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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

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## **The role of institutions for deaf children and adolescents in the context of inclusive education**

Marko Strle<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Univerza na Primorskem (Slovenia); <sup>2</sup>Center za korekcijo sluha in govora Portorož (Slovenia)

### **Abstract**

*New legislation in the field of education regarding children with special needs was adopted in 2000 and the number of deaf children included in mainstream educational programs significantly increased. This notion suggests that there's an important need for a careful preparation of all participants involved in the process of the integration of a deaf person. The initial preparations and the education about special needs of deaf persons must be followed by a qualitative cooperation between professionals from specialised and mainstream institutions, kindergartens and schools in which the deaf child will be included. Often a question emerges as to whether the process of integration for a deaf person is the most suitable decision or not. The answer to that question is not simple because the population of children with a hearing loss differs regarding the quantitative level of the hearing loss and on the cognitive and other psychological characteristics. The most important difference is on the level of functioning between the persons with a hearing loss which is much bigger than the remaining percentages of the hearing. The purpose of this article is not in finding answers to questions about the diversities, benefits or disadvantages of integration or inclusion but presenting actual practices and experiences of specialised institutions for deafness.*

**Keywords:** *special institutions, deafness, speech and language disorders, inclusion*

### **1. Short introduction or looking into the past**

In Slovenia there are three main institutions that provide public service for the population of children, adolescents and adults with hearing impairments and speech and language disorders.

A historical overview of the three institution's activities serves us some important facts. The first Slovenian institution for deaf was established on September 21 in 1900 in Ljubljana. There were the first sixty children included in it and this year ZAVOD ZA GLUHE IN NAGLUŠNE LJUBLJANA celebrated its 110 anniversary.

The school for deaf in the Slovenian Littoral was established on November 28 in 1945. In the year 1954, when the Littoral part of Slovenia was joined to the rest of the country the institution changed its name into the institution of the deaf youth but today it's named CENTER ZA KOREKCIJO SLUHA IN GOVORA PORTOROŽ.

The third institution was established in Maribor on June 29 in 1962. They have started as a special rehabilitative service for hearing and speech as part of the medical centre in

Maribor. In their beginnings they have had only two surd pedagogical ambulatories for persons with hearing impairments. This unit became independent in 1981 and in 1997 they named the institution as CENTER ZA SLUH IN GOVOR MARIBOR.

The presentation of actual practices and experiences of specialised institutions for children and adolescents with hearing impairments is a way of pointing out some aspects of the integration or the inclusion that is present in our society.

## **2. Aspects of inclusion**

The aspect of inclusion can sometimes be understood as an inclusive educational situation that is presented by spontaneous, tolerant, caring and fair relationships among different persons whose diversities are due to the mental, physical abilities, ethnic, religious characteristics of individuals. In its educational aspect they are seen mainly as an advantage rather than a frightening entity in the educational process. If seen in such terms teachers could approach toward it as it is something unaccepted and unexpected that has to be specifically regulated, differently planned, directed into addressing the handicap, preventing possible conflicts which can arouse from the pressure of a dominant mainstream population (Kroflič, 2003).

We can agree with the distinction of the definition of inclusion in terms of separating the more effective inclusive process from the ineffective one. He stresses out that an effective inclusion can be determined as a spontaneous and caring acceptance of diversities which is the opposite toward an unsuccessful inclusion that can be a construct of an artificial regulation of relationships between the mainstream population and the minority of the population of persons with special needs (ibid).

What about the specifics of the population of persons with hearing impairments and language difficulties. Firstly let's focus on the population of deaf and hard-of-hearing persons. Their inclusion in its perfection can be understood as the integration in the educational process with all the hearing population, especially peers.

The mainstream, traditional, common environment which is adapted to the hearing population is the environment where are lots of different possibilities for interactions between individuals. In terms of inclusive educational setting we know that most of the times we speak only about placing a deaf person within the others (i.e. hearing persons). Inclusion should incorporate different possibilities of aid provision for persons with hearing impairments that need interpreters, assistants, learning/teaching aids, appropriate staff from the professional field of surd pedagogic etc. Everything mentioned above in the context of normality, regularity, and commonality, mainstream.

Foreign experiences, e.g. from the United States of America, show us that there were some attempts before 1975 of including deaf children in mainstream schools but the majority of deaf children (approx. 80%) were still attempting specialised institutions. (Cohen 1995).

The first more important changes occur while accepting the "Education of All Handicapped Children" act which ensures that for each child is chosen the less restricted environment. It was understood that the children with special needs will be integrated in such environments where there will be a little number of children with special needs or none. The implementation of such decision showed that there were some very good examples of inclusion but a lot of non successful ones i.e. special units of groups for children with special needs in a mainstream school, teaching deaf children in separated classes or cabinets and they could meet their peers only during breaks, non academically activities. In 1995 there were more than 60% of deaf children included in mainstream school settings (Cohen 1995), even though there were no evidence based researches of effective inclusive models in relation with the non effective ones.

A critical overview of the inclusive education reminds us that we still have to take in consideration the positive and the negative aspects of inclusion.

Among positive aspects are:

- The possibility of a child to be included in an educational setting close to his hometown. Children that have to leave their home have to be placed in a boarding school.
- The possibility of communicating with the hearing world. Meeting people who can hear on a daily basis enhances the opportunity for a better development of communication
- The possibility of learning the rules of the hearing world. Students with hearing impairments that learns together with other students can develop in a better way the understanding of the standards of the hearing community while the others that are included in institutions can't.
- The accessibility to educational programmes. There is a wider range of possibilities of choosing an appropriate vocational direction for students with hearing impairments that are included in a mainstream educational setting than those in institutions.

What about the negative aspects or disadvantages of inclusion?

- The isolation from the peers, teachers and others. The inclusive environment can be seen as the environment which is the least adaptable to the communicational abilities of a hearing impaired person.
- The possibilities of direct learning are limited. The inclusion of students with hearing impairments usually emphasizes the indirect learning in terms of accepting the information that is translated by an interpreter.
- The possibilities of direct and independent interactions with peers and gaining additional help are limited. Persons with hearing impairments most of the time need an interpreter who can help them in a most effective way of communicating with the others i.e. school mates, teachers ... Professionals in schools usually are not educated for a direct communication with individuals with hearing impairments and therefore they can't help them in accessing to different services that they need.
- The accessibility and the quality of the support. The adequate numbers of interpreters and other professionals in education is already an important issue.

The population of hard-of-hearing children is commonly seen as the hearing population because their communication is mainly based on the use of common language. Those children usually don't use the sign language and they have the tendency of relating to the hearing population. They can adapt more easily to the hearing population and therefore the process of integration/inclusion results as more beneficiary for them. The population of deaf children, usually their hearing remains are very low, needs a more multimodal communicational approach which include sign language as well. The process of integration/inclusion results as unequal in many comparative aspects with the hearing population. Inclusion should not be seen as a magic solution for hearing impairments but it should remind us of the negative aspects that can even tragically affect a deaf person's life. While analysing the process of inclusion we have to take into consideration every aspect of a person's development as a whole, not just the communicational/language aspect but also the cognitive, social affective and personal development.

From a Slovenian perspective Kuhar's research (2009) focussed on the acceptance and popularity of deaf and hard-of-hearing children in the inclusive educational setting. With the method of *sociogram metric* testing they wanted to find out if children with hearing impairments included in mainstream schools are alone or not. The findings show that children with hearing impairments are equally alone and unpopular as their peers who don't have any hearing impairment. A lesser part of those children (17 %) or every sixth in the class is very popular. The concerning part is that almost a half of children (43 %) are alone and unpopular despite the efforts of professionals in monitoring their inclusive process and providing help. The findings showed that age and sex in the period of adolescence are more important in finding an appropriate role among peers than the hearing impairment in itself. Another interesting finding was that teachers overestimate the popularity of "special" pupils and confuse the willingness to help with popularity. The main message of the research is again the acknowledgement of how important is to understand the process of inclusion as a delicate process.

We can share the researcher's belief that inclusion is the best solution for those children with hearing impairments who are equal to their peers in other areas of development.

The further possible questions are what to do with those individuals that don't benefit from inclusion. A common agreement could be that we have to consider all aspects of inclusion in accordance to every individual and his characteristics and therefore choose the best solution.

### **3. Activities and programmes of the present**

In the three institutions for persons with hearing impairments (i.e. deaf, hard-of-hearing, language difficulties) we have developed and work on different educational programmes:

- Educational programmes for preschool and elementary school in the institution and secondary school in the institution in Ljubljana.
- Educational programmes for all the other children from mainstream schools that have problems with the hearing, speech and/or language.

- Educational programmes as part of the medical service. Provision of speech therapy, psychological assessment and intervention, clinical speech therapy, clinical psychology, surd pedagogy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy ...

According to the acts of establishment the population of children, adolescents with hearing impairments can be included in educational programmes that are provided within the three institutions:

- Adapted educational programme for preschool children with hearing impairments within the institutions;
- Adapted educational programme with additional professional aid in mainstream preschool, school, secondary school provided by the peripatetic teachers from the institutions for all the included children and adolescents with hearing impairments;
- Adapted educational programme of compulsory school with the equivalent and lowered academic standards for children and adolescents with hearing impairments within the institutions;
- Adapted educational programme of compulsory secondary (i.e. vocational) school with the equivalent and lowered academic standards for children and adolescents with hearing impairments within the Ljubljana's institution.

### ***3.1 The centrally organized support programme***

As already mentioned the three Slovenian institutions provide basic care and education for the population of deaf children and adolescents, hard-of-hearing children and adolescents, children and adolescents with language difficulties and adults with hearing impairments but specifically:

- Adapted education programme with additional professional help – inner integration/inclusion in preschool units of the institutions (i.e. Ljubljana), where are even some mainstream preschool units.
- Peripatetic service of additional professional aid for integrated children and adolescents.

Therefore it was established a continuum of courses addressed to teachers and other professionals who encounter children and adolescents with hearing impairments on a daily basis, and courses for parents and caregivers.

The consultant service was developed in terms of helping institutions who include children and adolescents with hearing impairments.

Years of experiences brought us to develop educational models that allow children and adolescents with hearing impairments to be included in their hometowns.

Beside the individual and group rehabilitative services for children and adolescents we provide support to parents, caregivers and siblings too.

A unique model is the so called partial integration/inclusion in a preschool, i.e. preschool mainstream groups within the institution, intervention programmes for individuals and

groups of children within the same preschool or different groups in a partial integration/inclusion with different activities in the group or among groups.

Other forms of cooperation were developed especially for children. Weekly intervention programmes from peripatetic teachers providing individual hearing and listening trainings, programme of social learning, development of positive self-esteem, support groups for adolescents in secondary schools, workshops of communication, intensive programmes for children, adolescents, their parents and siblings ...

The cooperation with parents is established in forms of support groups for/with parents, consulting ambulatories for families ...

In terms of developing a cooperative network with the environment other forms were developed as regular meeting with teachers who work with the included children or adolescents, presentation of institutions and programmes for children and adolescents with hearing impairments, establishing team groups for the preparation of individualised educational plans, professional courses for teachers, presentation of institutional activities through conference presentations, publications in journals, cooperation in innovative projects, international projects etc.

#### **4. Persons with hearing impairments and language difficulties included in the institutional (segregation) and mainstream (inclusion) education from 1995 to 2009**

The following tables are showing the number of children and adolescents who were attending preschool, primary school and the secondary (vocational) school in the three Slovenian institutions for the population of deaf, hard-of-hearing and persons with language difficulties and in the inclusive educational setting from 1995 to 2009.

Preschool - Segregation		Preschool - Inclusion	
School year	Total	School year	Total
1995/1996	48	1995/1996	46
1996/1997	41	1996/1997	43
1997/1998	53	1997/1998	51
1998/1999	55	1998/1999	70
1999/2000	73	1999/2000	57
2000/2001	57	2000/2001	54
2001/2002	56	2001/2002	51
2002/2003	63	2002/2003	36
2003/2004	69	2003/2004	56
2004/2005	59	2004/2005	82
2005/2006	43	2005/2006	63
2006/2007	43	2006/2007	80
2007/2008	44	2007/2008	90

2008/2009	51	2008/2009	100
Total	755	Total	879

**Table 1: The number of preschool deaf children, hard-of-hearing children and children with language difficulties in segregation and inclusion.**

The number of preschool children which are included in the three institutions is decreasing. It is acknowledged that it is mostly due to the fact that in preschool we don't speak any more of deaf children as traditionally known deaf children but deaf children with cochlear implants. Those children are mainly included in mainstream educational settings in their hometowns. Another fact is the changed attitude of accepting those children in mainstream preschool.

In the last few years the number of children with language difficulties is increasing (among them also children with autistic spectrum disorders) who were intensively included in group and/or individual rehabilitative programmes and specific projects. The decreased number of children with language difficulties is also due to the fact that those children have no possibility of being included in preschool programmes designed especially for them.

The number of included preschool children that receive the additional professional aid is increasing each year. If we compare only the year 1995 and 2009 the number increased for 217%. We still have to take in account that we are referring only to those children who were officially assessed by a commission and directed into an appropriate educational programme.

Primary school – Segregation		Primary school - Inclusion	
School year	Total	School year	Total
1995/1996	163	1995/1996	133
1996/1997	154	1996/1997	146
1997/1998	159	1997/1998	155
1998/1999	136	1998/1999	167
1999/2000	128	1999/2000	176
2000/2001	130	2000/2001	155
2001/2002	118	2001/2002	197
2002/2003	119	2002/2003	155
2003/2004	105	2003/2004	190
2004/2005	110	2004/2005	270
2005/2006	143	2005/2006	261
2006/2007	146	2006/2007	272
2007/2008	159	2007/2008	308
2008/2009	170	2008/2009	293
Total	1940	Total	2878

**Table 2: The number of deaf children, hard-of-hearing children and children with language difficulties in school in segregation and inclusion.**



The tale that follows we can see that the number of children with hearing impairments in the institutions significantly decreased until 2004. Since 2005 this number increases each year. In the last couple of years we notice an increasing number of children who are directed in the institutionalized programmes in the last three years of compulsory school. Why? It is mostly due to an inappropriate process of directing those children into the right educational programme or the previously mentioned inappropriate inclusion. Those children are accepted in the institutions for children with hearing impairments while they have already gained other disabilities i.e. behavioural problems, affective, psychotic disabilities ...

The same inclination of the increased number of children can be seen in mainstream schools. The reason is not that we tend not to direct children into segregation but it is important to understand the importance of the parents' awareness and the awareness of the society in acknowledging the rights of persons with special needs. Therefore the option of choosing the inclusive approach as the first one is not an option but already the first milestone.

Secondary school - Segregation		Secondary school - Inclusion	
School year	Total	School year	Total
1995/1996	72	1995/1996	32
1996/1997	74	1996/1997	37
1997/1998	78	1997/1998	43
1998/1999	105	1998/1999	60
1999/2000	93	1999/2000	66
2000/2001	94	2000/2001	65
2001/2002	86	2001/2002	81
2002/2003	82	2002/2003	82
2003/2004	92	2003/2004	65
2004/2005	77	2004/2005	66
2005/2006	74	2005/2006	68
2006/2007	75	2006/2007	65
2007/2008	64	2007/2008	76
2008/2009	58	2008/2009	62
Total	1124	Total	868

**Table 3: The number of deaf children, hard-of-hearing children and children with language difficulties in the secondary school (only in the Ljubljana's institution) (segregation) and inclusion.**

The data shows the tendency of decreasing the number of adolescents included in the programmes of the secondary /vocational school in Ljubljana. It is mostly due to the specific of vocational programmes that are offered and again as the result of an ineffective inclusion when children that were included in mainstream schools find out that this option was too difficult for them. But again there is an increasing number of adolescents with hearing impairments in mainstream secondary schools, if we compare only the numbers in 2009 with those in 1995, there is a 194 % increasing level.

##### **5. Persons with hearing impairments and language difficulties included in the mainstream (inclusion) education (from preschool to secondary school) from 1995 to 2009**

The next table presents the number of all children in segregation and inclusion from the preschool, elementary school and to secondary/vocational school from 1995 to 2009. Not to forget that those children that were in inclusion are children who were assisted by professional that were supporting them with additional professional aid through the peripatetic service.

School year	Children and adolescents - Segregation	Children and adolescents - Inclusion
1995/1996	283	211
1996/1997	269	226
1997/1998	290	249
1998/1999	296	297
1999/2000	294	299
2000/2001	281	274
2001/2002	260	329
2002/2003	264	273
2003/2004	256	311
2004/2005	246	418
2005/2006	236	392
2006/2007	241	417
2007/2008	235	474
2008/2009	250	455
Total	3701	4625

**Table 4: The comparison between the number of all children and adolescents (from preschool to secondary school) in segregation and inclusion from 1995 to 2009.**

There have been significant changes in the last fifteen years in the field of inclusive process in terms of directing children with special needs in appropriate educational programmes and giving them appropriate rehabilitative support. The first important milestone was in 1996 when we experienced the first operations of deaf children providing them with cochlear implants. Further changes occur in the last five years when younger children were operated and the process of rehabilitation has to start very early, i.e. since the birth of a child with hearing impairments. The next (more legislative) milestone was in 2000 when the new law for persons with special needs was introduced and the opportunities for inclusion became reality. The majority of children with hearing impairments could attend the mainstream preschool and school and not only. Those children gained the possibility to be professionally followed up the entire schooling

period. Not to forget, also parents' expectations changed from the perspective of inclusion accompanied by the negative effect of parents' exigency that their child has to be included in mainstream environment no matter what. The positive effect of the increased importance of the role of parents is also seen in the increased support and cooperation with parents in the process of rehabilitation of their child.

### **Conclusions**

The change of legislation and the everyday professional changes that we have been facing for the last couple of years present an important decision in understanding the need of implementing those changes in the paradigmatic perspective of the education of persons with special needs. We are facing, especially in the three main institutions for children with hearing impairments, the implementation of new educational programmes, the change of our statuses in the perspective of increasing the potential of managing special needs otherwise we won't be able to fulfil the expectation of everyone involved in the educational process In general.

On our experiences we expect that there will be an enhancement in terms of (re)organizing our activities, the amount of coordination, the exchange of information between all the active participants in the educational process and the need for technical implementation.

The future steps that have to be followed:

- To establish an educational doctrine for deaf persons, hard-of-hearing persons, persons with cochlear implants, persons with language difficulties as a foundation for the implementation of education programmes.
- To adjust the organization of the educational system toward the contextual areas and programmes.
- To adjust the organization of the educational system toward the changes of the environment and the needs of the target groups.
- To define the professional responsibility toward the implementation and the development of specific areas.
- To assure all the conditions for an effective intervention of all the target groups.
- To keep all the already established areas of development because only unified can assure the complexity of programmes, transition and the possibility of choice.
- To assure to the institutions the continuum of following up, consulting and supporting the process of restructuration.
- To redefine the role of peripatetic teachers.
- To reinforce a multidimensional cooperation between different ministries in the process of implementing inclusion.
- To redevelop the already existing and to develop the new university programmes at the faculties of education.

For an efficient redefinition of the institutions' developmental vision some important questions have to be answered.

- How to keep all the best practices and activities that showed an important, significant developmental impact in working with persons with special needs (i.e. persons with hearing impairments).
- How to continue the process of reorganization with all the new methods specially designed for the population of persons with hearing impairments.
- How to continue with the implementation of our own work if all the needed specifics are hardly accepted by the mainstream environment.

These are questions that from our perspective could answered today. However, these questions have to be answered with an enormous amount of responsibility and in recognition of emerging professional realities and the need to consult and listen to all those involved.

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