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‘Look at me! Here I am’: Including children with special needs in European school projects

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Introduction

One of the main goals of including people with special needs is to give them equal opportunities in the process of education, in spite of their cognitive, physical, social or emotional characteristics. Cooperating in an international project is a way of achieving this goal. It is a new experience for them and gives them an opportunity to accomplish different projects which are common to others.

There will be concrete aims for such projects, and they will have an impact on the participants and other interested parties: opening schools to the European idea, understanding the importance of everyone's citizenship, promoting awareness of and for people with special needs, allowing co-operation between pupils with special needs from special institutions and pupils from ordinary schools, allowing pupils to present their hometown and country, and establishing and increasing partnerships between schools.

The pupils of a special school in Strunjan (CUEVS) were involved in the Comenius school project ‘Look at me! Here I am. The natural and cultural heritage of my hometown’, in which they could translate and present their way of perceiving their natural and cultural environment. To achieve this aim they had to research their environment and learn to express their feelings, impressions and thoughts. During the project they built partnerships with pupils and teachers from all the partner schools.

Planning for the needs of all children

Inclusion is fast becoming an automatic part of the planning that goes on from early years settings, placing children in a mainstream setting and ensuring that the attitudes, policies and practices at institutional and individual levels enable children to participate as fully as possible (Drifte, 2003, p 2). Children with special needs benefit from contact with persons of all abilities and one of the main goals of their inclusion is to give them equal opportunities in the education process. Children, especially young children, are not in a position to ensure by themselves that they are included, so it is our responsibility as both adults and practitioners to make this happen.

Equal opportunities may be taken for granted; familiarity often presents dangers of omission. Therefore there is always a danger that conscious awareness of the need for vigilance in equal opportunities may be forgotten. Planning for equal opportunities includes planning to meet the needs of all children, both boys and girls. This includes addressing and challenging gender stereotypes and taking account of children with special needs, children who are more able and children with specific disabilities. We need to be aware of the needs of children from all the groups that comprise society, including those from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds (Hallet, MacLeod-Brundenell, 2004, p 257).

Something about us and our planning

Our institution had never previously been involved in any national or bilateral co-operation. Finding out about Socrates programmes was a great opportunity to choose a Comenius school project as the first step to open our school not only in our local community but even further; in this case to establish a school partnership with four different European schools.

And who are we? The history of our Centre began in 1953. That year an auxiliary boarding school was established in Portorož called 'Educational Institution Elvira Vatovec', and this has developed into the Centre we have today. The Centre is a special institution with different branches of its mission in teaching, educating and qualifying children, adolescents and adults with special needs; it is the only institution for children with special needs in the whole Slovenian Littoral-Karst area, which includes eight different communities.

We are an institution for children and adolescents with special needs, organised as a special primary school for children who are diagnosed with mild mental retardation, with educational departments for children diagnosed as moderately and severely mentally retarded. The mobile special educational service for children with learning disabilities is included in ordinary primary schools. Our children come mostly from socio-economically disadvantaged families; some of them have to live in our boarding school through the week. They do not have many opportunities to present themselves and are not used to being included in extra-school activities outside the school. That is why we tend to involve our children into different activities which are mostly organised in the school and on a local level.

Our main goal was to co-operate in a school project, but after a successful preparatory visit within Slovenia, the chance arose to exchange our experiences about our work, school organisation, solutions to actual educational problems (such as preparing IEP (individualised educational programs), assessing pupil's mathematical capabilities etc) with our new and future project partners.

Content of the school project

The starting point of the project

The pupils involved in the project were asked to translate and present their way of perceiving their natural and cultural environment. Important persons, historical facts and natural history were themes for different art activities. Paintings and pictures were planned for presentation at local exhibitions. At the end of the second project year, the final exhibition was held in Bielefeld, Germany. A catalogue summarising our work was carried out: a videotape and a PowerPoint presentation explained the course of the whole project as well as the preparation, inauguration and the organisation of the exhibition in Germany. The videotape also united all the pupils who took part at the project and those who could not participate, parents and other members from the schools and local communities. The students' self-confidence was increased through working with new forms of media, and a sensibility towards children with special needs was encouraged – a new step into society had been taken.

Concrete aims of the project

In our project group we decided to determine some concrete aims of the project:

- to open our schools to the European idea which is a basis of Socrates projects
- to promote awareness of and for people with special needs
- to allow co-operation between pupils with special needs from special institutions and pupils from ordinary primary schools
- to allow pupils to present their natural and cultural environment by drawings, paintings, simple words, sentences and texts
- to involve teachers, parents of our pupils and the rest of the school staff in the achievement of the final goal of the project
- to establish and increase partnerships between our schools
- to use different methodological aspects to give a better perception of our hometowns to our various correspondents
- to exchange information between several partners involved in the project (staff, teachers, pupils...)
- to extend the interpersonal dialogue between pupils from special and ordinary educational institutions and the professional dialogue between their teachers through project meetings
- to observe and exchange educational methods and didactics in all partner countries, also through project meetings.

The active plan of the project

In the course of the project we intended to carry out different activities during the two planned project years:

during the first project year:

- to present the program to the pupils and teachers involved in the project
- to collect thoughts, ideas, suggestions, feelings from teachers and pupils for the project
- to establish a work plan and schedules
- to define the role of everyone involved in the project
- to research sources of information (using books, advertisements, booklets, web pages...)
- to start the realisation of the project
- to gather all information and evaluate the progress of the project during a project meeting of the staff, at the end of the first project year,

during the second project year:

- to continue the realisation of the project
- to conceive posters, videos, booklets, catalogue, advertisements, etc.

- to evaluate the progress of the project and solve different intermediate problems
- to organise a local exhibition as a competition where the best works were chosen for the final exhibition of all partner schools
- to invite to the exhibition local authorities from other schools and communities
- to send the best works to the country where the final exhibition would be held (Bielefeld, Germany)
- to collect and send to participating partners presentational CDs, articles from newspapers, magazines, etc.
- to determine project meeting(s) for the staff where they would be able to establish the final plan for the exhibition in Germany
- at the project meeting of the staff and pupils at the end of the second project year, to prepare the final exhibition.

We also wanted to define more objectives and we would like to realise some concrete outcomes as:

- to integrate in this project pupils from the special primary school and educational departments (who are not especially used to working together),
- to involve in the project other teachers and persons from the school staff,
- to teach the pupils to co-operate with people from a different cultures,
- to learn about different countries and their cultures, which are completely unknown to our pupils,
- to make new friends and contact them using new technologies (writing emails and a kind of diary when communicating with new friends),
- to give our pupils an opportunity to be active in an international project and to visit foreign countries,
- to enhance our institution's image in the local community.

We intended to produce three main end products: (1) an exhibition of the best works from all the project partners in Germany, (2) a catalogue of the exhibition and (3) videotapes of the exhibition.

The staff meeting at the end of the first project year evaluated our work with an exchange of photos, videotapes and PowerPoint presentations. The project's impact on the participating pupils and teachers was evaluated throughout private discussions in our schools (with the help of a checklist) and preparing materials to present our work to other partners.

Results, experiences and end products were disseminated in different ways:

- through the presentation of the project to all our colleagues and other members of the school
- through local exhibitions in each participating country

- by inviting other institutions (schools from the same community) and local authorities to the exhibitions
- by CD-ROM presentations realised and sent to all participants
- through recorded radio interviews, articles from newspapers and magazines which were collected and sent to all participating institutions.

We did not believe that we would take any specific measures within the project, because we all work with children and adolescents with special needs and we are used to working according to the capabilities of each person. With this attitude we carried out work on several project topics and activities. Being included in a project with an Icelandic ordinary school brought another welcome dimension into work. We agreed that other measures (ensuring equal opportunities for female and male pupils and staff, promoting intercultural education, facilitating the participation of disadvantaged pupils) could not be specific to the project's aims because they are already part of our institutions' systems, but we agreed to give them more specific importance.

All the partners agreed and defined our individualised roles. We wanted to ensure that every country could co-operate on a project area that best suited them. We considered the technical equipment available to each partner institution and its organisation and distributed tasks to each partner country as follows:

- Germany was in charge of the organisation of the final exhibition
- Belgium was in charge of preparing a CD-ROM presentation
- Slovenia was responsible for the realisation of the catalogue
- Finland prepared the presentation of the evolution of the project during the first project year in all countries
- Iceland created posters and a web site of the project.

Throughout this project the pupils were led to develop interactive competence in different areas: (a) mental processes (e.g. to search for information, to deal with it, to use and communicate new findings), (b) learning strategies (e.g. to plan different stages of each activity) and (c) socio-emotional characteristics (e.g. to know themselves, to take responsibility, to talk and listen to each other, to strengthen personal self-confidence). They were active in researching on web-sites, in collecting information from libraries, participating in local cultural visits, taking photographs and writing letters to new foreign friends (they had to learn at least some phrases in English.).

Conclusion

All of these activities and more are already part of our curriculum. Specific and new project aims will become an integrated part of the curriculum (different activities will be a part of school's subjects). We hoped that the project would be integrated not only into curricula activities but that a sensibility for people with special needs would be encouraged in the local community and even across national boundaries. We could not think of any better way to present a European dimension to pupils and to involve their work and practice.

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