care there until they start primary school. Kindergartens provide education and care in two age groups:

- first age group: children aged 1 to 3 years and
- second age group: children aged 3 years to primary school age.

Education and other professional staff of public and private kindergartens that hold a concession follow the Kindergarten Curriculum, that is, the essential programme document adopted in 1999 that specifies pre-school education as part of the education system.

Primary and lower secondary education is organized in a single-structure nine-year primary school attended by pupils aged 6 to 15 years. It is provided mainly by public schools (less than 1 % of pupils attend private primary schools), as well as educational institutions for children with special educational needs (SEN), and for adults adult education organizations. As specified by the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, primary school education is compulsory and state-funded. Local communities set up primary schools. An extensive public network of basic schools gives all residents of Slovenia access to education.

Municipality of Ljubljana

The Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) is the founder of 23 public kindergartens, in which 13.529 children were enrolled in the school year 2017/2018 (above 90 % children from MOL attend kindergarten), of whom there are 450 children with special needs either in possession of a Placement of Children with Special Needs Act document or in the process of acquiring one.

Children's disabilities are mostly expressed in disorders such as motor difficulties, the development gap in a particular development area, disturbances of attention and hyperactivity, suspected autism spectrum disorders, severe allergies and visual impairment.

According to the degree and variation of the disorder, disability or deficit on the basis of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act children are placed either into regular kindergarten groups with additional professional assistance or in the development departments of kindergartens that deliver tailored programmes for early childhood education.

MOL's public kindergartens have 9 development departments, which currently include 54 children. Soon, another development department will be established for children with autism.

In addition to all statutory obligations, MOL carries out a number of additional activities and provides additional funds to raise the quality of life of children with special needs and their families. The children in Ljubljana's kindergartens receive above-standard support in regular classes from part-time employees and additional assistants. When the children who are already in the process of acquiring the Placement Act document attend regular kindergarten classes, the Municipality of Ljubljana will, based on a kindergarten's proposal, provide an additional assistant as a form of above-standard services. As an action of an early intervention, children in the process of obtaining the document are also offered early assistance in the form of a special pedagogue. Additional professional support to the children with the Placement Act document or in the process of acquiring one is given by professional staff assistants in kindergartens in MOL. Their work is coordinated by a professional advisor for children with special needs.

In the Janez Levec Centre there is a training centre for professionals, the Educational Centre PIKA, also set up by MOL, following an initiative of the Department for Pre-school Education in 2013.

The Centre activity is based on 5 programmes:

- professional training programme of special and social pedagogues from day-care centres and schools in the City of Ljubljana,
- individual consultation programme (for the needs of female participants in the professional training),
- telephone and e-consulting for educators, teachers and families,
- programme of lectures and seminars for educators, teachers and families,
- school for parents/families programme.

PIKA offers considerable knowledge and experience in the field of education of children with intellectual disabilities and additional knowledge for the education of children with special needs to the teachers and educators of Ljubljana's primary schools and kindergartens.

Additional professional help as well as special mobile pedagogical service has been available to pupils at schools, but the new centre provides a systematic training of teaching staff, following contemporary efforts to include more children with special needs in mainstream schools, as is the case elsewhere in Europe.

Children with special needs and inclusion

According to the prevailing concepts of inclusion and integration in Slovenia, children with special educational needs are generally enrolled in mainstream education. Kindergartens, in cooperation with external experts and institutions, therefore offer advisory services to support children with special needs (among them, children with intellectual and physical disabilities, and children with autism, language disorders and chronic illness) and their parents.

Individual and needs-related support for children with severe disabilities is provided within so-called developmental groups (*razvojni oddelek*). An individual educational plan is compiled for each child. Depending on the kind of special needs, individual support staff is available either for part (usually external staff, so-called mobile support personnel) or all of the child's daily attendance in kindergarten. Since 2013, the concept of inclusion has also been supported by legislation (Placement of Children with Special Needs Act). Professional development activities for staff and mobile support personnel are part of this concept.

Usually the Municipality is not directly involved in the programme and activities of kindergartens. The Municipality is involved as a third party when agreement between institution, parents and experts in field of inclusion and children with special needs. In the school-system, the school can provide an optimal development to children with special needs with the support of qualified experts, on the basis of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act.

For children with physical and motor disabilities, there is the possibility of companions. Emotional and behavioural issues have become widespread only in recent years and competences, characteristics, professional knowledge and training needed for children with physical or psychological special needs are vastly different. So the companion's role in the group is usually just support and help for the teacher – to remove the child from the group when it has an emotional outbreak. The group's educator can receive additional training in caring for children with special needs, but in kindergarten, each child comes into contact with many teachers, those of other groups and those who are substitutes for teachers on sick leave, even students who have not finished their training yet. So it is impossible to guarantee complete competence of all who come into contact with a child.

While inclusion of a child with special needs can have a positive impact on other children within the group, in cases of severe disabilities the negative aspects prevail. And while moderate disorders are something regular kindergartens (and schools) wish to deal with because it teaches all involved empathy, patience and acceptance, they do not wish and cannot deal with severe cases. Not only are the teachers not sufficiently trained, the environment itself is not supportive enough for the child who will develop much better in a specially and specifically adapted environment, backed up by trained professionals.

If children with special needs receive enough suitable professional assistance, they will often learn to control their disorder, even to such an extent that it becomes unnoticeable. In such cases, even a normal inclusion in society in adulthood is possible.

Unfortunately, it is the severe cases that often come to the MOL's attention, because the parties involved cannot reach an understanding among them and need support from an independent source. We offer support as much as we can, but can't help but wonder if our support was always the right thing to give - for the child, that is.

As a municipality, our primary range of work considering pre-school children with special needs is organization, management and financing. We have little to do with concrete cases.

The main policy-focus in the kindergartens in Ljubljana

The main focus of the MOL and the kindergartens is a stable policy-environment, a focus on the quality of the teachers in the kindergartens and the schools and the recognition of the importance of the head of the institutions.

The stable policy environment is guaranteed by a 10-year policy strategy adopted by the City Council. In this strategy the main principles, goals, measures, solutions, projects and expected results for the childcare system are written down. This gives a stable policy environment, which is of great importance for a high quality system. This long term commitment in Ljubljana is a very powerful example of stability in the system.

A second characteristic of the Ljubljana policy is a very strong emphasis on quality in the institutions. Of course, all cities strive to have high quality childcare for all the children and all cities have a special policy on quality. But in Ljubljana the trust in the institutions if the quality basis is given, is remarkably high. Therefore over 90 % of all children in Ljubljana go to public kindergartens even though kindergartens are not compulsory. The city of Ljubljana sees the responsibility mainly in

providing quality arrangements for the public institutions. This core-policy is visible in the Educational centre PIKA (and the special education centre Janez Levec).

A third characteristic is that the role of the head of the institution is very important since the head's understanding of pedagogical, professional and developmental continuity is crucial for ensuring smooth transitions.

A challenge will be to find ways of significantly strengthening the participation of vulnerable groups of children (such as Roma and migrant/refugee children). This includes paying more attention to issues of diversity and offering children and parents programmes suited to their needs and rights.