



**INCLUSIVE
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**

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Case Study Visit Report:

Kindergarten Jelka, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 15–17 June 2016

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full version
ECE:	Early childhood education
EU:	European Union
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education
IEP:	Individual Education Plan
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAG:	Project Advisory Group
SEN:	Special educational needs



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Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role of the PAG members and national experts who took part in the visit and provided additional support.



PREAMBLE: THE IECE PROJECT


This report on the case study visit to Ljubljana and Kindergarten Jelka, Slovenia, is part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the Agency from 2015 to 2017. The project includes a total of eight such visits in different European countries.

The project's overall goal is to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children from three years old to the start of primary education.

Thus the project focuses on the structures and processes that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high-quality inclusive ECE that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the children from the school group's local community.

The project started off with a focus on the five thematic areas for improving ECE that were raised by EU and OECD working groups for this field (EU, 2014; OECD, 2014):

- Access to quality ECE for all children. From the perspective of the project, this principle refers to facilitating access for all children in the community, with particular concern for the most vulnerable, such as children with disabilities and SEN, immigrants and newcomers, and other at-risk children and families.
- Workforce quality. This principle calls for the employment of appropriately trained staff with access to continuous training and adequate working conditions, appropriate leadership, support staff inside and outside the school, and adequate resources and positive parent, interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration.
- Quality curriculum/content. This principle underlines the need for a holistic and flexible curriculum and pedagogy that promote child wellbeing and learning in all aspects of development – cognitive, social, language, emotional and physical – and enable children to be meaningfully and actively engaged in a safe but open and stimulating environment.
- Evaluation and monitoring. This not only refers to how children's development and learning is monitored, but also to the ECE provision's level of effectiveness to meet established quality standards that ensure a quality learning environment for all children.
- Governance and funding. This principle considers how public funding and leadership models are used accountably to ensure that a quality ECE service is



available to all children and is managed with a constant focus on enabling each child's holistic growth and learning.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

- A literature and policy review providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on ECE.
- Country reports providing information on policy and practice in inclusive ECE for all children at national level.
- European practitioners' perceptions of and practices for inclusive ECE: a qualitative analysis of descriptions of 31 examples of inclusive ECE provisions.
- Detailed reports of the eight selected case study sites, including analysis of the key project themes investigated.
- Recommendations designed to meet policy-makers' needs: the project synthesis report will draw on evidence from all project activities; the key issues/factors facilitating quality inclusion in ECE will be analysed and translated into recommendations.
- A self-assessment/self-reflection tool for the ECE setting.



1. INTRODUCTION: SELECTED CASE STUDY VISIT 4 OF THE IECE PROJECT

This report provides information about the case study visit that the Agency team conducted in Slovenia in June 2016.

Ljubljana and Kindergarten Jelka were selected, along with seven other sites, from examples of inclusive practice in ECE submitted by national experts and Agency Representative Board members. The eight selected examples were willing to be visited and studied by a project team in order to understand the quality features of inclusive ECE provision.

In order to support the countries in identifying examples of inclusive practice in ECE, the Agency team, in collaboration with the PAG members, established criteria that the example provisions were expected to meet. These criteria, which were also used to select the eight examples, were:

- Relevance of the site
- Clarity of the information provided
- Evidence of the following:
 - respect for diversity;
 - promotion of participation and engagement;
 - holistic curriculum;
 - skilled workforce;
 - collaboration and partnership;
 - smooth transitions;
 - quality assurance;
 - self-evaluation to inform improvement.

The selected examples also needed to reflect diverse geographical locations across Europe.

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and country experts visited Ljubljana and Kindergarten Jelka from 15 to 17 June 2016. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about developments in the city and the kindergarten's ECE provisions, to observe classes and to interview different stakeholder groups: principal, teachers, support teachers, parents and children. Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the eight project case study visits. In addition, relevant documents on national and regional policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All visiting project participants provided first impressions at a forum on the last day of the visit and then submitted written



feedback about the inclusive features of the ECE provision at Kindergarten Jelka. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.

An analysis of all the above data led to the identification of three main themes that enhance the inclusiveness of Kindergarten Jelka's ECE provision:

- 1 Effective class management
- 2 Shared vision of inclusion and collaboration
- 3 Great capacity to communicate.

These are described in detail in Sections 3 to 5 of this report. Section 2 gives an account of the background of inclusive provision within inclusive education in Slovenia and in Kindergarten Jelka. Section 3 follows, describing the setting's main highlight.



2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 Inclusive education in Kindergarten Jelka, Slovenia

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

Pre-primary education is divided into two age groups: one to three and three to six years of age, or until school admission.

Kindergarten Jelka is a public pre-primary organisation. It performs a daily programme of ECE that includes education, upbringing and nutrition for children.

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

Kindergarten Jelka is located in an urban environment. It cares for 500 children, divided into 29 groups. The institution employs 103 staff, 63 of whom are professional staff. They have established strong co-operation with parents, the local community and with their international partners. A great part of the kindergarten's philosophy and vision is continuous professional growth and staff development, teamwork and excellent co-operation at all levels of the kindergarten. Through teamwork, innovation, project work and international co-operation, they successfully extend their mission and co-operate with the local and the international community.

There are 24 children with special needs who are included in mainstream groups. They are provided with additional individual attention by special needs teachers, such as special pedagogues, a speech therapist, and a psychological therapist. All children with special needs have adaptations depending on their IEP. The kindergarten has developed systematic and strong co-operation with children's families and supporting advisory services for families of children with special needs.

Various disabilities are represented 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 are provided with 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. This is done in co-operation with all the professionals, the counselling service and parents. The advisory and observation process currently includes 66 children with distinct developmental problems.

(More information about the Slovenian inclusive education system is available in the country report, in the description of the example and in Slovenia's national overview: www.european-agency.org/national-policy-and-provision/Slovenia).



3. THE SETTING'S HIGHLIGHT (THEME 1): EFFECTIVE CLASS MANAGEMENT

The inclusion of children with SEN is one of Kindergarten Jelka's priorities. The kindergarten is remarkable for several reasons:

- Children with SEN share all activities with their peers. The learning objectives are individualised. It is difficult for the outside observer to identify these children, creating a feeling of true inclusion.
- The adult in charge of small groups does not focus attention on children with SEN. Rather, interactions between all children present are encouraged.

Dividing the class into small groups of four or five children allows many one-to-one verbal exchanges between adults and children. It also facilitates interactions between children. Exchanges are always highly benevolent.

Activities are prepared co-operatively by all the adults. A formally defined period of time is dedicated every day to this collective preparation, which enables everyone to be fully involved in the class. It is difficult for an observer to distinguish between the teacher and their assistant, as they are both equally involved.

The workshops proposed for the children are very playful. There is no attempt to turn workshops into primary school activities. This ensures the participation of all and makes it possible to differentiate objectives and adapt them to each individual. The national programmes, which have been stable since 1999, encourage this practice. They are far from trying to turn kindergarten activities into primary school activities. Participants indicated that it was interesting to observe the session with the 'learning dog'. Here, the objective was to stimulate the children's interest and curiosity. This then formed a good platform to introduce them to a counting game.

All the children, including those with SEN, participate in the same activities with the same status as their peers. Educational assistants do not focus their attention and help on children with SEN, but on the small group. In this way, interactions between children are facilitated.

Many verbal tools are used in the classrooms. Many of the proposed activities focus on language and the acquisition of specific vocabulary. The discovery and learning of foreign languages (English and French) encourage openness to cultural diversity. They also assist with the integration of children whose native language is not Slovenian. Many imitation games favouring verbal exchange take place in the classes. It is worth mentioning the singing activities, which also stimulated focus, concentration and memory.

The children participate in every stage of the activity, from material preparation to tidying up afterwards.



Materials are varied and regularly updated. The presence of materials that are not connected to specific activities encourages imagination and creativity. Open-ended resources are made available to support creativity. Almost all of the materials can be easily accessed by the children. No materials based on new technology are accessible to the children (do they really need new technology at that age?).

Colourful and creative displays of children's art and craft are displayed throughout the kindergarten. These displays of the children's work contribute to the kindergarten's warm atmosphere. Boardmaker signs and symbols are used to support communication. The structure and organisation of furniture and resources support independence.

Staff treat all children with respect and dignity and take a holistic view of the child to ensure their learning and care needs are met. There is a clear focus on the 'hidden curriculum', paying attention to the culture and ethos of the kindergarten.

Finally, participants highlighted that the children's general feeling of serenity comes from the continued consistency of care on a daily basis. It is like 'daily smooth transitions'.

One reason for this could be that the teachers spend most of the time with the children (early in the morning, during lunch, in the playground, etc.). The reference adults are clearly identified and do not change.



4. THEME 2: SHARED VISION OF INCLUSION AND COLLABORATION

All staff in Kindergarten Jelka seemed proud of their work and strived to do it to the best of their ability. All seemed aware of the importance of their role (teachers, assistants and ancillary staff).

4.1 Motivated and enthusiastic staff

Staff were enthusiastic about the work they do and see inclusion and its challenges as a part of their work. They spoke about the obligation involved in taking on the challenge: if taken on, it should be done well, so extra work and training may be necessary.

Staff motivation was facilitated by strong leadership, opportunities for staff and participation in special projects.

Team building strategies are promoted so that staff feel they all belong to the kindergarten, share the same vision and are equally involved in all activities.

Visit participants were impressed by the innovative thinking about effective use of time. This allows time away from the children for planning and development to be part of the working day.

Staff carefully plan activities for the children and identify relevant aims for individual children. In addition, IEPs are put in place when required. Language and literacy are given a high priority. Appropriate resources are available to extend children's learning.

4.2 Staff are valued and acknowledged

There were inviting spaces for the staff away from the classroom.

Staff members' skills were acknowledged, celebrated and used. This included the full staff team. For example, a cleaning lady was cooking with the children the following day; a teacher, who is part of a choir in her spare time, led the singing activities in the kindergarten.

Staff had a role in educating and training other staff members.

Recruitment of new staff is planned to exceed basic requirements. This enhances Kindergarten Jelka's inclusive practice. It also ensures that staff share their talents with the kindergarten, as well as developing professionally through their work. Staff members' talents and skills were used and shared with other classes. For example, a teacher who is fluent in English and French regularly plays games in these languages with the children in all the classes.

There is peer support for new employees. Freedom, autonomy, opportunities and support for staff are important to the kindergarten.



4.3 Staff work collaboratively

There was no clear distinction between teacher and assistant and each staff member contributed a valued role, using their strengths. This extended to the collaboration between staff, families and children.

Staff do not see themselves as superior. They will attend training with parents, where relevant, and admit to children that they do not know something.

It is also noteworthy how aware the staff are of sensitive and respectful ways of advising parents on how best to support their child's development. For example, this may take place through an informal conversation when the parents come to collect their child, rather than (only) in formal meetings.

Assistants do not link themselves only to one child, but are full members of the classroom team.

Advisory teachers and counsellors on site facilitate on-going reflective discussion. This allows difficulties to be identified and provided for early on.

The National Institute of Education is available for advice and training. This facilitates access to advice and training from other sources, where necessary. It also allows collaborative work with other professionals.

Involvement with external projects (national and European) raises awareness, knowledge and skills and has a motivational and esteem-building impact for staff.

Very good staff teamwork allows for the sharing of knowledge and skills.

4.4 Management that serves children

The management encourages teamwork. They set up many projects inside the school. When recruiting, they ensure that there are diverse and complementary skills among team members.

Staff are assessed annually by the management personnel with whom they work daily.

Some members of the management personnel are former teachers. They are therefore aware of problems that can arise in the classroom.

Due to its autonomous status, this school has great flexibility in terms of schedule, recruitment and budget. This enables it to adapt constantly to the children's needs.



5. THEME 3: GREAT CAPACITY TO COMMUNICATE

One of the great strengths of the school lies in its communication with all stakeholders (parents, classroom staff, other staff, children, community, etc.).

Parents can make contact with the school through several channels of communication, including email, verbal exchanges and regular post.

Bulletin boards are present at the entrance of each classroom and are updated regularly. Parents are thus informed about their children's activities and are involved in planning for children's inclusion. They also contribute their skills to the kindergarten and are educated about their children's learning.

Each parent can meet and discuss issues with their child's teacher several times a year. An Internet application facilitates exchanges and data sharing between different stakeholders (parents, management personnel and teachers).

Parents and grandparents are regularly involved in projects proposed by the school and can present activities in the classroom.

Reception of parents is spread over the beginning of the morning to allow quality exchanges. A space at the entrance of the classroom is set aside for providing information to families.

Staff work in partnership with families to support children with different first languages. Participants were impressed with how teachers engaged with parents about language. For example, Russian language sheets were seen, which were used to support communication with Russian speaking children.

From the discussion with parents, it was obvious that they feel welcome and trust the staff to nurture their children.



6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The inclusive education model of Kindergarten Jelka, presented in this report, was observed and highlighted by participants during the visit and in relevant discussions with the stakeholders. There is an inclusive education approach for all children in the kindergarten, irrespective of any additional needs.

During activities, all of the adults interact with or observe the children. The low ratio of children per adult (one adult to six children on average) encourages the children to participate very actively. All of the children playing autonomously are fully involved in what they are doing.

The verbal interactions between adults and children always take place calmly. The calm atmosphere in the kindergarten is mainly due to the quality of the interactions between the adults and children. The noise level of the interactions is always very low. The adults do not hesitate to establish reassuring physical contact with anxious or unruly children, thus maintaining a serene atmosphere.

The highly flexible schedules of the institution allow daily individualised attention for families.

The upkeep of the premises is satisfactory, with quality furniture. The children's creations are highlighted and contribute to the decoration in the kindergarten.

High priority is given to play and allowing children time to develop friendships. Planned activities support co-operative and group play situations.

Staff stand back and observe children in different situations and carefully consider the timings of their interventions. Children are respectful and well behaved. There are excellent opportunities for exploratory and physical outdoor play.

6.1 Areas for further discussion

As Kindergarten Jelka strives to continue improving its services, the visit participants made some proposals for further reflection on key areas related to inclusion:

- Transition to primary education: Building links with primary schools requires a special focus. The justified desire to avoid making kindergarten activities the same as primary school activities leads to a growing gap between these two levels. This gap will be all the more difficult to bridge for children with SEN.
- Portfolio: The children in Kindergarten Jelka do not have an individual portfolio. This makes it impossible to keep track of their skills acquisition. Would such a portfolio be justified?
- Leadership and autonomy: There is no doubt that the impetus provided by the management personnel, strengthened by the autonomy of the school, is



the reason for its excellent functioning. What would happen in the event of dysfunction on the part of the management personnel in the framework of a totally autonomous school?