

## **The restructuring of Teacher Education - a case study from Slovenia**

### **The three C's: Clarity, Consistency and Commitment\***

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### **Introduction: The Context of the Project: Primary Education in Slovenia**

The frame of reference of the Tempus project 'RESPECT' was the 'White Paper' (1995, English version: 1996) and the subsequent new school legislation (1996), which defined the strategy of education in Slovenia in the future. The most evident change, according to the new legislation, is the extension of compulsory education (which corresponds to primary education in Slovenia) from eight to nine years. There will be three educational levels, each of three years, and children will start the school at the age of six.

Primary (class) teachers will teach at the first educational level. Regularly, one teacher will teach pupils of the same class throughout the first educational level. In the first grade, a preschool teacher or second primary teacher will also be present in the class for half of the time which means that the two teachers should be able to work together as a team.

Other important changes will be the integration of (some) children with special needs into mainstream classes; the introduction of foreign language instruction in the fourth year of schooling and, resulting from the new organisation, team teaching.

The new concept of primary education in Slovenia represented a challenge for teacher education from the very first discussions. Initial teacher training for primary school teachers was extended in the last decade and is now a four-year university degree course for teachers of both the lower and upper grades of primary school. It was realised that there was no need to change the whole system of teacher education, just a need for "restructuring primary teachers' study programme" according to the new primary school legislation.

### **The Roots of the Project**

In Slovenia we were aware that in many European countries educators had already found the solutions to similar questions. Therefore we tried to find partner countries who were addressing some of these issues.

Attendance at ATEE Conferences helped us to locate prospective partners. In the context of this project the Conference in Lahti was very important. At the ATEE Winter University in Falun (1995) a good overview of the main areas of European teacher education systems was presented (Aldrich, R , Coolahan, J, McCall, J ). Consequently we decided to ask Finland, Scotland and Sweden for cooperation.

We had discovered Finland to be a country with complex and coherent theoretical ideas, with a "theoretical discussion about the conception of knowledge that could serve as a basis for education irrespective of the contents "(Voutilainen, T., Mehtalainen, J, Niniilouto, I.:7). Finland is also a country where foreign language is as important as in Slovenia as the native language is limited to the few million inhabitants only: a language of a small nation is not popular for others to learn.

We appreciated that the educational system in Scotland was independent although it was a part of the United Kingdom and was more reflective and more careful in the educational reforms, connected with a National Curriculum and National Testing (McCall, 1995). We also knew that in Scotland children enter school at the age of 5 and that a second person in the classroom is quite common and we thought that we would be able to learn a lot from these kinds of experiences.

Unfortunately the Swedish university with whom we sought co-operation at that time was not interested in participating in the project.

### **The Aims of the Project**

The main purpose of the TEMPUS project, Restructuring Primary Teachers' Study Programme (*RESPECT*), which was approved for the period from 01.09.1996 to 31.08.1999

was to answer, in co-operation with partner universities, some dilemmas about the amount and the direction of change in teacher education in Slovenia and to create some new courses, which would respond to the needs of "new primary school".

In this context the main objective of the project was to review and restructure the existing pre-service university study programme for primary school teachers, in particular in connection with the following issues:

- \* **teaching younger children (early childhood education), connected with the lowering of the school entry age from 7 years to 6 years old)**
- \* **teaching children with special needs, integrated in mainstream education**
- \* **team teaching and other forms of team work;**
- \* **earlier introduction of foreign language teaching;**

Due to these issues the objectives of the project were expressed as

- \* **the development of new courses within the in-service (retraining and updating) programmes for practicing primary school teachers**
- \* **the development of a new course for primary teachers to teach early foreign language at primary level**
- \* **development of a post-graduate programme for primary school teachers at Master's Degree level.**

For each aspect of the project a set of activities was designed and planned throughout all three years.

### **Project participation and Activities**

A key to the successes of this project has been the commitment of all those involved to the aims of the project which were clearly defined by the Slovenian participants and discussed by all levels of participants in each of the three countries. There has been a consistency in the goals, the progress of which has been reported on and subject to evaluation throughout the project.

## **Contributions of Partner Universities**

The Faculty of Education, University of Helsinki is the biggest national educational faculty in Finland with the highest amount of annual intake and output of educational professionals. It comprises two departments, the Department of Education and the Department of Teacher Education. Although both departments participated in the project, a clear majority of collaboration was organised by the Department of Teacher Education. Most of the participants were from the Class Teacher Section, but - according to the aims of the project - there were also some separate teacher educators from the Sections of Special Teacher and Kindergarten Teacher Education in the project.

Similarly the Faculty of Education, University of Strathclyde is the largest teacher education institution in Scotland. Participation in the project was drawn from four of the Faculty's departments: Educational Studies, Language Education, Primary Education and Special Educational Needs, with the organisation being done by the Department of Primary Education.

The main forms of activities offered for the project by the academic staff of both faculties were attending workshops and organising workshops according to the project plan; lecturing in workshops and writing papers for workshops; organising visits for faculty colleagues and teacher education students from Slovenia and informal talks with colleagues from Slovenia about areas of their interest.

After work on the project was started the Finnish and Scottish coordinators analysed which staff, sections and departments should join the project. Participation was based on personal interest and willingness.

In Finland, student teachers visiting Slovenian schools and practicing there were chosen from the class teacher programme with an emphasis on foreign language teaching (English), while in Scotland students were chosen from among those who had taken classes in either teaching English as an additional language or teaching foreign languages. It was believed that the methodological awareness resulting from these classes would help students to work in a teaching environment where the main language of education was not their own.

For the purposes of the project the help of some other units of both Faculties of Education was also needed. In Helsinki, two researchers from the Media Education Center of the Department of Teacher Education joined the project. because they had special experience in early foreign language teaching. They could also show the colleagues from Slovenia, how modern communication techniques had been used in teaching English to children of a small rural primary school in Lapland, about 4000 kilometers from Helsinki. The Faculties of Education in Helsinki and Strathclyde both own very large educational libraries. The staff of the library made preparations to offer visitors from Slovenia possibilities to get acquainted with journals, books and other references according to the areas of interest in the project.

To offer teacher educators from Slovenia opportunities to see real practice in schools was appraised as very important in preparing the visits of Slovenian colleagues.

The departments of teacher education in Finland have their own (university) training schools where the most essential periods of practice teaching are arranged. However, for special purposes, also municipal comprehensive schools are used. For the visits of Slovenian teacher educators both the university practice school and municipal primary schools (with relevant profiles) were chosen to give visitors a wider view of the practices in the Finnish basic school system. It was seen as very important that while visiting schools Slovenian colleagues had also a possibility to talk with principals and teachers about their pedagogical thinking and practice. Informal talks with specialists of the Department of Teacher Education were also arranged for visitors according to their areas of interest.

In Scotland all schools are used for school experience purposes (student teaching practice). Schools were chosen for visits by Slovenian teacher educators which would offer insights into particular areas of the project goals, i.e. team teaching, early foreign language teaching, including the support for children for whom the language of education (English) is not the home language and schools where children with special needs are integrated into mainstream education. An additional focus of many of the visits in Scotland was the organisation and curriculum for young children as Scottish children start school between the ages of four and a half and five and a half years old.

The Finnish and Scottish participants in the project were prepared for their activities by informing them of the general aims of the project. Their special responsibilities in the activity in question were also outlined beforehand. Their familiarity with Slovenia and with the Slovenian education and teacher education system system was aided by giving them materials and information provided by the Slovenian coordinator of the project.

**To highlight the clarity, commitment and consistency some of the activities will now be described from the perspective of the project aims and from the perspective of the participants (teacher educators, teachers and student teachers) from Slovenia, Finland and Scotland.**

**Lectures and workshops: Faculty of Education, Ljubljana: Visiting Scottish and Finnish experts**

A number of visits were organised of experts from Scotland and Finland on different topics - early education, the integration of children with special needs, team teaching, developing a portfolio in foreign language teaching and developing a portfolio in teacher education.

Some of the visits were organised as lectures for students, alongside discussions with the teacher educators. Others were organised as workshops for school teachers.

As the lectures for the students as well as the workshops were designed as practical activities with demonstrations and/or video projections, both target groups (students and school teachers) who participated in the lectures and the workshops were very satisfied 'with the possibility to experience and see, for example, the practice of teaching younger children. They were also able to get answers to their questions and dilemmas. They were able to notice and became aware of the similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses of different educational practices That was especially possible during almost all workshops, where there was participation from faculty experts, headteachers, school teachers or experts from local authorities from all three countries Finland, Scotland and Slovenia. Therefore the workshops were excellent opportunities for all participating school and faculty teachers to compare the educational situations in different countries.

It is also important to stress that within the overall yearly evaluation of their educational courses primary student teachers were very positive to the "guest lectures". They emphasized that these lectures enabled them to broaden their knowledge and to be informed about European practices within primary education. It is interesting to mention that none of the Slovene students complained about the language of delivery (all lectures were in English).

The evaluation of the project with the Finnish and Scottish staff who participated was made via their written reports and by oral feedback. Teacher educators highly valued attendance in workshops where they had a possibility to meet colleagues from the area of their own specialty. There were colleagues from at least three countries (Slovenia; Scotland and Finland) which have quite different systems of education and of teacher education. In some workshops there were participants from other countries, and systems other than those of the three core countries were able to be presented and analysed.

The most important acquisition for teacher educators was the widening of their comparative knowledge of the systems of education and teacher education in Europe. The acquisition of new ideas differed from the knowledge got in "ordinary" conferences in two aspects. The aim of the workshops was highly focused: all the participants had the same theme in their presentations. Secondly, there was a good balance between theory and practice in presentations. The lack of connections to relevant practice is a problem that sometimes disturbs teacher educators in the presentations of a conference. These two advantages most probably result from the aim of the project being to consider the restructuring of teacher education in a particular country. Much informal discussion was able to take place between participants which significantly contributed to increased understanding.

The possibility of getting their presentation published in Slovenia was offered to all of the teacher educators who attended the workshops of the project. Teacher educators who have an interest in research on education set great value on the possibility of publishing their presentations in a foreign series. Teacher educators with a more practical professional orientation valued instead the possibility to see and hear how colleagues from different countries solved practical problems of their everyday work and reported that during their visit they got new ideas and tools for their own work.

### *Visits of Slovenian project members to Scotland and Finland*

Many of the visits to Scotland were targeted on the questions about early childhood education. It was a chance to answer some crucial questions regarding early childhood education; how to organize school work for younger children in a way that recognises their developmental level and at the same time enhances the development of their cognitive and social knowledge. Many visitors from Slovenia, both teacher educators and students, expressed surprise about the level of independence of younger children in Scottish schools, about their abilities for school work and their respect for the very clear discipline. They discovered that school for younger children is not just a game, but a game with clear educational aims. A special enthusiasm was frequently expressed for the clear philosophy which is commonly transmitted and accepted by teacher education, schools, teachers and children.

*The main aim of all educational initiatives (from pre-service teacher education to early education at primary schools) is so perfectly clear: team work, teaching of learning strategies, promotion of motivation for learning, care about healthy personal development --- all these educational qualities, incorporated in Scottish education, are really dedicated to its users - to children! --- For the first time I saw very clearly that educational and psychological theory can be successfully introduced into practice.*

(Mojca J, teaching assistant at university of Ljubljana, after visits to some Glasgow schools)

During the visits the members of the project team were able to become familiar with some new ideas and practices about early education:

*At the department of Kindergarten Teacher Education in Helsinki --- demonstrated us some approaches and didactic resources for enchanting mathematical learning in early childhood.*

(Alenka)

The Slovenian teacher educators collected teaching materials and video-materials:

*I've got some didactic materials and games for stimulating logical thinking,--- I made a video about teaching younger children*

(Marjanca)

It was a very good opportunity to prepare new courses:

*As we are launching a new programme for training teachers of English to young learners, we'll be able to implement and include lots of ideas and experiences that surfaced and were*

*generated during our visit*

(Janez)

Visits to Scotland and Finland gave the Slovenian faculty staff the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with a large variety of people with different educational roles:

*I had a good opportunity to meet and speak with faculty teachers, school teachers headteachers, special teachers, English as an Additional Language teachers, classroom helpers school psychologists*

(Mojca P. Č.)

After the visit the ideas and experiences will be shared with others:

*I will share these useful experiences with my students as well as with primary school teachers in different in-service courses*

Mojca J.

*I will use new experiences and materials for my in-service seminars and workshops within the programmes for teachers of the new first primary class (future teachers of 6year olds)*

(Marjanca)

Finnish school teachers who participated in the project derived most benefit from the practice teaching of Slovenian student teachers in Finnish schools. They were very pleased with the foreign language ability (English) of the student teachers. The student teachers also voluntarily wanted to teach more subjects than they expected.

Scottish schools visited by Slovenian faculty staff were delighted to have been chosen as representative of educational aspects of particular interest to another country. One school arranged local newspaper coverage of the visit to highlight the school's role in the wider community. On one visit, parents enthusiastically shared their philosophy of immersion language education with a visitor from Slovenia. Headteachers and teachers were very keen to find out about other educational systems and visits often lasted far longer than planned due to the genuine desire to share knowledge.

### **Student Mobility**

One of the most successful activities was Students' Mobility, where students from Glasgow

(5) and Helsinki (6) acted as teacher assistants within early foreign language teaching at schools in Ljubljana (7) and Piran (4) while students from Ljubljana acted in Glasgow (6) as student teachers in classes for younger children and in Helsinki (6) as assistant teachers in a Finnish - English bilingual school.

All students were well prepared for the exchanges. Slovenian students met the Scottish and Finnish co-ordinators in Ljubljana and were able to find out about the actual placement schools as well as both country's educational systems. As the co-ordinators had participated in a number of visits to Slovenia prior to the exchanges they were able to give the Glasgow and Helsinki students orienting information about Slovenia. Co-ordinators in the three countries visited students in their placement schools. All students took the exchange very seriously. A Glasgow student chosen to go to Ljubljana wrote:

*To be chosen to take part in such a new and exciting exchange made me feel privileged and very honoured to know that I would be representing Strathclyde University in another country.* (Susan G.)

All participants involved (students, mentor-teachers and school principals) were extraordinarily satisfied with this form of international co-operation.

Each student (all were female) also had the role of ambassador for her own country. One of the regular activities in all the schools was the presentation of the country through cultural characteristics: aspects of history and geography, an introduction to places of tourist interest, food and songs. Children in Glasgow and Helsinki learnt how to count in Slovene. Children in Piran cooked Scottish and Finnish typical meals.

The practice teaching of the foreign student teachers brought a real intercultural atmosphere into classrooms. Young, lively and enthusiastic people who talked about their own country and culture were loved by children. They were the best possible ambassadors of their country.

The students all reported positively on this intercultural aspect of their visits:

*The children were very interested in Slovenia. I had a lesson about my country in three*

*classes. --- We were invited to tell the children some Slovene stories.*  
(Zvonka, visiting Glasgow)

*The children were very interested in Scotland so I did a number of lessons focusing on customs and traditions --- I also taught the pupils some ceilidh dancing.* (Susan G.)

*We were able to present our country. We presented some books about Slovenia, a Slovenian fairy tale book translated into English, a video and some other materials about Slovenia.*  
(Zanet, visiting Glasgow)

Positive reports on the benefits for professional development were also received from all students:

*They tried to arrange as many activities as possible which were connected with my aims So I was able to observe, assist, teach, experience days in camp with first graders, visit other schools,....* (Janja, visiting Helsinki)

*The experiences will certainly be helpful for my practical work in the class, especially the ones from working with younger children and team teaching. Very useful were also drama classes at the university.*  
(Anemari, visiting Glasgow)

*I was able to try some modern and effective teaching methods, such as teaching through exploration, using constructivist methods, integrating subjects, project work ---*  
(Nina, visiting Helsinki)

*They accepted me as a teacher; not as a student --- I was responsible for a group of children to teach them on my own. There was nobody to supervise my work - they have trusted me completely.* (Katarina S, visiting Glasgow)

*I've found confidence in myself and my abilities to teach. I am looking at my ways of teaching in a more critical light. I'm more willing to experiment with different methods.*

(Barbara, from Glasgow, visiting Slovenia)

*This experience has not only accelerated our development as teachers but through the observation and the mutual exchange of ideas has enabled us to develop further our own confidence within the classroom situation. (Carolyn and Susan M. from Glasgow, visiting Slovenia)*

The practical experience of team teaching was very important to the Slovenian students:

*Very good experience was the chance to see how team-teaching works and how important it is for a teacher to be a good organizer" (Katarina R. visiting Helsinki)*

*I had a chance to work in a team, which was a great experience and taught me a lot about self-control and about accepting the suggestions of others I realised how productive and at the same time complicated team work can be .*

(Jemeja, visiting Helsinki)

Having the possibility to assist and teach in classes with younger children, their experiences were not congruent with the preconception that children at the age 5-6 are "too small and too immature" for "real" and "hard" school learning.

*The most interesting thing was the organisation of group work and how two teachers work together and how they keep such a discipline in the classes. (Alenka, visiting Glasgow)*

*The last week I taught a group of 12 children aged 5 and 6. They made puppets and performed a puppet show. They made their own Easter cards, read books,---*

(Katarina S, visiting Glasgow)

*I was able to see that Finns are treating young children more seriously than we are treating the children of the same age. So the Finnish children are more independent .*

(Nina, visiting Helsinki)

The Slovenian students were able to practice their English and gain experiences in teaching

English as a foreign language:

*I saw how an English lesson should be planned and performed in order to enable pupils to gain as much useful information about the content and possibilities to **use** the language as possible.* (Nina, visiting Helsinki)

*I had a chance to test myself in teaching a foreign language which was a great challenge and gave me a lot of valuable experience.* (Jerneja, visiting Helsinki)

For their part, the Scottish students became more aware of how to teach a foreign language, as there is little opportunity within the degree to put this into practice.

The students practised and became aware of different organisational schemes and the roles of teachers:

*Planning and teaching together (Team teaching) has been an essential part of our work We managed to do it just fine and I have no fears about it any more.*

(Nina, visiting Helsinki)

*Teacher collaboration is very interesting: it is a cellular organisation. As an example, the beginners cell are classes 1A, 2A, 1B and 2B. Each cell creates its own work teams to accomplish a variety of cross-class projects and activities.*

(Branka, visiting Helsinki)

*I found teachers in Finland in general more self-confident than in Slovenia. I realised that self-confidence is important for teacher.* (Petra, visiting Helsinki)

The Slovenian students made a comparison between education in the host and the home country and found differences in the following interesting points:

- \* curriculum (less free in Slovenia)
- \* Schedule and duration of lessons ( more unique for all children in Slovenia)
- \* pupils (less independent in Slovenia)
- \* teachers (less male teachers in Slovenia)

- \* other professionals working in school (more numerous in Slovenia)
- \* role of parents (less engaged in Slovenia)

The students also made interesting observations about the methodology of education in the host countries:

*The Portfolio is a good way of teaching pupils self-evaluation and responsibility for their own work. Teachers give them (twice a year) a descriptive assessment where the communication skills, co-operation, group work and other social components are stressed.* (Nina & Kristina, visiting Helsinki)

*I was fortunate to be able to take an active part in a Wambach programme of education which had many merits, mainly that the children were relaxed and comfortable with both teachers and peers and therefore more ready to learn.* (Barbara from Glasgow, visiting Slovenia)

Most students in all three countries expressed a wish to be able again to participate in students exchanges in the future and suggested that the time be prolonged from one to at least two months.

The Finnish and Scottish student teachers who practiced in Slovenian schools gained invaluable life and career experience from the project. As they stayed for one month in Slovenia they had a much better opportunity to get familiar with the country, the people and the culture than if they had been travelling as a tourist. Creating contacts and networks with teachers, other staff and pupils are not possible during a tourist trip.

All students considered that they had grown personally and professionally. The Finnish students thought that their professional English had improved considerably. Their experiences also gave them extra motivation to keep up their studies and especially to improve their foreign language skills. Also their self-esteem as future primary teachers grew. One of the Finnish students, for instance, who recently got her teachers' diploma is going next semester to India to act as a class teacher.

Not only were students satisfied with the form of exchange. Principals and teachers of all the schools where TEMPUS students were placed, expressed a wish for further co-operation and stressed the importance of such contacts for the school as an institution:

*As you chose our school for the student from Glasgow, for us it was a sign of trust and confidence, a good experience for the whole school.*

*Children were proud to have Barbara in their class; they were eager to listen and work with her.*

English language teachers, who were responsible for the students on placement were also glad to have an opportunity to share knowledge, to see some different methods of language teaching:

*Susan has a power to motivate children, to involve them in work without any special "tricks", It can be seen that her knowledge of teaching methods is very good.*

Student mobility, then, was one of the activities with the most multi-faceted effects. It affected many different subjects: not only students, mentor-teachers and principals, but also other teachers at schools, children, their parents and other students in groups, where students presented their reports and portfolios.

Glasgow students, returning from placement in Slovenia, have led seminar groups on comparative education, considering with their final year peers how society's educational aims can lead to particular approaches and methods. One Glasgow student felt confident enough to share with a lecturer in giving a lecture to 200 peers on the Slovenian education system. Many of the final year students in Glasgow are now using the Slovenian education system as a case study in their exam on comparative education.

As the students are young people, their experiences are even more important, because they will continue with the contacts made and broaden their multicultural experiences. Written and e-mail contact is now well established among a number of the students. One of the Glasgow students, following graduation this summer, returned to Slovenia to go on holiday with her mentor teacher from Ljubljana.

## **Conclusions**

The project was planned according to the needs of the Slovenian curriculum. Through the project activities we broadened and updated the knowledge of teacher educators, school teachers and student teachers in Slovenia in general and especially connected with the main aims of the project, which importantly are also the aims of the curriculum changes.

The visits of Slovenian students and project team members to Scotland and Finland offered them the possibility to see, to "touch" or even to experience some new ideas and through this they were able to reduce the "fear" of unknown practices, especially concerning team teaching, teaching younger children and teaching children with special needs.

Through different activities, planned and realised within the project, a lot of people were able to learn "on site" and later they shared new knowledge with others, not only with colleagues, but very often also with students and school teachers.

Especially through sharing the experiences and using new knowledge for work with students and teachers, many more persons, than were formally involved, gained from the project: students, school teachers, also children in some schools and even their parents.

The whole range of activities contributed to the development of some specific in-service courses for teachers who will teach in the new first class and also to the development of two new programmes, which can be evaluated as an important and long range achievement within Slovenian teacher education:

- \* the course for early foreign language teaching, e.g teaching English within the primary school - ELTP
- \* the postgraduate curriculum (Master's degree) for primary teachers - "Teaching at Primary Level"

Both programmes were developed with the assistance of knowledge and experiences gained during the project. Comparative studies, made as a part of the project were of a great help, e.g. the comparison of postgraduate opportunities for primary teachers presented to ATEE in 1997.

Programmes have already been approved at all levels (Faculty of Education, University of

Ljubljana and the Slovenian Ministry of Education and Sports) and both are evaluated as modern, well structured and comparable with European trends.

ELTP is structured as an optional course for primary students or as an INSERVICE for primary teachers. In the year 1998/99 four groups of participants (with 30 students each) were enrolled: two groups of primary students, one group of practising primary teachers for English language in Ljubljana and one mixed group for Italian language in Koper.

The Postgraduate Master's course will be an option for graduates of the faculty course for primary teachers and we expect the interest will be high (30 part-time students yearly).

**All visits, workshops and other forms of activities not only met the expectations; every activity was a real model of international/European cooperation, with the respect of each of the partners involved; it was also a model of learning from each other - the roles of teachers and learners were reciprocal all the time.**

**Many formal and informal contacts have been made between the three countries and collaboration and co-operation are continuing.**

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