

START

A good start for all: Sustaining Transitions across the Early Years

Developing Transitional Activities for Romani Children and Their Families for Smoothing the Transition between Home and Institutional Environment.



Case study
SLOVENIA

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Contents

| | |
|----|--|
| 4 | 1. Contextualisation |
| 7 | 2. Analysis of local needs |
| 9 | 3. Development of the action plan |
| 12 | 4. What was implemented |
| 16 | 5. What works? Impact on children, families, teachers, organisations |
| 17 | 6. Reflection and critical evaluation |
| 20 | 7. References |
| 21 | 8. Appendix 1: The partnership with roma families conectes us |
| 27 | 9. Appendix 2: Conducting workshops in the Roma Multipurpose Center |
| 32 | 10. Literature |



1. Contextualisation

According to data of communities (2004), where Roma people are historically present, the number of Roma people in Slovenia is estimated from 7000 to 12000 (the official Census from 2002 reports 3246 Roma people living in Slovenia, 3834 persons declared Roma as their mother tongue). Their status and living situation differs from region to region, with Roma people in Prekmurje being most settled and developed, following Posavje, Dolenjska and Bela Krajina, where still many Roma families live in settlements, isolated from the rest of the population or are situated at the edge of inhabited areas, under minimum living standards.

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) United Nations declared that all children have the right for quality education, yet there are still many children dominantly from vulnerable groups, among which Roma children, who are not enrolled in formal education. A combination of various negative conditions leads to such state, where the living situation of the family is one of the factors with potentially negative influence (Arnold, 2004; Hart and Risley, 2003).

The necessity for additional care and guidelines when working with Roma children is stated also in official documents regarding education in Slovenia - the Slovenian Council of Experts for Education and Schooling first adopted the Strategy for education and schooling of Roma in the Republic of Slovenia (2004) to adjust the primary school program for Roma children in 1993. With implementation of 9-year school program seven years later another Strategy (2001) was accepted and supplemented in 2011 (Appendix to the Strategy). Preschool Curriculum was published in 1999, in 2005 followed the addition to the Preschool Curriculum for working with Roma children. In these documents, the content, organizational and normative conditions for ensuring adequate and successful integration of these children into the work and life of the primary school are defined according to the particularity and diversity of Roma children.

There are several reasons that prevent parents from enrolling their children to preschool. Firstly, there still exists the belief that family, especially the mother, is the first and only suitable for the child's education and care in the early years. Furthermore, there are many Roma who believe that it is not safe or appropriate for an unfamiliar person outside the community to take care for their children, as this person does not know and understand their children. As ECEC practitioners from preschool are most likely the first people outside the community with whom children are entrusted, building trust with Roma families is therefore of crucial importance when enrolling their children to preschool (Building Futures: Developing trust, 2009: 8-9). The organized preschool education should offer children and their parents the feeling of being secure, wanted and competent. It would be only then that Roma parents would be more open to accept the inclusion of their children into organized education. It is stated also in the Curriculum for Preschool (1999: 13) that »it is the role of the organisation to respect the culture, identity, language, beliefs, values, habits and customs of child's parents...«, which is of great importance in the initial period of the cooperation with Roma parents when professionals are building trust with them (Appendix to the Curriculum for Preschool for Working with Roma, 2002: 5).

One of the greatest obstacles in the integration of Roma children into education is the unequal starting position of Roma children in comparison to others. The starting position includes experiences, skills and knowledge, necessary for the inclusion into institutional life. In our cases, most of the children came to first grade with no previous experiences with organized education and schooling and with no knowledge of the language, used in school. Despite intense efforts to include Roma children into preschool in the scope of the project, only a few children were actually enrolled into preschool.

Besides low enrolment of Roma children into organized preschool education, very low class attendance is also recorded. It was believed this happened due to Roma parents being very protective towards their children and not trusting their children to anyone. This is especially typical for parents who had negative experiences with organized education and schooling themselves. Therefore it is very important for professionals to detect the fears of parents that are connected to prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination which they faced in their lives. (Building Futures: Developing trust, 2009: 20).

Children's rights are the first and main aspect, which should be considered when placing attention to transition. Yet several studies, such as the 'Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving (ESL)', which was recently concluded under the commission of the DG EAC, indicate that positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor for children's future success and development, while negative experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance (Rimantas et al., 2014).

It is well documented by a growing body of research that paying particular attention to smoothening transitions – by adopting a more unified approach to learning across educational settings in order to sustain continuity of children's experiences over time – can significantly improve children's educational achievement and socio-emotional development (Brooker, 2008; Woodhead & Moss, 2007). In these regards, promoting professional exchanges among ECEC practitioners and teachers as well as involving parents in the transition process are considered to be key factors in ensuring successful transitions (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Margetts & Kiening, 2013; Moss, 2013). As the large scale longitudinal study on Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (Sylva et al., 2004) demonstrates, no single factor – quality of pre-school, children's home environment, school effectiveness – accounts for long lasting positive effects on children's cognitive and social development, but it is rather the combination of experiences over time that matters, especially for children with disadvantaged background.

These findings were great motivation to form, implement and evaluate different kinds of soft transitions of Roma children into organized education in preschool and primary school, which led us also in our project. This initiative could contribute to a more successful schooling of Roma children and to overcoming of the deficits, necessary for an inclusion into institutional life. Such soft transition could reduce the cultural shock of Roma children when they enrol school and prepare them for primary school (especially on social and emotional level, language knowledge, pre-literacy skills), improve their school success and satisfy the needs of Roma children and their families in the attitude towards institutions. Experiences show their needs to be safe, wanted, and competent and to make sensible learning experiences.

Woodhead (2005: 80 in Jager, 2015: 11) stresses an aspect, which is from many perspectives the most convincing one when we defend all investment into child's early development - the aspect of children's rights - all children have the right to life and the opportunity to develop their full potential.

This aspect is not considered in any available scientific proofs, expense analysis and benefits of school programmes nor is it seen in policy contexts which cover social justice, even though all of them are significant for exercising rights in practice. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, further CRC) (Woodhead, 2005: 80), all children should be entitled to rights for survival, health and development of their potentials.

According to the CRC, each child is *entitled to quality education and care*, which supports the child's well-being and healthy development (Tankersley, Vonta in Ionescu, 2015), whereas the quality could not be reached without achievements for "radical and broad-based compliance with the CRC (1989)" (Kernan, 2014 in Tankersley, Vonta and Ionescu, 2015: 78). Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that ensuring access to education and care services is not enough to assure children's rights, well-being, and healthy development and learning to develop all child's potentials; quality is what needs to be provided (Tankersley, Vonta in Ionescu, 2015).

The White Paper on Education and Care in the Republic of Slovenia is the fundamental document which expresses the demand of ensuring quality of ECEC system on all levels, referring to exercising the children's rights (Krek and Metljak, 2011: 13). The White Paper defines the quality of ECEC work as one of the general goals of ECEC (Krek and Metljak, 2011).

"Children's rights are one of the fundamental topic in discussions about the quality in ECEC" (Vonta, 2009a: 105), whereas we should be aware of the fact that preschool exercises rights of children, parents and the society (ibid. 108). Regarding the assurance of quality, preschool should be "adjusted to children, their developmental, individual and cultural characteristics, needs and rights" (ibid. 106) as well as "encourage and develop partnership with family and community (ibid. 106). The quality of ECEC could then not be defined merely as relationship towards children, but also in the context of considering characteristics of the local environment, in which the quality is being developed, as well as in dialogue with various stakeholders (for example families) and deriving from universally accepted values and principles.

It is also essential to expose that children's rights are universal and not culturally determined. Furthermore, they oblige us to assure welfare and quality of life of all children. We should also be aware of the changes to the perception of concept of the child and childhood, which are another consequence of implementing children's rights in the field of pedagogy. A child is no more perceived as somebody who *needs* support, but somebody *who has the right* to such support (Vonta, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Vonta and Gril, 2014). Difference between needs and rights could be expressed through the following example: if we consider the aspect of the child's needs, we would say there are 70 % of all preschool children; whereas if we consider the aspect of the child's rights, there are 30 % of children, whose rights to be enrolled in preschool are not exercised (ibid., 2014).

The second thesis, on which the project is being built, is based on the presumption that the institution should also take parents into consideration when designing activities for assuring soft transition. Therefore, a certain part of the planning of such activities should also cover the institution's cooperation with parents. A soft transition of the children is impossible; if we do not take into consideration also work with parents and preparation of the institution in which the Roma child will be included (preschool, primary school). This is why attention was also given to openness of educational institutions, enabling and ensuring Roma parents to get to know the purpose, goals, content, organization and the processes of educational institutions. Furthermore, enabling Roma parents to air their thoughts, doubts, fears and expectations and facing all parents with stereotypes, prejudice and living conditions, which are a lever for a priori misunderstandings, intolerance, low expectations and the current situation of the majority and the Roma population in the society, improving the parents' competence of education, upbringing and helping their children with learning. The aim is also raising awareness of Roma parents and informing them about the need of early enrolment of their children into preschool and primary school education, which is also stated in the Appendix to the Strategy (2011) as the first goal. According to this document, Roma children should be enrolled in preschool at least two years before entering primary school (by the age of 4). The aim of this early inclusion is learning the language (both, Slovene and Roma) and socialisation in the educational institution.

According to the Strategy (2004), other important goals, which should be considered as necessary to help Roma children with better inclusion in preschool and school, are the inclusion of Roma assistant to preschool and school in order to help children overcome lingual and emotional barriers

when coming into new environment and to be a connecting link between the organisation and the Roma community; adjusting programs in primary schools and offering optional choice of learning Roma language, more focus for Roma children on the Slovene and including contents on Roma culture, history and identity to the curriculum; furthermore, in order to prevent segregation, Roma children should be involved in homogenous groups and be offered different kinds of study help.

Therefore, trust and mutual respect for successful cooperation between professionals and parents has significant impact on child's well-being and life in preschool (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 1996). It contributes to better understanding of each other and building bridges between family culture and the culture of preschool (Tankersley et al., 2013: 52).

Experiences in our country show that the first steps towards building trust between preschool and Roma parents in personal contact of professionals with families in their home environment. When professionals went to the Roma community and organise different activities, speak to them informally, using simple language in order they understand them (Kostelec in Pravne, 2009: 90).

Another positive aspect of a good start of successful relationship is informing parents about enrolment orally and not in writing (Kostelec in Pravne, 2009: 90). Furthermore, it is advisable to include in this conversation someone, who speaks both languages, Slovene and Roma, with the aim of preventing any misunderstandings. Families should also be invited to come and take a tour around preschool, to learn more about life and work there (Kostelec in Pravne, 2009: 92).

To conclude, the openness of the whole organisation – from management to professionals is fundamental for continuous building and preservation of strong and fruitful relationships with the Roma community. The necessity for continuous professional development is acknowledged also in the Strategy for education and schooling of Roma in the Republic of Slovenia (2004).

2. Analysis of local needs

Slovenia, like other European countries is facing a high level of non-participation of Roma children in the education system, starting with the inclusion of Roma children in preschool programs. As stated (Vonta et al. 2013) data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia in the last decade are showing that almost 90 % of children aged three to six years are included in preschool. Based on statistical data, as indicated by Vonta (ibid.) *it is not possible to obtain data on how many Roma children are enrolled in preschool*. According to the principals of primary schools that participated in the *national Evaluation study of the performance of Roma pupils in primary schools*, one year before entering primary school only 53 % Roma pupils were enrolled in preschool in 2009/10 (nearly third of principals did not have any information about numbers)

The mission of the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step (further Centre) from the Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana is to research, develop, conduct and evaluate pedagogical initiatives which lead to development of each child's full potential and assure them equal chance for education, thus following the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Furthermore, the Centre established a Network for Quality in Education which connects preschools and primary schools in Slovenia with the purpose of developing quality education through different initiatives of professional development.

Primary School Tišina and Preschool Plavček, which cooperate with the Centre in the START project, are located in Prekmurje region and are organisationally connected. Due to the presence of two Roma communities in their vicinity, both organisations were involved in different projects in the past (Successful Involvement of Roma Children to Education and Care 2008-2011, Raising Social and Cultural Capital 2013) to help them raise awareness on importance of education and consequently increasing the number of children enrolled in preschool. The unemployment rate of Roma parents in this area is not very high, their living conditions are in order, and many of them work nearby in Austria and have decent income. This piece of information is important as it results in lower enrolment of Roma children in preschool – if parents earn more; they have to pay more for preschool. On the other hand, if mother stays at home and is reported as unemployed, the family receives more state support. Higher the number of children in the family, higher is also this support. All these leads to the fact that many families decide to keep their children at home before enrolling them to primary school at the age of 6, which is obligatory.



Even though findings from initiatives conducted in this environment showed that education of Roma parents improved in the past decade as well as their awareness of education's importance for child's development, schooling and life in general, professionals still face certain obstacles in reaching these families. In one of the mentioned projects (2013), professionals planned and prepared various workshops for families with children who are not enrolled in preschool. Activities, which were organised in the institution, were not well visited. After they decided to go to the settlement, the number of attending families increased. Professionals felt they gained more trust and even respect from families, but when they organised another workshop in preschool, families again did not attend.

Due all these experiences from past projects and gaining information from monitoring within our Network, we found Primary School Tišina and Preschool Plavček to be suitable organisations for helping them improve understanding of importance of education, mission of preschool and school and their professionals, consequently improving children's transition from home to preschool, respectively preschool to primary school. Supporting ECEC practitioners and primary school teachers, who belong to the same organisation and should cooperate more to achieve soft transition of children, and learning about their responsibilities in this area, was another aim in the project.

¹According to the data from the beginning of the project, there were one hundred children enrolled in preschool, one of them was of Roma origin. In primary school, there were 275 children, 25 of them were of Roma origin. The main focus group in the project were children aged 6, in their last year of preschool, going to the local primary school, and Roma children who are not yet enrolled in preschool.

3 ECEC practitioners from the preschool and 3 primary school teachers formed the project group, which wanted to achieve better connection with professionals from both institutions in order to assure softer transition for children and to evaluate the number of enrolment of Roma children in preschool. Yet their experience show that a large percent of Roma families still keeps children at home, sometimes they have difficulties with transport and sometimes the lack of information about preschool and all advantages of enrolling children to preschool keeps them away of enrolling them. Therefore, the aim of the project group was to present the preschool as an institution which is very significant for the child's development and to get closer to parents and gain their trust, which will be of great importance in order to enrol their children to preschool.

Their experience from previous cooperation with Roma families showed it is important for professionals to do the first step in coming to families' home environment – with workshops in the Roma settlements, they prepared training programs for them and after they made a connection, they also invited them to certain events at preschool (doors open day, different events for all families). Furthermore, more attention was laid on sharing experience, knowledge and good practice among colleagues, trainings for ECEC practitioners and teachers were held, a Roma assistant was integrated in the process of education in both institutions in order to help Roma children overcome language and emotional barrier and to “be a bridge between preschool/primary school and Roma community” (as proposed in the Supplement of the Strategy for Roma ..., 2011).

The focus is predominantly put on Roma children, yet the situation in the environment showed a need of laying more attention on researching transition of all children in the municipality who are not yet enrolled in preschool. In order to assure this a need to connect with the other preschool in the environment was expressed. There are namely also children of Roma and non-Roma origin who enrol in the Primary School Tišina at the age of 6. Therefore, finding ways of forming strategies for a soft transition between all these institutions was one of the goals in the project.

Another aspect which needed to be considered after the research of local needs was assuring mentorship to two young Roma assistants. They partly work in the multipurpose centre in the Roma settlement and partly in preschool and school? Due their lack of experience, ECEC practitioners and primary school teachers, who form the project team, mentored them in order to empower them for working with Roma children and their parents (help with learning, preparation of activities for children who are not enrolled in preschool). The situation also showed the necessity of more intensive promotion of preschool and the work of its professionals.

1 At the time of the project implementation, there were more than 20 children in the Roma settlement Vanča vas – Borejci.

3. Development of the action plan

The term transition in the field of education or shortly transition is used when we want to name a transition from one learning environment to another (e.g. from family to preschool, from preschool to school, from one class to another, etc.). The transition between these different environments usually brings positive expectations, as well as stress and fear. What will be the relationship between them depends on the differences between one and the other environment, both in social and physical terms. The transition is easier, the smaller the differences between the known and unknown environment. During the transitional period, an adult should facilitate the transition between two different types of activity and the environment, which relates both to the changing of the physical as well as the social environment (Vonta, 1993).

When we are thinking about Roma children, environments from which they come from differ greatly from the institutional environment they enter. During the transition, children (and also families), find themselves at the crossroads of environments that are diverse according to the philosophy of their mission as well as the structure and method of operation. Therefore, the child can be blurred with clear guidance on our expectations of him, which may cause unforeseen problems (ibid.). Research has shown that as many as one third of all children's problems in primary school are associated with adaptation problems that can affect later life problems (Ladd and Asher, 1985; 1987; Ladd and Prince, 1987; Vonta 1993: 1). But when a child comes from a culturally very different environment from the one at the institution to which he is entering, the transition can be even more challenging and anticipated problems are greater. How can the institution act in this case? If the transition is to be carried out in a qualitative way, it must ensure continuity in three aspects, which are closely interlinked and at the same time interdependent: from the perspective of the child, developmental continuity must be taken into account; from the institution's point of view, the continuity of activities and also cultural appropriateness must be taken care of, which means taking into account the knowledge of the social and cultural context in which every child grows (Vonta, 2009b). Thus, objectives of institutions as well as developmental needs of children, which are primarily evident in the need for emotional and social stability (Ladd, 1990, ibid.: 2), must be addressed. Furthermore, it is significant to ensure that the institution is sensitive to the child's family culture and language (Vonta, 2009b: 90), which can be achieved by actively involving the child's family in their activities.

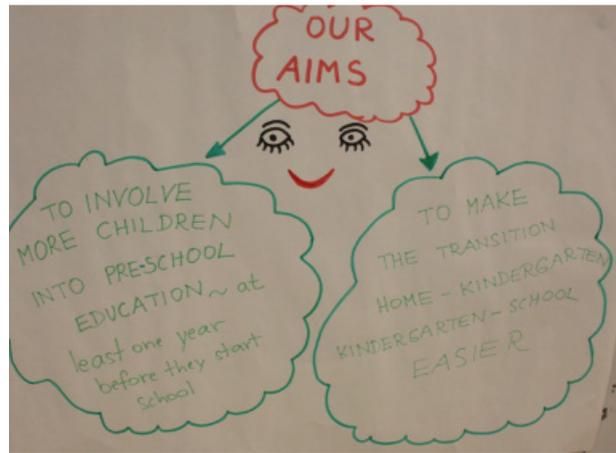
In our case study, we followed all three aspects of continuity mentioned above. The original action plan envisaged several actions: identification of the number of Roma children (non)-enrolled in the preschool, workshop with Roma parents on the importance of education and care, implementation of a focus group with Roma parents, with the aim of finding out meaningful ways of cooperation with preschool and school, planning and implementing transitional activities based on the results of the focus group and the first joint transnational training activity, implementation of activities that contribute to softer transition, activities of connecting the local community with preschool and primary school as a guarantee for sustainability of the implemented activity.

Immediately after the first meeting with the project action team of the preschool and the primary school Tišina, the anticipated plan of action was modified. As there was only one child included in the preschool, the focus of actions needed to be adjusted: instead of providing soft transition from preschool to school, it turned out to be more reasonable to firstly plan activities of ensuring smooth transition between home and preschool and only in the following step from preschool to primary school.

Based on the needs in the environment as well as on the basis of past experiences, we started to plan the following activities which could contribute to softening the transition:

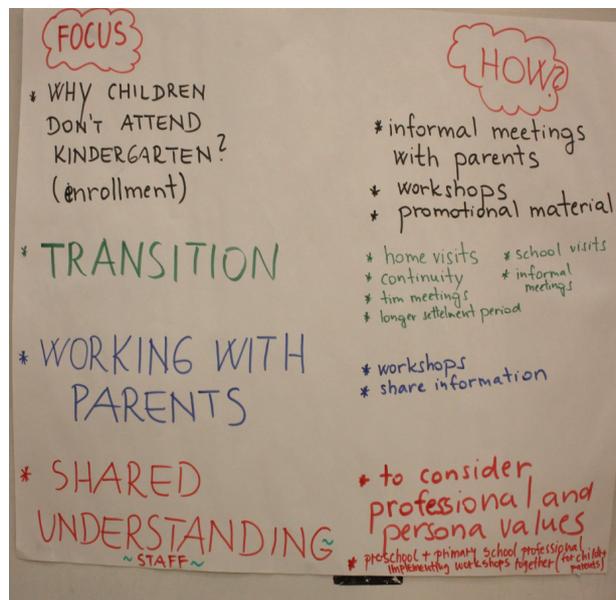
- Transition activities between different learning environments, i.e. between home and preschool
 - "Outreach" activities were developed and implemented by professionals in a Roma settlement with the aim of building trust between Roma parents and the institution. The outreach approach is based on the assumption that the institution recognizes the importance and the necessity in connecting with the involved actors to create mutual trust and for this purpose creates opportunities for interconnecting with various forms of cooperation. The institution is responsible to be the one that first approaches individuals or groups and does not expect from them to do the first step. The main goal of the carried out activities was to build parents' trust in the institution and its employees of the institution on parents' side, which would consequently influence their decisions for enrolment of children in preschool (Komac et al., 2010).

- Activities for ensuring continuity in the approaches between preschool and primary school
- Joint activities were conducted for professional staff from the preschool and primary school, which encourage a common understanding of the child-centred approaches and thus ensure the continuity of the educational process between the different environments to which the child enters. Peer observations with reflection between preschool and primary school teachers, who are members of the project team, was planned for this purpose.



Workshop in Corby – developing action plan.

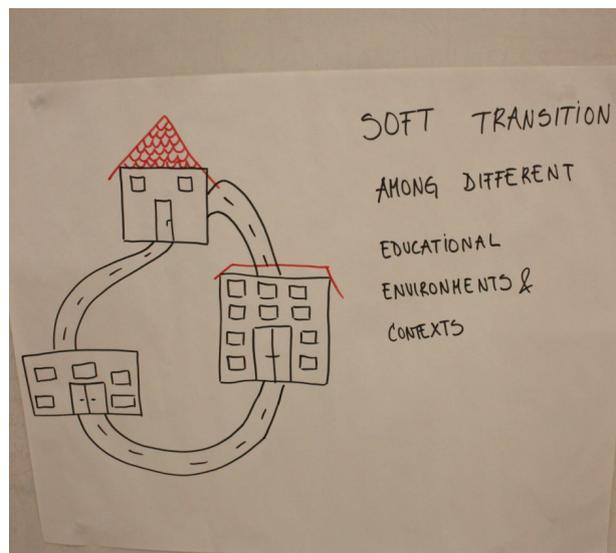
- Activities to ensure sustainability of the project idea
 - Activities were aimed to reach the preschool/primary school staff, which would ensure development of a supportive environment for the project team, taking ownership of the project idea, and transfer of the achieved into practice. Reaching these goals would help maintain and carry out the project idea even after the completion of the project. We planned a training of the entire preschool and school staff on the topics of developing a professional learning community, strategies for ensuring strong relations between professional staff and the importance of creating partnership with parents and methods for developing it.



Workshop in Corby – developing action plan.

- Pedagogical support activities
 - The Centre supported preschool and primary school staff for the purpose of regular reflection of achievements and planning of further activities. Regular monthly monitoring was agreed to follow the realization of the set goals.

At the first short term joint staff training in Corby, we learned about the strategies of developing partnerships with parents and monitoring and evaluation of children in the context of UK partner. Especially valuable was sharing and exchanging the ideas on developing partnership with parents, connecting with the local community and developing strategies of soft transition among different learning environments with other partners of the consortium. Teachers also reported that workshop on action research held in national languages was of great importance. After the training, the initial action plan was modified:



Workshop in Corby – developing action plan.

Two goals have been identified as important:

1. To include a larger number of children in preschool (at least one year before entering school), both Roma and non-Roma. In this context, the need of organizing activities in integrated way, aimed to all non-enrolled children and their families, was recognized.
2. To create a softer transition between home and preschool and later to school. In this context, a need to reconsider strategies for cooperation with parents appeared. Detecting the needs of parents in the process of transition between different learning environments is crucial, as only recognizing their needs by professional staff and responding to them influences the development of parents' trust in the institution. The teachers were thinking about the implementation of various activities for parents (informal meetings, organizing workshops on various topics which would parents perceive as meaningful, implementation of home visits if parents expressed the need, allowing a longer settling-in period for children at enrolment in the preschool, planning the introduction with parents, providing informative visits to the school ...). The next area that was recognized by the teachers as important was development a common understanding of the importance of establishing partnership with parents among the professional staff in preschools and (the first triad) primary schools. Developing common understanding among professionals is a strategy for raising the quality of the work of preschool and primary school as a whole. Common understanding would be developed through implementation of continuous professional meetings/workshops between the professional staff of the preschool and primary school, on the following topics:
 - Creating a partnership relationship with parents;
 - Peer visits as a strategy for ensuring continuity in approaches;
 - Regular follow-ups (regular monthly monitoring with the whole team of professionals) – reflecting on implemented ideas and planning further actions. Due to the change in the school management during the implementation of the project, we encountered certain hindrance in the process, which will be described in following chapters of the report.

Professionals also recognized the need to promote the role of preschool in the local environment and the need to connect with professional and managerial staff from another preschool in the local environment, which also accommodates Roma children and from which children enter to the Tišina Primary School as well.

With the aim of finding a way to Romani parents, it was presumed that developing closer links with Roma assistants, who carry out activities of learning assistance for Roma pupils in the multipurpose centre (VNC) in the Roma settlement, would be of great support to them expanding of their activities also for preschool children. ECEC practitioners planned to mentor them in development of the activities aimed at preschool children.

We already mentioned the need for greater promotion of preschool in the local environment, which was also recognized during the project. To this end, it was planned to record a promotional video, publish articles in local newspapers and design a promotional leaflet.

In December 2017, a second short-term joint staff training event was held in Tišina. The main theme of the meeting was "reflection" (reflection on the role of a teacher, the role of the child in the process, the role of parents).

On the basis of the content of the second training, the project team members wanted to further explore practices that contribute to the continuity of the educational process between different learning environments. They planned to also continue implementing workshops in the Roma settlement, but in particular to explore strategies that contribute to ensuring the continuity of the educational process between preschool and school and the creation of a common understanding of the child-centred approaches. For this purpose, the project team planned peer visits on the basis of observational documentation, which was helpful for focused observation and later reflection of the practices observed.

4. What was implemented

Researchers from Educational research institute provided support to the project team with regular monitoring (via Skype or live), where we reflected performed activities and planned the following steps (action research) based on the reflection.

As planned, we started training for professionals and paraprofessionals - preschool staff, professional staff of the first triad of the primary school Tišina and Roma assistants, with the aim of creating a common understanding of the importance of partnership with parents and ensuring continuity between approaches in the preschool and school. One of the trainings was also attended by professionals from another preschool in the local environment. Topics of the joint training were:

- Addressing the challenges of transition among different learning environments;
- Importance of creating a partnership with parents;
- Documenting changes.

With this joint training, we wanted to ensure development of a supportive environment for the project team and create conditions for sustainability of the project idea.

We also wanted to involve parents in the planning of project activities. We planned a focus group to obtain their views on meaningful cooperation with preschool and primary school. But since the trust between parents and professional staff was not established to the extent that parents would speak frankly about their expectations, as well as the complexity the relationships among the parents in the Roma settlement themselves, the focus group was not implemented. Instead of that, preschool and primary school teachers conducted individual, informal talks with parents and which was more effective way of learning about the interests of parents.

The core project group of teachers monthly implemented activities in the Roma community (a detailed description of activities is in the appendix). Members of the core project group also performed mentoring for Roma assistants, working in the multipurpose centre. Mentoring was implemented in the form of joint planning, implementation and reflection of performed activities.

In order to increase the promotion of the preschool, all non-enrolled children, not just Roma, were invited to preschool activities that were carried out in the afternoon. A promotional video of the preschool was also designed.

The implementation part of activities was carried out in the school year 2016/17 and 2017/18. In the spring of 2017, after several months of conducting activities in the Roma settlement, 2 Roma children enrolled in the preschool. In the spring of 2018, 4 Roma children were enrolled in the preschool.

Challenges that occurred during the implementation:

Lack of interest of the professional staff in the preschool and primary school for carrying out project activities

Professionals' understanding and acting in the direction of ensuring equal opportunities for all children in the community are among the key competences in a competent system of pre-primary education at different levels. At the level of individual practitioners, at the level of training institutions for professionals and at the level of managers and policy makers, which can be seen from the research on key competences of professionals in pre-school education at European Union level (Urban et al., 2011). As it was experienced in during the implementation of this project, the new paradigm of respecting the rights of the child is still not understood accordingly in the practice at this level. Besides the above mentioned, motivation of professionals to engage in project activities also influences their preference of participation in deciding which projects the institution will participate in. In this context, it is meaningful to create a common vision of the institution, which would lead the staff to jointly decide which projects that could help them realize their established vision.

This occurred at the beginning of the project implementation and led to changes in the core project team. Yet we could agree that the interest of the whole team of professionals at the preschool and school would be different if the principle of participation would be considered, respectively if the institution's vision and the execution of project activities would work in synergy. Furthermore, common understanding of the professionals' responsibility towards ensuring equal opportunities to all children in the community and of the families' needs in the transition period should also be taken into account.

The implementation and reflection on implemented project activities influence the changing of professional knowledge, practice and values of the staff. We constantly face the question respectively the challenge to what extent is the professional staff ready to explore their own practice. Certainly, the willingness to experiment with various pedagogical approaches is connected with the willingness to explore their own pedagogical practice (Dewey, 1933 in Tankersley, D., et al., 2013)

Observations of colleagues (observing the practice with reflective conversation) are one of the significant activities for ensuring soft transition the continuity of pedagogical practice among various institutions. This strategy is one of the most effective strategies for mutual learning and support of professionals and a strategy for creating a common understanding of concrete pedagogical concepts among professionals (Tomić, 2002). Through observation, professional workers acquire authentic "study material", based on which they can reflect the practice and form an action plan that serves to change their own practice. Observing practice with reflective conversation also serves as a strategy for shaping and consolidating the functioning of the learning community at the level of preschool.

It was planned during the project to train the professionals how to use the ISSA Quality Assurance Toolkit and to conduct reflective interviews after observation. The ISSA Quality Indicator Tool describes seven principles of quality pedagogical practice and quality indicators, which were identified through the research and the analysis of good practices. These are: Interactions, Families and Communities, Diversity and Values of Democracy, Assessment and Planning, Teaching Strategies, Learning Environment and Professional Development. During observations, we focus on one (or two) pedagogical areas (for example, on the Learning Environment, Interactions, etc.). During the process of observation, we note "evidence" for each indicator of a concrete pedagogical field that we see in practice. In this way, we get involved in identifying quality indicators directly in the practice. The common understanding of each pedagogical areas is build through reflective conversation that follows observation.

A prerequisite for the implementation of colleagues' observations is the trust, which should be established at the level of the collective, and the understanding of communication as a tool for professional development (Tomić, 2002).

'Everything requires its time. This is also true for our professional development - we need to be mature enough to begin the change in this area. At the same time, we had an important task of also changing the way of thinking of the whole collective. In my opinion, the latter task was the most demanding.' *(A member of the core project team)*

The implementation of observations was adapted according to the trust among colleagues and the degree of willingness of each individual to change their own practice. Based on the contents of the joint training and the ISSA Quality Assurance Toolkit, the management of the preschool and primary school designed their own instruments for observing pedagogical practice and used it in practice.

Strong leadership

In Slovenia, preschool and school director's responsibilities and directions for management of employees are precisely defined in the 49. article of the Organisation and Financing of Education Act (ZOFVI, 1999:22). Director is also in charge of keeping a high level of employees' motivation towards work, which consequently leads to quality work being perceived as a value and assures the whole atmosphere in the organisation (Devjak in Berčnik, 2010: 185-186).

Effective leadership should provide support and create conditions that would enable professionals to work together, collaborate and define quality of the process as professional value. Therefore, it is important that director creates a culture that is open to the learning of both professionals and also the children (Earley and Bubb 2004, 35, 48).

During the implementation of the project, there was a change of leadership in school. In the period prior to the change, the leadership lacked the motivation for guiding and motivating the professionals, especially in implementing the project activities for the whole preschool and primary school staff. The new director took up the function in August 2017. After taking office, we conducted a meeting with the management team to review the status of the activities and to plan further steps. The new management supports the project and the implementation of the activities, and is now actively involved in the search for strategies to integrate project activities systematically into the work of the preschool and school.

Importance of building partnership with Roma parents

In order to include their child in preschool, trust in the institution and its employees is of great importance to parents, especially when they have a possibility of caring for their child alone at home. In the case of Roma parents, the need for childcare is relatively small because of the high level of their unemployment. On the other hand, the need for trust in the institution, its ECEC practitioners and the positive effects of its program is much greater (Vonta, 2008). Parents cannot establish trust overnight when the child is included in compulsory education, which happens with enrolment in the primary school. This transition from informal to formal environment needs to be built much earlier and with special attention, especially when we can assume that parents are burdened with their own bad experiences in the educational institution.

In the Strategy (ibid. 26), the principle of cooperation with parents is defined as one of the principles that are particularly important in the design of implementing curricula for work with children. It is written: "When introducing Roma children to preschools, cooperation with parents is of particular importance. For the implementation of this principle, preschools should develop activities in which children and parents in the Roma community will be included before the entry of children into preschool. These activities should primarily contribute to the establishment of trust of Roma parents in the institution. To this end, the teacher should work closely with other organizations in the environment that works on the field of health, care, education, etc. Before entering preschool, they should contact the parents of the child in personal. In addition, before enrolling in the new institution, preschool should organize activities for gradual introduction of preschool, preschool group, educational staff and other adults in preschool, other children in the group and their parents. These activities are aimed at children and parents.

Roma parents did not attend workshops at the multipurpose centre (MPC) in the Roma settlement in very often². Reasons for such behaviour are complex. Activities, which are carried out in the MPC are usually intended for learning support to primary school pupils. Children attend these activities alone, without parents. Many primary school children have younger siblings. If parents were expected to send their children alone to MPC to learn there, they were now expected to join the (younger) children at the workshops. Obviously, parents perceive the MPC as the place where their school children learn with the help of Romani assistants. This is the reason, why much more attention should be paid to exceeding these established patterns. It turned out that one year of intensive implementation of the activities is insufficient to "break" the traditional role of the MPC (being the place, where children can go to the Roma settlement alone or with their older brothers or sisters, but now with parents). Furthermore, the MPC was supposed to be perceived as a common space for socializing for the entire Roma community. Yet, parents not visiting it is a clear message, that they do not perceive the MPP as a place where all would gather.

However, another important consideration is being given about the level of trust in relation to teachers. In different Romani settings, by different occasions, Roma parents expressed that when a certain level of confidence has been reached toward professionals, they no longer see the need to accompany their child to the workshops. Nevertheless, there exists certain hesitation, whether non-attendance actually means a high level of trust and raises the question, how to ensure parents' presence in this case.

According to teachers, parents did not attend the workshops due to complexity of relations in the Roma settlement – due to disputes between families. Relationships among families also affect the enrolment, attendance of children to preschool and school attendance.

'In the future, we will continue to work on connecting the preschool and school, and of course, we will continue working with parents.' (Teacher, a member of the core project team)

One of the first steps, which can be done by the institution towards building trust with Roma families, is outreach. The next one is changing school practices and processes, but this one still remains challenging. The institution needs to be the one who initiates the dialogue with parents and shows its readiness to hear parents' ideas, doubts or fears. Besides, ECEC practitioners and teachers are the ones who need to realize how important it is to reflect and revise their own practices and relations towards parents.

² According to teachers and ECEC practitioners' reports of workshops, one or none Roma parents attended workshops in the Roma settlement with their children.



'I am afraid to enrol my child in the preschool, because he gets ill very often. And there are many children in preschool.' *(Roma mother)*

'I was worried, how my daughter will be accepted. She was the only one to be enrolled just before school and I was concerned how would she blend in the group of children, who are already well-connected. She was in preschool for two months, starting in September but then I withdrew her out in December. I did not have enough trust in the practitioner and therefore did not tell her about my doubts. My child started crying already in the changing room when she heard the practitioner's voice and she did not want to enter the playroom. She is now in school and has no difficulties. I do not know, perhaps I would now enrol my child in preschool earlier. But it was so painful to see her cry at home saying that nobody wants to play with her. Though I need to point out that her being Roma was not the reason for that. She was just new in the group and others already had a strong bond.' *(Roma mother)*

'I think they (Roma children, AN) should be together at least at the beginning. It should be simpler for them because they know each other well. In this way they would get used to the new environment easier.'

'I do not have any obstacles (to enrol the child, AN). I just think that it is too early to do that sooner. She will be 3 in December and we will enrol her in September. But before it would just be too soon. She is my first-born, so I was more afraid. I cannot tell why. I just had that feeling. Besides, we could babysit her at home. If we did not have that chance, we would perhaps consider earlier enrolment. I see now that preschool is nothing intimidating as many imagine.' *(Roma mother)*

Unemployment is largely embedded in the life of Roma families and consequently one of common reasons for children's non-enrolment in preschool. There is a continuous need of seeking a holistic approach towards tackling Roma issue - from preschool to employment level.

'My wife used to work as a caregiver in an old people's home. When she lost her job, she stayed at home and could take care of our child. There was no need to enrol her in preschool. But she will start visiting the preschool in September.' *(Roma father)*

Sustainability of the project idea

One of the conditions for sustainability of the project idea is the creation of supporting systems for professionals within the institution as well as the support system for institution involved. Preschool and primary school have been a long year member of the Network for changing quality Step by Step, operated by our Centre. Members of the Network have the opportunity to reflect and share experiences and practices with other professionals. In addition, pedagogical support to professionals is provided. Unfortunately, the leadership of the school decided to leave the Network in the school year 2016/17, which resulted in termination of more intense pedagogical support. Still, we encouraged professionals to join the National Romany Early Years Network (REYN), which operates under the auspices of ISSA (International Step by Step Association), and provides professionals opportunities for networking with other professionals.

The initial point of view changed on different levels:

On the level of teachers:

- Intensified and deeper connections between different stakeholders in the local environment (preschool, primary school Tišina, dislocated unit of primary school Gederovci, municipality, local NGOs, other preschool in the local community, centre for social work).

'The project has contributed to several positive and deeper connections between different institutions - primarily the cooperation between the primary school and preschool and also with the founder - the Municipality of Tišina' *(school management)*

'We also work with the Centre for social work, as their representative offers learning assistance to our pupils at home, including Roma children. We meet with her regularly, because she is also a link between us and parents. We exchange the necessary information when working with children.' *(Teacher, a member of the project team)*

'We actively participated with the preschool Laura in different activities. We organized common

activities on the playground...! (Teacher, a member of the project team).

- Intensified and deeper links between professional workers

ECEC practitioners and teacher of the first triade in primary school connected due to common project activities. Together with monthly mentorings this led to them forming a common understanding of the meaning of soft transition. A novelty was also the practice of intercollegial connecting. A strong influence on this relationship had the learning week in Corby in December 2016. The professionals had the opportunity to exchange good practices and their experience, which made them reflect their own practice.

'The project also connected us professionals with each other - here I am referring to the preschool and school. Previously, it almost felt like we were part of two different institutions, and now we meet at informal and formal meetings. A few teachers from the school went to peer observation to the preschool, and I think this was one of the best collaborations. We were all positively surprised and enthusiastic about the dynamics of groups; we were comparing methods and forms of work with children who need different approaches. Recently, preschool teachers of the oldest group also participated in the formation of classrooms of the future first grades. We also participated in the teachers' workshops at the preschool' (Teacher, a member of the project team)

'We - preschool and primary school teachers connected more. There were more exchanges of practices, opinions, initiatives, ideas.' (Teacher, a member of the project team)

- Different understanding of parents- changes in understanding the role of parents

'Our regular monthly meetings were conducted in order to provide intensive support to professionals involved in the core project team. For example, we reflected the role of parents at their work and how to maintain strong relationships with them. Based on our meetings, they started considering new practices in order to connect better with Roma parents. They noticed how active are (Roma) parents on social media and successfully reached them in this way.'

'Even before the project, I was inclined to try to involve parents more into the work and life of the school. This project just confirmed my approach of including parents into our work. I see parents as a link between us - teachers and children. I talk to them more, I ask them to help me with some more complex situations with their child. I think that we need to be very sensitive and talk to parents about their fears and concerns connected to school and their child. We also encourage parents' participation in school activities. This year we prepared many such activities where parents participated in or outside the classroom. We cooperated in preparations for the bazaar, traditional Slovenian breakfast, hiking, cross-country skiing and a three-day camp' (Teacher, a member of the project group).

- Changes in the understanding of transition at the level of the whole preschool and primary school staff

ECEC practitioners and teachers from the first triade started to cooperate more actively, which also resulted in their work on common understanding of transition.

'The whole project was presented to the teachers' council, to the wider environment and also to parents. There are still colleagues who are sceptical, whether this is necessary or not, yet on the other hand, more teachers see that the project activities have contributed to the softening of the transition.' (Teacher, a member of the project team)

5. What works? Impact on children, families, teachers, organisations

In the case of our case study, we focused on recording impact at the level of professionals, and indirectly we also monitored the effects on children and parents.

What works?

- Strong, supportive leadership;
- Willingness of professionals to change their own practice;
- A project idea that is included in the vision of the work of the institution;



- Developing a supportive system for a core project team at the level of the institution, which ensures the sustainability of project ideas even after the official completion of the project;
- Linking different stakeholders at different levels;
- Strengthening the awareness of the professional staff of preschool and school about their own professional role in relation to parents (Roma and non-Roma), sensitization for their needs;
- Supporting structures at the level of the municipality (the founder).

6. Reflection and critical evaluation

Data, which were shared by professionals at the beginning of the project showed there were one hundred children enrolled in Preschool Plavček, one of them was Roma. In primary school Tišina, there were 275 children, 25 of them were of Roma origin. Regarding the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), more efforts should be made to try to include all children in early childhood programs (Jager, 2016), especially children who live in most difficult circumstances, to which also belong the Roma.

With the aim of offering families softer transition from home environment to preschool and further on from preschool to primary school education, different activities should be initiated. Vonta (2013 in Vonta et al., 2013) writes that even though preschools are ECEC service providers of various programs, this does not ensure that Romani parents would decide to enrol their children to preschool. Institution should systematically plan more activities of promoting their service to Roma families if professionals want increased number of enrolled Roma children.

In order to approach the target group of Roma families, outreach activities should be conducted. When going to the Roma community, professionals present the work and life in preschool, and make a bond with parents and children. Building trust with marginalized communities is namely of great importance and preconditions for parents' decision to include their children in a preschool program. Many documents confirm this statement, in Slovenia, the Appendix to the Curriculum in Preschools for Working with Romani children (2011) and the Strategy of Childcare and Education of the Roma in the Republic of Slovenia (2004). This led the professionals from the project team to plan their visits in the Roma settlement in the municipality of Tišina, where they later in the project conducted different workshops for Roma children and their parents.

6.1 Implications for policies

With the experience from this and from previous projects, the following guidelines should be considered when planning outreach activities for families whose children are not yet enrolled in preschool programs:

- To facilitate the planning of the activities for the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs it is that preschools acquire information on the number of Romani preschool children in a given area, as well as to connect with key local stakeholders who will enable the preschool to gain such information.
- Outreach activities should be planned and continuously carried out. They are the first step toward building the trust of the Romani community in preschools; such activities may be carried out in the home as informal gatherings, games, creative workshops, sports events...
- ECEC professionals should pay special attention to making a personal approach in terms of campaigns; they should notify families of their activities, as well as take Romani parents and their children into consideration when planning, carrying out, and evaluating such activities.
- In order to conduct such activities, suitable conditions should be met in Romani settlements, as appropriate (covered space or at least a canopy with tables and chairs, and so forth).
- It is also important to plan and carry out step-by-step introduction activities to familiarize Romani children and their parents with preschools, ECEC professionals, and other children, enrolled in the preschool, as well as their parents.
- Appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established in order to provide

transportation for children if Romani parents cannot access the preschool due to financial or any other reasons; this includes not only transporting children and their parents to step-by-step introduction activities, but also their transportation later on when the child is already enrolled.

- Regarding the inclusion of Romani children in preschools, it is vital that children are included in heterogeneous groups, not in homogeneous groups of only Romani children.
- Various reasons why parents do not enrol their children in early childhood programs should be taken into consideration, as well as the fact that due to high rate of unemployment in Romani communities the need for day care is relatively small. If parents are unable to cover preschool costs – for children at the highest risk – alternative sources for covering enrolment fees should be provided or parents should be permitted to enrol their children free of charge. Additional dedicated financial means should be considered in order to allow parents to ensure their children are transported to preschools, to buy them clothes, and so forth.
- Last but not least, the inclusion or employment of the members of Romani community at preschools should be encouraged and enabled; as such cooperation plays an important part in building trust and overcoming language barriers.

With the aim of assuring these directions to be executed, some actions should also be done on the national level:

- The Personal Data Protection Act should be put into effect in a way that would allow preschools to have access to the necessary information for planning the inclusion of Romani children in early childhood programs.
- A binding measure should be implemented to obligate the preschools in environments with Romani communities to prioritize activities with which they could approach Romani children and their parents or encourage the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs.
- In addition to the funds that Slovenia has already earmarked for preschool services for Romani children under the Pre-School Institutions Act, other financial means should be provided for activities with which preschools could approach Romani preschool children who are not enrolled in preschools and their parents (for staff and other related costs).
- A systematic approach to ensuring the prioritized inclusion of Romani children in preschools even during the school year should be considered if parents decide to enrol their child in a preschool during outreach activities or step-by-step introduction activities.
- If parents are not able to cover preschool costs, appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established in order to provide alternative sources for covering enrolment fees for Romani children at the highest risk, which would allow their parents to enrol them free of charge.
- Appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established in order to provide transportation for children if Romani parents cannot access the preschool due to financial or any other reasons; this includes not only the transportation of children and their parents to step-by-step introduction activities, but also their transportation later on when the child is already enrolled.
- Appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established to help them include or employ members of the Romani community at preschools.

The outreach approach is of great importance with achieving trust of Roma families. Both, preschool and school, made a large improvement in this area. The next step they need to do towards softer transition is to consider changes in school practice. Parents should be more intensively involved in this process: professionals should plan opportunities where they could start a dialogue with parents and based on this seek ways to adapt school practice. This step still remains challenging.

Building trust between the Roma community and educational institutions was seen as one of the most important aspect, which should also be considered. In order to increase the number of enrolled Roma children, preschool should also connect with significant people from the Roma community and with different professionals from other sectors, who also work with Roma families, such as local authorities, education, culture, social affairs, employment, and health sector (European Commission, 2013; Official Journal of the European Union 2011/C 175/03, in Jager 2016). With clear and common understanding and goals of the role and responsibility of each stakeholder, they could be more effective in securing better educational perspective of Roma children. Following guidelines should be considered:

- In terms of preschools, all key actors who have contact with Romani families and may contribute to the more successful inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs (municipality, centres for social work, healthcare centres, NGOs and other organizations who work with Romani families, the Romani community, the local community, and so forth) should be identified.
- It is critical that ECEC professionals and other relevant stakeholders within the local community are aware of the significance of a comprehensive approach in preschool education, and should also pay attention to the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs.
- It is vital that the representatives of the Romani community are identified and included in their respective local action teams.
- In this respect, it is key to strengthen the cooperation between the preschool and its founding municipality, with the latter being responsible for providing ECEC programs that can fulfil the specific needs of program participants, including Romani families.

In order to increase the number of enrolled Roma children to preschool, also ECEC professionals and primary school teachers should raise their awareness on the importance of early inclusion of all children to formal schooling, especially those with vulnerable backgrounds:

- In each preschool, special attention should be given to informing ECEC professionals about the situation of the Romani community in their respective local community (housing situation, inclusion in the local community, demographics, inclusion of children in childcare and education and so forth).
- Concerning ECEC professionals, special attention should be given to raising awareness about the importance of high-quality ECEC programs for all children, especially for those who come from socially and economically disadvantaged environments – which is certainly true for the Romani children in Slovenia.
- Concerning ECEC professionals, special attention should be given to creating a common and detailed understanding of the quality of ECEC services, as well as to the understanding of the connection between the professional development of ECEC professionals and the quality of the childcare and educational process.
- Special attention should also be given to raising awareness about the importance of ensuring social justice in childcare and education, as well as identifying and eliminating prejudices, stereotypes and any discriminatory treatment inflicted by individuals or educational institutions.
- Advocacy is crucial for preschools in raising the awareness of non-Romani parents and the larger community regarding the importance of enrolling Romani children in preschool programs and ensuring social justice in childcare and education.

To conclude, we should again point out children's rights to be the first and main aspect, which should be considered when placing attention to transition. Experiences show that social investment discourse is still the prevailing discourse in ECEC (and preschool being just a service to prepare children for primary school), whereas the awareness of strengthening the aspect of children's rights should be on a higher level. The right to education is in the United Nation's document *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood* (2006) understood as the right, which is acquired by birth and gives everyone the right to optimal development (ibid. 2006). Education is namely intended for *optimal development of child's personality, talent, cognitive and physical abilities* (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 29., nr. 1) and at the same time understood as the empowerment of an individual to develop abilities, knowledge and other skills, as well as dignity, self-respect and self-confidence. This should be achieved through child-centred and child-friendly approaches, and through considering children's rights and by birth acquired dignity (United Nations, 2001 in Jager, 2015: 20).

In Preschool Plavček and Primary School Tišina, environments where the project was implemented, we can confirm major step towards softer transition. Higher children enrolment, more trustful relationships between ECEC professionals and families, as well as among professionals from preschool and school, outreach activities and greater openness of both institutions are all indicators of successful work in the project. Nevertheless, we are all well-aware of the fact that this good practice is only the fundament for further work, which still needs to be done to achieve long-lasting results in this field.

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8. Appendix 1

THE PARTNERSHIP WITH ROMA FAMILIES CONNECTED US - BUT HOW?

Barbara Lejko, Preschool Plavček at Primary School Tišina

Translation: Manuela Filipič, Primary School Tišina

Summary

In the article I closely present the implementation of the project at all levels; with Roma children, Roma parents, employees and local community-both in the kindergarten, the school and the local environment as well. The approach is based on active involvement of all pedagogical workers in kindergarten and the first level of elementary school. So, we present an efficient model of collaboration between kindergarten and elementary school, since the project promotes innovative pedagogical approaches in early education, which help children to develop their potentials. The aim of the project is a softer and less stressful transition from home to kindergarten and from kindergarten to school. These transitions sometimes represent a big barrier or much effort, for children, their parents and teachers. With adapted pedagogical approaches we enabled the children a less stressful and difficult transition, because they are the most vulnerable group. The project group was educated in various cultural environments and in several countries. That enabled them to exchange information about various practices from *many years of experiences*. The article serves as an encouragement for kindergarten teachers and school teachers to start thinking outside the frames and make a step further to deepen their relationship with Roma parents. Attention is drawn also to the challenges we had to face at the time of implementation.

Key words: partnership with Roma parents, pedagogical challenges of teachers, Roma children.



Training week in Tišina, Slovenia, December 2017 (photo: Caroline Boudry)

Small steps for a great cause

Collaboration with parents plays a big role in the process of settlement of Roma children into the setting. We must gain trust from the families for them to trust an institution such as kindergarten or school. We also must explain to them that by enrolling a child in the kindergarten does not mean that our intention is to change or steal them. It is necessary to introduce to them the importance of education in the further life of their children and the importance of preserving their own cultural identity while integrating into majority culture. In order to achieve this it is good to make personal contact with the parents or with the family before the child enters kindergarten (Dodatek h kurikulumu za vrtce za delo z otroki Romov,2012,str.4).

Before the implementation of the START project only one child was attending kindergarten Plavček in Tišina, although there were about 20 children of that age in the Roma settlement Vanča vas-Borejci. A few years back professional workers from our kindergarten took part in the project The Raise of the Social and Cultural Capital in the Roma settlements. Within this project we already organised workshops in the multipurpose centre Vanča vas- Borejci.

But the activities did not continue after the end of the project. Till now teachers of Primary school Tišina did not organize workshops or offered learning help in the Roma settlement, so with the implementation of this project we started with a new method of collaboration. Because this was something new for us we studied some literature about it, talked to professionals and practitioners from Slovenia and other countries (Italy, Belgium and Great Britain). After that it was clear to us, that getting trust is of key importance and that this cannot happen overnight.

To gain some first insight of the situation we talked to two Roma Assistants who work at our school. They told us that the main concerns of Roma parents about the enrolment into kindergarten are:

- financial impact on the family budget
- the fear something might happen to the child
- the fear that the child would be alone and sad
- the fear that they would have to play alone
- the problem with transportation, because they do not have a car or a driver`s licence

These concerns were identical to those of non-Roma parents. That is, we decided to extend the project activities on two focus groups:

- Roma children from the municipality of Tišina that are not yet enrolled in kindergarten
- Non-Roma children from the municipality of Tišina that are not yet enrolled in kindergarten

Both Roma and non-Roma families in the municipality of Tišina live in urban settlements. The unemployment of Roma is low. Most Roma parents, especially fathers, are employed in neighbouring Austria. They also decide to start a family between 16 and 30 year of age. So, this is a younger generation of parents which communicate in the colloquial version of the Slovene language or in the prekmurje dialect. A minority of them knows or uses the Roma language and they do not want that their language is used in educational institutions.

When we obtained the initial information, we decided that we must run the activities in the project on two levels:

- separate workshops and learning help in the Roma settlement for pre-school children and school children
- workshops and activities in kindergarten

Through all these activities brought professional workers closer together. We exchanged a lot of examples of good practice. We had several meetings which supported us in the process of transition.

Activities were numerous:

- collaboration of pre-school teachers and school teachers in the educational process: the introduction of teacher`s work, introduction of the school bag and school supplies, a tour through the whole school (classroom, changing rooms, the gym, toilets, kitchen, headmaster`s office...); participation in the lesson for future first-graders (introduction of the concept of a school lesson).
- visits of future first-graders in the school library (twice a month)

- teaching observations between pre-school teachers and school teachers
- the participation of kindergarten children and school events and vice versa
- puppet shows in the school gym for all kindergarten children
- collaboration of kindergarten teachers and school teacher in other projects
- exchange between a playroom and classroom for a day
- in December school children read fairy tales in the kindergarten

Before the implementation of this project we realized that we did not pay special attention to the transitions of children, because this was a logical process that happens in the life of each individual. We only visited the school once a year and spend one hour in class.

At the time of implementation, we had several discussions about what professional workers sensed when Roma or non-Roma children enter kindergarten or school. That is why we expanded our activities and noticed that they are positively accepted by the parents.

Promotion of the project, kindergarten and school

At the beginning the project was presented to the entire pedagogical staff and the headmaster. It was important to us that our co-workers recognize our efforts to soften the transitions. At the same time, however, we presented the project to the headmaster of the private kindergarten Laura which is also located in Tišina. They also participated in the preliminary workshop of the START project. We often collaborated with them, because we want that the children get to know each other before they enter school together.

When we received the information how many Roma children are enrolled in kindergarten we were surprised. At the beginning only one Roma child was attending kindergarten and that just only one year before entering school. This opened a question what to do, besides the workshops in the settlement, to get more parents to enrol their child in kindergarten. We decided that we have to do more on the promotion of the kindergarten, so we decided to make a promotional video. In this video we present one day in a life of a child that attends kindergarten. The parents can see the kindergarten, the activities, play and work of children. To bring the video even closer to Roma and non-Roma parents and to convince them of the benefits of institutional education we showed them how that works on a regular day of a family- getting ready for kindergarten, the arrival and departure, communication with the kindergarten teacher and so on. The video has no spoken dialogues just music playing in the background, so it is also suitable for Roma parents which mainly speak Roma language. The video shows a non-Roma family, but we are thinking about making a video with a Roma family in the future.

We prepared flyers in Slovenian language with which we invited all parents to visit our kindergarten. We invited all children that do not attend kindergarten to see a play. Furthermore, we organized a visit from Santa and we prepared a Christmas tea party. Through these informal meetings and conversations, we gained some additional information why their children are not attending kindergarten. We tried to make the event pleasant for them and children got presents from Santa. In the meantime, parents could look around the kindergarten.

With all the activities that were held in our kindergarten the parents had the opportunity to gain information about the kindergarten, see the playrooms and meet other kindergarten teachers. We used promotional leaflets to inform Roma and non-Roma parents about the news and further activities that will take place in kindergarten. We sent them to all household in the municipality. We represented our institution in the local newspaper and wider. We informed them about significant events, achievements and daily life. We also used the local television channel to promote our kindergarten on TV. The response of the Roma and non-Roma depended on the content of the workshop and weather conditions. The attendance of both was higher just before the annual enrolment in kindergarten.

The collaboration with Roma parents is essential

Skubic (2012) indicates the importance of collaboration with Roma parents which must be built on trust. We must listen to the wishes of parents, but only if they are in accordance with general norms and safety. He also states that parents must be informed with the certain order that is held in the kindergarten. All presentations of the kindergarten and the contact with parents must be short and

concise, because if they do not understand the intentions of the kindergarten teacher they often get frightened and do not insist with education in kindergartens. Therefore, they do not let go of their children and do not let them stay in care.

Based on the experiences that we gained, we are introducing a new method of working with Roma parents. Parents are now more involved in the period of settlement, they can support their children as long as they don't get the feeling that they can trust the kindergarten teacher and that their child is safe. A lot of Roma parents pick up their children right after lunch and they can do that. The Roma assistant that has her child in our setting said that she is glad that she can pick up her child earlier. What are the reasons she takes her child home right after lunch:

- she feels calmer and her child can sense that
- she has someone to take care of him at home, so he can eat his lunch there, because in kindergarten he won't eat anything
- the child does not want to sleep in kindergarten
- she is afraid that by him not sleeping he would disturb the routine of other children

Similar reasons were stated by a father who also takes his child after lunch.

All kindergarten teachers communicate with the parents in the dialect. We do not use any professional terms so that the parents can understand us and are able to identify themselves with the professional workers. When children arrive or go home we are always prepared to answer any questions they might have.

Together we can do more

The biggest challenge that we had to face in the implementation of the project was certainly how to inspire all professional workers to follow the same aims as we do. Even though our project team presented the project in detail the response was not as positive as what we hoped for. At the beginning the project has not reached such proportions, because we were in the process of changing the headmaster. After that our new headmaster offered us a lot of support in our efforts to spread our ideas among all professional workers. The headmaster of the school and the kindergarten was often present at teaching observations among peers, in discussions between practitioners, at workshops for Roma and non-Roma families. He also attended the learning support sessions in the Roma settlement. He was in favour of the exchange of good practice and opinions within the regular teaching observations (kindergarten teacher –first grade teacher and among other teachers).

There are still a lot of Roma and non-Roma children in the municipality that don't attend kindergarten. Therefore, we will continue to invite them to our events in kindergarten and school. We will inform them via email, with leaflets and regular promotion in the local media, through Roma assistants or personally at school. If it is necessary, we will visit them in the Roma settlement and invite to our workshops. To accomplish our goals, we already included other teachers that are not members of the project team. Together we will continue the activities in the future.



Training day between the kindergarten teachers and teachers at school Tišina, February 2017

We have opened our doors

A more intense collaboration is seen between the kindergarten teachers and the next year first grade teacher. We considered that when planning teaching observations.

With these teaching observations we generally wanted to:

- the raise of the work quality and the professional development of teachers as individuals and the school in general
- monitor the work of students (class climate and relationships, the motivation of students.
- developing the culture of mutual trust, partnership and cooperation among teachers

The choice of teaching observation among peers was free. Teacher could choose the teacher or the kindergarten teacher they wanted to observe. So, we had to establish the first contact and started to cooperate more intensively with each other. The teachers of the first educational period had teaching observations in kindergarten and kindergarten teachers at school. We did not use any special forms for our observations. We just wrote on a sheet of paper. We observed what was interesting for us, discipline, motivation and the guidance. At the same time, however we also wrote down some points: what are the things we do the same, what do we do different and what could be improved or changed. We are aware that by using a written form for observations would lead us to observe even more closely. But at that time our method seemed better for us. In the future we will definitely include some guidelines to make our observations even more efficient and to become more skilled observers who can give an even better feedback to our co-workers. We tried to reflect on our observation as soon as possible, because the impressions were still fresh. The reflection was held in a relaxed atmosphere and that additionally strengthen the bond among us.

While reflecting on the observation teacher pointed out the areas the observed closely:

- dealing with disciplinary problems,
- setting limits,
- attention of children or students (agreed signs)
- the activity of children or students
- the solving of problems which some children or students had

Our teacher Hema Hanc described her experience while observing children aged 4 to 6 years. She was observing an exercise lesson in kindergarten. She noticed that both kindergarten teacher and her assistant consistently set the limits and they friendly, but at the same time firmly dealt with discipline problems. They used time out to calm down children and agreed signs which they use in the case when children have problems with attention. They just touch the child with their hand and use no words. They also let the children to be active and to overcome obstacles. If they had problems they friendly offered them their help. The same situation was at the end when children had to change their clothes. Most of the children did that by themselves. There were only few children that asked for help. There was a boy who approached his teacher because he needed help with his sports bag, because it was torn. The kindergarten teacher saw him tear up his bag on purpose. So, she told him that he has to solve this problem alone (of course she helped him at the end). That is how she encouraged him to start thinking and solve his problem.

The teacher and the kindergarten teacher:

- encouraged the interest and the motivation of children
- observed their responses, are they all actively involved in the planned activities
- they provided a positive and supportive learning environment which enabled enough learning challenges to work individually or to collaborate with other children (active methods, work strategies, building mutual trust, a quiet music playing in the background).

Last year each professional worker only had one teaching observation so this year we are planning to do the same. If we compare the discipline at school and kindergarten we see that we use similar methods. We notice that a healthy, supportive learning environment, learning by exploring and positive climate is important to all of us.

'A stimulating learning environment affects the cognitive, social, emotional and motor development of children' (*Vonta idr.,2009, str.9*).



Kindergarten teachers are trying to provide a safe environment for our children. That can also be seen using a variety of learning resources (children explore for themselves, are active, they experiment) and variety of materials. We are trying to provide a sense of belonging and support for all children. Teachers in the first educational period have a similar strategy. There is a lot of problem solving learning, a lot of group work and also a lot of learning with exploring. All professional workers accepted the teaching observations positively, because they give us a chance for our professional growth. The experience of this collaboration and an honest conversation was really priceless for us.

Reflection of the project

When we joined the project we were aware that hard work awaits us – working with parents. How to get them on our side and gain their trust in order to establish good contacts with our institutions? How to get more of them to join the activities we organized? Those were our wishes and needs. We are aware that each child is important for us (the number of groups or classes depends on the number of children in kindergarten or at school) and that this requires from us to be creative and have a different perspective on our work.

Were we successful?

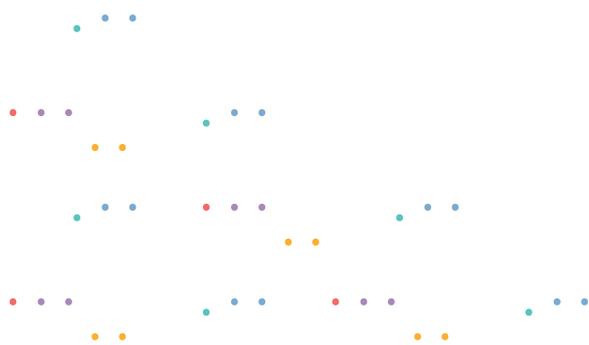
We think so. Since the beginning of the project four parents have newly enrolled their children in kindergarten.

The teachers of first education period will continue with their work in the Roma settlement. They will offer learning support, organise workshops themed on special days or holidays and together with the kindergarten teachers they will organise family meetings. We planned to have one family gathering every three months. We hope to include those activities in our yearly working plan of our institution in order to spread it horizontally.

We see a significant shift in the fact that our social worker, all kindergarten teachers and all first educational period teachers joined the activities. That means that they also feel that some changes had to be made in the way of approaching and communicate with Roma parents.

Final thoughts

In the school year 2018/2019 START project is in the final stage of implementation, but we will continue with our workshops for the pre-school children and learning help for the school children in the multipurpose centre Vanča vas-Borejci even after the end of the project. We will also continue to invite all children who do not attend kindergarten to join us in our kindergarten on different occasions. The headmaster of the school and the kindergarten is preparing a comprehensive plan with further activities to create a collegiate community of kindergarten teachers and teachers. At the time implementation of the project START we realized- not only the members of the team, but also other professional workers- that it is necessary to talk about our educational work, share opinions, ideas and experiences in order to spread good practice. This is essential for the transitions from home to kindergarten and from kindergarten to school. In the collaboration with Roma parents it is important to have a deeper relationship and that cannot happen overnight if we want to have the results we hope for.



9. Appendix 2

CONDUCTING WORKSHOPS IN THE ROMA MULTIPURPOSE CENTER

Hema Hanc, Primary School Tišina

Translation: Manuela Filipič, Primary School Tišina

Abstract

In the article, I am presenting cooperation among professional workers at school, (first three grades teachers, consultant), and Roma children with their parents in the incubator, in VNC multipurpose center. Cooperation started within the project Start Erasmus plus, when together with educators we started activities for less stressful and soft transition from home to kindergarten and from kindergarten to school. When we investigated the possibilities for cooperation with Roma parents and children, one of the activities was also workshops that are still ongoing. In the workshops, we offer them learning aid, removing gaps in knowledge, and working for better involvement of children in the educational process and in the environment, developing motor skills, focus on holidays, developing their self-esteem, imagination, creativity, and providing parents with tools to help their children. With the workshops, we want to make Roma children more successful at school in order to reduce their absences, while at the same time we want to reduce our prejudices when working with them.

Key words: partnership with Roma parents, professional workshops, Roma children.

Overcoming Of Distress And Better Collaboration Between Kindergarten And School

The aim of Erasmus plus project is a softer and less stressful transition of children from one setting to another, including the transition from home to kindergarten. These transitions are often accompanied with many obstacles, efforts and distress for the children, their parents and professional workers as well. Our challenge was to diminish and soften that distress in order to help both parents and children. One of the activities for a softer transition were workshops in the multipurpose centre, which is located in the Romani settlement. It was important for us to gain the trust of parents in order to get closer to them and for the professional workers to get an insight into this different environment. Before that, the teachers did not organize workshops or offered help with studying. Therefore, we came to this new method of implementation of our project activities within our institution. Because all this was new to us, we had to study different literature and talk to experts and practitioners who come from Slovenia and other countries (Italy, Belgium and Great Britain). After that, it was clear to us that our focus must be on finding ways how to gain as much trust from the parents as possible.

It is important that the parents get an insight why education is important for their child`s future life, for the preservation of their cultural identity and their inclusion into the majority culture. To achieve that it is good to make personal contact with the parents and the family before a child starts kindergarten. (Dodatek h Kurikulu za vrtce za delo z otroki Romov, 2012, str.4).

To get the first insight about the state in the Roma settlement we organised a meeting with Roma assistants. The meeting was held in a relaxed atmosphere. Why we decided to meet them before we met all other Roma parents?

We all knew the Roma assistants well, because they were both mothers of children that were enrolled in our kindergarten and are now students at our school. That way we wanted to get as much information possible about their way of living, about the Roma culture and about the dynamic in the Roma settlement. We knew that they were an important link between our institution and the Roma settlement. The information we got was a good starting-point for our further work.

The Adjustment Of The Kindergarten Teacher/School Teacher And The First Contact With The Roma Families

The environment is obliged to enable suitable development possibilities for all children. Therefore, the collaboration between the institution and the family is of key importance. Kindergartens have to organize and provide such an environment that all children and parents can gain experiences of equal possibilities and rights, because only then the mutual collaboration can be efficient. (Marjanovič Umek, 2012)

Macura Milovanovič (2006) explains that certain values should get and preserve their place and meaning in the educational environment. Professional staff must respect the values by showing concern, love and acceptance of others no matter if they see them as them alike or different from them.

Lesar mentions that there is not enough responsibility and sensitivity of professional workers towards Roma children. In her opinion, professional workers do not take responsibility for the results and progress of Roma children and that they are not sensitive enough for their problems.

So we started building a trustworthy relationship between us and the Roma parents. We tried to develop a stronger bond between the family and the institution.

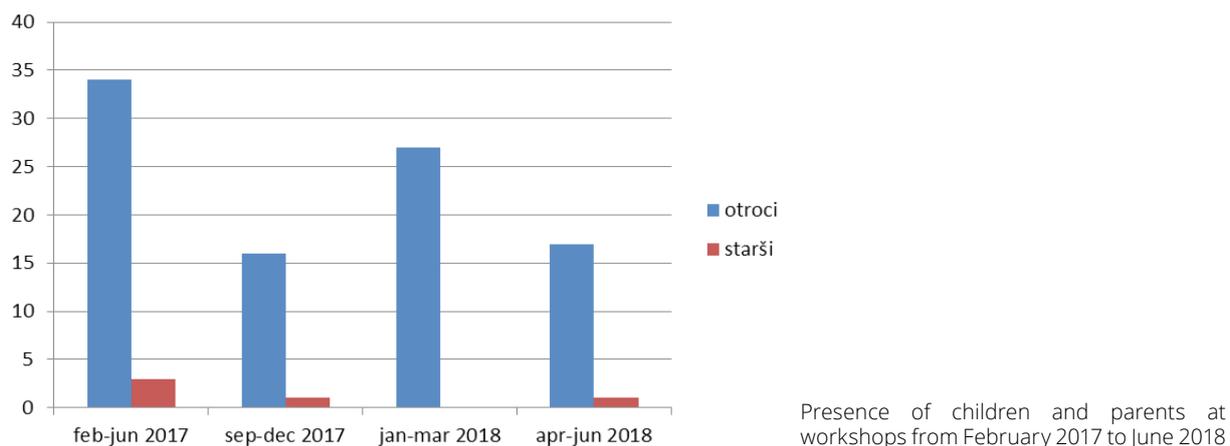
In the Roma multipurpose centre, we performed a mimic show about a frog that was different from others. Children like games. They provide a relaxed environment and children have the possibility to make the first contact with the professional workers. We wanted to offer them a show where they could be involved and creative.



Mimic performance

Our aim was to invite parents to get to know us better in their familiar environment, to show them that we know how to get closer to them, that we accept and respect their children and that it would be good if they enrol their children into kindergarten. After the show, we had an informal gathering and Christmas workshops.

We organize workshops every fortnight. We choose the theme according to the needs, wishes and interest of children. We know our students and therefore we know where they need help, what their interests are and their strong fields (art, English, drama). That is why we choose activities where they can express and show what they know. They are very creative, engaged and they suggest their own ideas. They made things, which they could take home. The work in the multipurpose centre acquires many adjustments, because there is no water and sometimes there are problems with heating. When we know we would need water we bring it with us. Air condition, which is used for heating, does not always work. We also have to make arrangements among us because workshops are during our free time.



In the graph, we can see that the workshop attendance of schoolchildren is quite satisfying. The challenge is how to get more parents to attend workshops. We want them to come more regularly because they are often surprised about the level of knowledge of their children (positively and negatively). The parents present were glad that they were present at the workshops because they could see how we encourage their children, that we show them different learning strategies, help them to diminish their knowledge gaps or we just play. Through the play, their learning is more efficient.

Possible reasons for the low attendance of parents at the workshops are:

- the parents are employed (a lot of them work in Austria)
- they do not know how to help or they are afraid of critic
- they think that they are not needed there
- bad relationships between certain Roma families

I want to give an example of good practice from a workshop that was attended by a student`s father. The girl was in the first class and could not memorize letters so she also had problems with reading. In the setting, the girl was relaxed and we wrote all letters on a separate sheet of paper. Besides each letter, we drew a picture. We put the letters on the floor and we tried to memorize them with the help of movement. We had to repeat that quite a lot and slowly she started to memorize the letters and connect them into syllables. Her father was very happy to experience that and promised to use this method of learning at home. When the girl started to read her father got very emotional and almost cried. It was similar, as he would experience his daughter first steps or first words. The movement proved to be a very efficient way of learning.

According to Sousa (2013) movement and physical exercise have the key role in learning and memorizing, because they improve the mood and strengthen cognitive processes. Tomori (2005) points out that movement has a pleasant effect on the reduction of despondency. That is partly connected with the production of endomorphines in the brain because their production increases during physical activity. All that leads to better wellbeing and good mood. They increase our self-esteem and the wellbeing that we feel when some effort is put into it. Therefore, that is why children become more sociable and open towards other people.



Learning reading technique through movement



Products from workshops

Through the workshops, we followed different aims and contents:

- development of a more domestic teacher-student relationship,
- development of social skills,
- development of motor skills,
- development of reading skills,
- revision,
- reduction of knowledge gaps,
- celebration of holidays,
- development of their self-confidence,
- development of their creativity,
- more relaxed communication between the professional workers.

In the multipurpose centre, we organized meetings with the focus group of parents. That way we got some additional opinions about the kindergarten, school and the fears that they have. They also wish that the multipurpose centre would be more attended by the children and other parents. In this focus group, also a football coach helped us with the inclusion and attendance of children with his engagement and persuasion.

An important link between the Roma parents and us is also the people that offer study help for children at their homes. They additionally motivate children and parents to attend the multipurpose centre. Through the complete working process, we learned that it is necessary to support each other, connect with one another and that we exchange experiences. We regularly meet with them, evaluate our success, problems, and talk about possible problems. In the last two years (since the death of a Roma councillor), we noticed that fewer children started to attend the workshops. The reason for that was the feud between the Roma families in the settlement due to the new elections for the municipal councillor (we will see how the elections will affect the relationships in the settlement). We are still trying and we offer help for all the Roma children. We included all our primary education teachers, our social worker and the headmaster. We all like to go to the multipurpose centre because of the relaxed atmosphere. The children are more open and you can see the positive effects of the domestic environment.

Together with the kindergarten teachers, we also organize family days where we celebrate important events and holidays.

How important the activities for the preschool children to be enrolled in kindergarten are is seen by the fact that children that do not attend kindergarten usually have many problems in the first grade:

- they want to run away from school,
- their attendance at school is low,
- in the morning they hide behind their parents` backs,
- they have speech and graphmotor deficits,
- they are not familiar with the fairy tales,
- they have problems socializing.

In our workshops, we try to diminish those problems, because children know and trust us.

We had a boy that was enrolled in a private kindergarten, which he did not attend regularly. At the beginning, he had a big crisis. He screamed, swore, kicked around and wanted to go home with his mother. His mother was helpless and you could tell that she suffered as well. However, because she had some errands to run she had no other option as to leave him at school. The teacher took the boy in her arms, stopped him from kicking and then she kindly explained that other children missed him at school. The boy relaxed in her arms and you could feel his relief. After that, he joined his classmates and there were no further problems. At the end of the day, he proudly told his mother how good he was.

There was also another positive experience from the workshop. One parent that is also the football coach in the settlement was a former student at our school. He noticed that the communication in the workshops is very different from the one in school. It is more genuine, relaxed and there is more time for play. He also complemented our work. He realized that parents are missing much by not sending their children into workshops. He is glad that he enrolled his child into kindergarten and that he has only positive things to say. He regularly attends the workshops.

The inclusion of each child, not only Roma into a preschool education is of key importance, because it strongly affects the child`s further success at school (Avsec, 1999:107).

We were glad to cooperate with Roma parents in the Symbiosis of movement project (October 2017 and October 2018) that was organized at school. We noticed a lot of Roma parents and grandparents which means that they want to cooperate, that they are interested in their children`s progress. There were also parents present that we did not expect. Therefore, we think that our efforts have many positive effects although we do not recognise them right away.

Through the whole process, we realized that we have to talk about our work and spread the good practice since it is important for our successful work with Roma children. We accept the parents as equal partners and we respect them.

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