

# INTEGRATION VERSUS SEGREGATION – THE CASE OF SLOVENIA

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*Abstract – In 1996 new school legislation outlining the education strategies in Slovenia for the future, including education of children with special needs, was passed in Parliament. Contrary to the former legislation that advocated segregation of children with special needs, the new one promotes integration in mainstream classes provided that this is in their best interest. This has raised many, not only practical, but also philosophical and political questions which I intend to discuss in my paper. To mention some of them: Who are the children with special educational needs? Which discourse can we use to discuss children with special needs? Who are the children with special needs that can be integrated in mainstream classes and what do we have to do to realise not only locational but also social and educational integration? How do we have to redesign teacher training courses to prepare class teachers and special teachers to work together successfully?*

## Introduction

**I**n the developed world, the idea of integrating children with special needs in regular schools is becoming increasingly popular. Slovenia seems to follow the trend. While the laws and regulations in force not long ago saw special education as the only way of teaching this population of children, the key feature of the new Act on Placement of Children with Special Needs – finally passed in June 2000 after five years of parliamentary discussions – is integration. It does not anticipate integration of all children with special needs in regular schools, hence it does not imply abolishing schools with special needs. It rather regulates integration of those children who might progress better in regular schools, providing some conditions are met. When a decision is made as to where and how a pupil with special needs will get his/her education, the new Act assigns a significant role to his/her parents.

In order to get a better understanding of these changes, it is necessary to see them in a wider social context. First, there are particular current trends in the developed world. World organisations are encouraging their members to integrate children with special needs in regular schools whenever possible and to create suitable conditions to meet their needs. Their calls are based on the belief that

segregation of this population creates further stigmatisation which makes it more difficult for individuals to fit in society, and that it is necessary to ensure equal opportunities for children with special needs. An increasing number of countries are willing to adopt these views including integration of children with special needs in their legislation and official reports. This trend has no doubt played an important role in the new Slovenian legislation too.

The new legislation regulating this area, however, has to be viewed also in the larger context of the new legislation regulating the whole education system progressively introduced in Slovenia during the last decade. Independence of Slovenia in 1991<sup>1</sup> and its first democratic elections are often thought to be the main reasons for change in the education system. Contrary to that, I would like to stress the importance of the old legislation and the necessity to legitimise experiments which had taken place in primary schools all around Slovenia, especially at the end of the 80's and the beginning of the 90's, and the influence of contemporary concepts on teaching and learning processes as essential reasons for these changes.<sup>2</sup> Experiments in teaching children with special needs actually began much earlier. Statistical data shows that in 1976 the number of children with special programmes in primary schools had dropped by 50%. Integration was actually taking place long before the new legislation was introduced. It was, however, in a lot of cases, a silent integration, where classes were not adjusted for children with special needs, teachers were not trained to teach them, and was quite often called a 'locational' rather than social and educational integration. This kind of integration depended largely on the parents of children with special needs who wanted their children to attend a regular rather than special school close to their place of residence. It also depended on the dedication of the children requiring special attention as well as the experts in this field and the teachers (Novljan, 1997, p. 75, 77; Galeša, 1992; Krek, 1996, pp. 138-142).

The new school legislation ensures that the principles of democracy, autonomy and equal opportunity are abided by. These principles are the building blocks of the Chart on Human Rights and the notion of a legal state. With regards to teaching children with special needs, the new legislation underlines the principle of equal opportunity which takes into account individual differences, meaning that a child with a special need should get enough help to control his/her disability and/or overcome its consequences as much as possible. As we read in the White Paper on Education, in the Republic of Slovenia<sup>3</sup> 'specialized teaching techniques should be adopted for working with such children, and their integration into the common education system should be promoted. Special attention should be paid to fighting the stereotypes of 'normal' and 'deviant' in the school population and to the historical and social aspects of such categorization' (Krek, 1996, p. 41).

As the Act on Placement of Children with Special Needs has only been passed recently, we are currently at the stage of passing a number of regulations which will help define and clarify the Act and will offer teachers guidelines as to how to teach children with special needs. How this integration will shape up in practice is very hard to forecast. Integration needs to ensure suitable quality education for children with special needs in regular schools. Whether this will indeed be the case depends largely on the teacher. Legislation may require that children with special needs are educated in regular schools, but this does not automatically guarantee that social and educational integration will follow. The classroom is the place where a teacher makes very important decisions, in other words, his/her teaching can generate either integration or segregation. Integration is therefore a practical project for teachers and largely depends on their willingness to accept this task and their ability to execute it in a suitable way.

There are at least two factors that will determine success for integration: the first is the discourse used when dealing with integration in acts and legal documents; the second is the practice or, rather, the way in which the law is interpreted by teachers in the classroom. The aim of this paper is mainly to analyse the former. I will highlight the philosophical and political solutions that were used as the basis for the new legislation regarding teaching children with special needs in Slovenia. Even though promoting integration through legislation does not in itself guarantee that it will be realised in practice, the concept of special needs as used in acts and legal documents can influence teacher attitudes towards integration and pupils with special needs. It is thus my intention to analyse the strategy and theoretical background of the new Slovenian legislation regulating education of children with special needs.

## **Medical versus educational discourse**

Discourse is crucial in shaping the strategy and theoretical background to reach certain goals. It defines how the goals can be reached and how a certain section of the world operates. It articulates this world in a particular way, identifying important problems and their features and indicating appropriate ways to solve them (Fulcher, 1989, p.8). Such a definition of discourse can be applied to the teaching of children with special needs. In practice, as well as in acts and legal documents, interpretation depends on what problems we identify as most important. This defines our ways of solving problems and determines whether these ways lead to integration or segregation, pupil independence or dependence.

In her analysis of disability policies, Gillian Fulcher talks about four types of discourse, namely: medical discourse, charity discourse, lay discourse and rights

discourse (Fulcher, 1989, pp. 26-31). She then adds educational discourse, a term she uses mainly in regards to teaching children with special needs. I would like to highlight here only the medical and educational types of discourse as the most visible ones in Slovenia.

The starting point for medical discourse is dealing with problems regarding the human body and the individual. It focuses on physiological changes and their consequences, using notions such as impairment, disability and sometimes handicap. Impairment is a term for anatomical loss or a loss of bodily function; disability is the measurable, functional loss resulting from an impairment – for example, poor ability of speech can be the consequence of a hearing impairment. Handicap is however the social consequence caused by environmental and social conditions which prevent a person achieving his/her maximum potential (Fulcher, 1989, p.22; Lewis, 1995, p.8).

The problem with the medical discourse, as pointed out by Fulcher, is that by linking impairment and disability it 'suggests through its correspondence theory of meaning, that disability is an observable or intrinsic, objective attribute or characteristic of a person, rather than a social construct' (Fulcher, 1989, p.27). Thus the medical discourse 'forgets' that we often talk about disability even though the impairment has not been found, is only assumed or not even that. The social context of a person with impairment turns him/her into a disabled person, and vice versa: an impairment per se does not necessarily imply the person in question is disabled. Furthermore, a person can be identified as disabled even though there is no impairment. A good illustration of such a situation is children with problems in social integration (displaying behavioural and personality problems) whose disability can often not be attributed to impairment but rather to their failing to reach the behaviour standards required by their social context. Disability in this context is a consequence of unhelpful and discouraging social interactions. The person could not learn certain social skills since he/she has never in his/her life been faced with the type of situation requiring them. Disability therefore is not only some measurable loss resulting from an impairment. Its cause is not always within the individual for it is a social category. Consequently, when analysing a person's disability it is necessary to take into account his/her social context.

If we take, in treating children with special needs, the medical discourse as our basis, we focus our attention on their disability. Disability becomes the basic criterion by which we differentiate children, and it is also offered as the main reason for a child's failure, demonstrating that medical discourse builds integration – where it does – on a basis of differentiation and stigma. It starts out from the position that some children have disabilities and others have not, it differentiates children according to one feature – disability. In this respect, the

school not only confirms what society regards as 'normal' and 'abnormal', it also gives the 'abnormal' new and wider dimensions using it as the scapegoat for all its failures. One of the problems arising from such an understanding of integration lies in the fact that the reasons for the child's failure in school are sought in the child's disabilities rather than in the conditions which generate these disabilities and which are further worsened by judgement based differentiation. This has been the experience in many countries. Children with special needs are often declared those that teachers find problematic in one way or another even though they do not seem to have any kind of impairment. Children who have a visual or a hearing impairment are not really a problem. In many countries there are more such children than ever before attending regular schools as legislation supports their integration. Problematic is the placement of children with various learning, behavioural and emotional problems. International data shows that these children are increasingly labelled as those with special needs so that teachers can justify their failure in the classroom (Allan *et al.*, 1998, p.24; Fulcher, 1989).

In this respect, Fulcher also points out that integration based on the medical discourse is only a new name for special education (Fulcher, 1989, pp.55-56). It is based on the belief that some children are different because they have a disability, therefore their education requires special methods, special goals and they should be taught by specially trained teachers. This means that children with special needs can be integrated in regular schools but the integration remains merely locational rather than social and educational. From this point of view, the medical discourse divides rather than unites children.

Integration according to the educational discourse is in comparison a fairly new idea. Its basic premise is that all children are first of all pupils and they all strive to acquire knowledge; teachers thus have to be very well trained to help all their pupils achieve this goal. The premise that all children are first of all pupils implies a different theoretical background and different analysis of the problem. At the centre of attention is not how to pin down the child's disability, but rather how to teach a pupil who has learning problems. Accordingly, teacher training does not primarily focus on various kinds of problems children might have, but rather on how to teach pupils who experience problems in school. This approach also changes the criterion that determines where and how a pupil is educated. The criterion is not the disability but the curriculum. At the centre is the child's development, his/her ability to learn, the type of knowledge essential for him/her. Once this is established it can then be decided how his/her goals will most likely be achieved and what kind of assistance he/she might need on the way. This approach is thus based on the assessment of how much help a pupil needs in order to compensate for his/her impairment and overcome his/her disability. The focus, in other words, is on educational problems and methods.

In Slovenia too we would like to replace the medical discourse which has been prevalent in the past with the educational discourse. Instead of the existing static pigeonholing of pupils with special needs, we are beginning to introduce progressive processes assisted by individualised education programmes graded from the most segregated to the most integrated.<sup>4</sup> It is less important whether an individual is visually or hearing impaired: what matters is to assess what kind of a programme he/she can follow, under what conditions, and how much help he/she needs with it. The question, in fact, is what is one able to learn and how. The school to which a child is sent is required to design an individualised programme for each subject, plan additional expert help, make adjustments in organisation, assessment, timetable, etc... The suitability of a programme has to be evaluated annually so that in the following year a pupil can join either a more integrated or a more segregated type of programme. At all levels of decision-making, planning, working, evaluating and progressing, the child's parents must be involved.

We are thus moving from a medical to an educational discourse, introducing the notion of 'ability' in place of 'disability' and placing pupils on an annual basis into programmes rather than categories of disabilities. All this certainly creates better conditions to encourage integration in the classroom. However, as I intend to demonstrate, there are many dangers lurking at the level of strategy and theory which can hinder integration. These range from the definition of pupils with special needs, to professional workers flexing their muscles in confrontation with parents, and too little attention paid to teacher training to help teachers cope with the situation.

### **Who are the pupils with special needs?**

The acts and documents regulating special education in Slovenia in the past used the term 'children with mental and physical disorders'. These were further classified as mentally handicapped children, children with hearing and speech impairments, visually impaired children, children with other disabilities, children with behavioural and personality disorders and those with multiple handicaps. These definitions affected about 3% of the whole pupil population.

At the time of debate about the new legislation this classification was put under question. Some experts pointed out it was necessary to differentiate between a loss (blind, visually impaired, deaf, hearing impaired, mentally handicapped, etc.) and disability which has grown from the interaction of an impaired child with his/her dysfunctional environment. In other words, the child's loss should be interpreted as a social problem. As pointed out by Vigotski it thus depends on all of us whether the blind, deaf, and/or mentally handicapped child will be disabled or not. A blind

person will remain blind, and the deaf will remain deaf, but they do not need to be disabled because disability is a social notion attached to blindness, deafness and mental handicap. Blindness, deafness and mental handicap are not disabilities *per se*, they are only losses, weaknesses or obstacles. (Vigotski, quoted in Galeša, 1992, p.6). In Galeša's view it would be better to talk about this population of children as children with a 'loss' rather than a 'disorder' as was the case in the previous legislation (Galeša, 1992, p.5.)

An important role in deciding upon naming this population of pupils played the solutions used in Great Britain where they use the term 'children with special educational needs' or in short 'children with special needs'. This term, however, does not cover only children with an impairment but also those with no obvious impairment yet experiencing various learning, behavioural and emotional problems. In Britain it is estimated that about 20% of the whole school population will at some time of their school life need special care or help. However, for most of these children no statement is issued which would give them the right to a changed curriculum or exempt them from some parts of the study programme. In schools, there are 18% of children with special needs without such a statement. Only 2% has received a statement as it is issued only to children with disabilities of a more serious nature (Wedell, 1988, pp.103-104; Fulcher, 1989, pp. 158-185).

Our research shows that in Slovenia too, nearly half of the children who display problems at least once during their primary school years, will require special assistance. Some children need it every day but not every hour. Some experience problems in the first years in the early literacy, others have problems with mathematics, others yet with a foreign language. There is about one quarter of children who experience difficulties in learning to read and write, some due to their lower abilities and about 10% due to specific reading and writing disorders. About 15% of the children encounter problems in mathematics, 3% due to specific calculating disorders. Some disorders reappear and some do not, they are linked to a subject, topic or/and teacher (Žerdin, 1992, p.191).

From this data it is possible to conclude that about 20% of children in Slovenia do not have any disability but do need occasional help. For these children the former legislation provided additional professional help in the form of extra classes conducted either by the class teacher or other school counselling professionals (educator, psychologist, social worker, social educator, special educator). At that time the children with developmental disorders who were integrated in regular schools did not receive any proper care. If we wish to integrate these children into regular schools, additional professional help alone, as offered to children with learning, behavioural and emotional problems, does not always suffice.

The notion of children with special needs – as opposed to that of special disability categories – has gradually become established in Slovenia too. It is argued that this notion better fits this type of population than the term previously used, i.e., 'development disorders', it is less stigmatising, and it covers a much larger population. This term is now included in the legislation. According to the Act on Primary School passed in 1996, children with special needs may be one of the following: mentally handicapped, visually impaired, hearing impaired, speech impaired, physically impaired, children with a long term disease, children with behavioural and personality disorders who need adjusted educational programmes with additional professional assistance or special educational programmes, children with learning difficulties, and finally, gifted children (Article 11). It is estimated that about 20% of children have special needs (the gifted not included). Of those, 17% have learning difficulties and that leaves 3% of other types of disability. Pupils with learning difficulties have had additional assistance from teachers and other professionals ensured by the previous legislation. It is now necessary to make adjustments to the whole education process designing special methods, structures and programmes for the remaining children, in order to offer them what they need whether they are in regular or special schools.

A rather different definition of children with special needs from that found in the Act on Primary School can be seen in the Act on Placement of Children with Special Needs passed in June 2000. This Act better defines the ways children with special needs (apart from those with learning difficulties) must be treated. According to the new Act children who need modified educational programmes with additional professional help or special educational programmes are next to those named by the Act on Primary School as displaying 'impairment in specific learning fields'. It is anticipated that this will increase the population of children who should be placed in individualised programmes up to another 2 to 3 per cent.

Such a definition is the result of numerous professional debates which delayed the voting of this Act. Experts in special education could not agree upon whether to include children with serious specific disorders among those who needed adjusted study programmes or special programmes, or to let them have only additional assistance from teachers and professional workers without an individualized programme. The problems arising from the introduction of this new category are related to the definition of scope and contents of the 'impairment' typical for this population of children. What kind of diagnosis to apply in order to assess the impairment, and what is the difference between these children and others who are placed in other programmes according to the Act on Primary School?

What all this means for the future handling of children with special needs, is an open question. The fact is that the new legislation has increased the number of



pupils who need to have designed individualised programmes to about 5% to 6% from the previous 3%. Increased is also the number of children whom the new Act names as being in need of special assistance, or who, in other words, have special needs. In the previous Act there also used to be provision for these children's special or additional treatment but they were never specifically named. On top of that, teachers are becoming gradually more aware that there are many children who are special and who make teaching harder because of that. The fact that the new legislation is geared towards higher productivity and is controlled by external tests is therefore not negligible. It raises the question of how much additional assistance can be offered within a class and how much of that should come from the outside. It also raises the question of how to ensure that the outside assistance is not segregating and stigmatising. The more the assistance given in a special class (rather than a regular class with a special teacher), the lower the probability that locational integration will expand to social and educational integration as well.

### **Taking parental views into account**

As I mentioned before, the new legislation gives parents of children with special needs more say over where and how their child is educated. For example, Article 49 in the Act on Primary School states that parents of a child with special needs have the right to enrol their child in a primary school in the suburb of their residence unless the school does not meet the conditions. In such a case the child is issued a legal Order of Placement assigning him/her to another primary school. The article is based on the awareness that success of a child with special needs depends to a large extent on his/her parents, hence it strives to include them in all stages of decision making, planning, working, and evaluation of the study programme and the child's progress.

This however opens up many questions for professional workers and teachers. For example, they would like to know what happens when parents decide to disregard evaluations by professionals and their recommendation. The Special Educators Guild of Slovenia states that experiences from the past indicate that the parents of a child with special needs who cannot accept the fact that their child is different can damage their child refusing to accept special assistance and treatment (Pripombe, 1998, p. 112). In their opinion, the Act should determine what is done when the Order of Placement is not respected. They say this would not only be a breach of regulations but could also cause damage to the child. They have requested an extra article to be included in the Act, which would make the Order of Placement final. However, the article was not included in the Act and an appeal

against an Order of Placement is now possible. The final decision is left to the Minister of Education who is advised on the matter by an expert committee.

A similar problem has arisen in respect to the possibility of the establishment of private institutions for children with special needs. The Act on Organisation and Financing of Education, the Act that covers the whole area of education, allows for a choice at all levels of education, meaning that children with special needs can be educated in private schools. Theoretically, this should ensure a wider choice for this population of children. Experts in special education however showed distrust of private institutions at the time of the passing of the Act on Placement of Children with Special Needs. They were of the opinion that these children could be abused by private institutions, being more vulnerable and in need of a better protection by the government than other children. They also pointed out the discrepancy between the Act which was to allow private schools for these children, and the Constitution. According to the Slovenian Constitution education of children with special needs is entirely financed from the National Budget whereas for private schools, according to the Act on Organization and Financing of Education, the Budget provides only 85% of their income. Experts in special education thus lobbied the proposed article which would allow for the establishment of private schools in this area, but their views did not get support in the parliament. The Act now allows private schools for children with special needs, and other documents will later determine the exact regulations for their founding and operation.

Both examples illustrate the attempts of the powerful and power-hungry professionals to impose their views on various issues in the education of children with special needs. The professionals would like to play the role of judge who knows what is best for a child (even though such knowledge is never neutral) and what is most suitable for the child's needs (even though it is them who determine what their needs are). They are in fact reviving the arguments of the medical discourse by hanging onto dependency and assistance in the place of confidence, independence, ambition – the feelings identified as highly important by many movements and initiatives of the disabled and their parents/representatives. Disabled people themselves would like to make the world aware of the fact that their problem lies not so much in their impairment or disability, but rather in their dependency on various professionals, obstacles in the environment, restrictions in life, and in not being given the opportunity for an independent living. They argue that their life cannot improve by getting even more help from professionals. Instead they demand conditions that will generate an environment which will let them compensate for their impairment and will support their integration. Professionals cannot make decisions on where and how a child with special needs will be educated on their own. It is necessary to ensure cooperation from the child

and his/her parents as well. They ought to be offered choice and variation, and it is finally up to a child and his/her parents to decide what type of education suits them best. This is the only way for dealing with children with special needs as free and responsible beings who have the same opportunities to make their own decisions, as anyone else, and take full responsibility for them.<sup>5</sup>

### **Children's and teachers' attitudes towards integration**

As mentioned before, the number of pupils in special schools has dropped since 1976 by more than 50%. About 2.5% of children aged between 7 and 15 years are now being educated in special institutions and 1.5% occasionally receive speech therapy in outpatient clinics, consulting centres and mobile units (Krek, 1996, p.139). At the moment, this amounts to about 3-5% of all children<sup>6</sup> (Pripombe, 1998, p.111). Let us have a closer look at these numbers.

In the academic year 1996/97, there were 99 children of primary age recorded as visually impaired: 49 (49.49%) of these children attended regular school and the rest attended the Institution for Visually Impaired Youth. The number of children in regular schools had been growing in the last decade but then it stopped because, according to Novljan (1997, p.76) 'it is very hard to integrate a child with no vision at all, or a visually impaired child who is also disabled intellectually or in some other way'. In Slovenia, we have not yet had a case of a child with no vision at all integrated in regular school (Gerbec & Florjančič, 1997, p.278).

In 1996/97 there were also 319 children recorded as hearing impaired in the primary school. 138 (43.27%) children attended regular school and the others attended segregated educational institutions (Novljan, 1997, p. 77).

Most pupils with mild mental disorders attend special primary schools and only a small number is integrated in regular primary schools. According to data from the Statistics Office of the Republic of Slovenia, there were 55 special primary schools in 1993/94 with 3450 pupils in 400 classes (about 1.4% of the total Slovenian school children). There were 579 boarding children and 158 lived either with their family/relatives or with a foster family (ibid.). In 1999/00 there are only 32 special schools left, educating 2019 children in 288 classes (Števil, 1999). Falling numbers are due to the decrease in child births but also to other alternatives available. There are more special educators employed by regular primary schools and they provide assistance inside or outside the classroom and advise teachers and parents how to help the child. There are also some cases of silent integration where a child is left without any extra help (Novljan, 1997, p.77). Children who are moderately or severely mentally handicapped are educated in special educational institutions.

Integration of children with physical handicaps and children with long-term diseases in regular schools depends mainly on the child's mobility, his/her health, school, and family situation. In recent years the number of children in the two special schools for physically handicapped children and children with long-term diseases is falling down considerably. In special schools there are mostly children with serious mobility problems (Novljan, 1997, p.79). In 1999/00, there were 104 children with long-term diseases in 18 classes (Številco, 1999).

There are eight institutions for children with behavioural and personality disorders and two boarding homes with between 25 to 56 children living there. Some of these children are included in activity groups in those institutions but otherwise attend regular schools. Educational programmes in the institutions are also attended by day students/pupils (Številco, 1999).

There are many disputes and disagreements among professionals regarding the organisation of programmes for children with special needs, and their eligibility for regular schools. Nevertheless, integration is definitely under way. That brings us to the next question, i.e., how teachers feel about integration as it is clear their attitude affects the children themselves as well as the way their classmates view them. Let me here refer to a few surveys which have set out to research this question.

First we will take a look at a survey by Novljan, Jelenc & Jerman (1998), which included 763 randomly chosen teenagers from regular primary schools. They were all aged between 12 and 15. The researchers wanted to know how they felt about their peers with learning difficulties. The survey showed that students with learning difficulties were not undesirable among their non-handicapped peers, as about half of them did not mind their company. More than one third of teenagers believed that teachers were understanding enough with their classmates with learning difficulties and were willing to help them. Almost half of the teenagers surveyed were willing to give up their spare time to help these classmates. Almost half of those surveyed approved of their being educated together.

Another survey (Schmidt, 1997) looked at the views about the integration of children with learning difficulties in regular schools held by teachers in regular primary schools and special educators in special schools. The differences in views held by teachers and special educators show that special educators harbour much less positive views on integration, namely in regards to its organization, acquired knowledge in regular primary schools, and especially in regards to the emotional and social integration. More than half of the special educators surveyed believed that children with learning difficulties were better off in special schools, whereas 77.5% of teachers in regular schools favoured integrating methods of work and held positive views regarding the social effects of integration. Teachers, however, did not seem to have clear views about individualised forms of work and the

amount of knowledge children with learning difficulties should acquire in a regular school.

Evaluation of another project, namely integration of 3 hearing impaired children in a regular primary school after their first year there, showed some interesting results too (Schmidt & Čagran 1998). The analysis showed that children with no hearing problems did not acquire less knowledge because they had hearing impaired peers included in their classes. On the contrary, their final test results in Slovenian language and mathematics were better than those achieved by the control group. This is certainly a favourable outcome for the chosen model of integration. The results achieved by the hearing impaired children too led to a conclusion that all three of them benefited from the integration in an educational sense, whereas social integration seemed to be less successful as it worked only for one child.

Another survey (Peršolja, 1997) looked at the social status of hearing impaired integrated children. The conclusion was that there were no significant differences in the social status of hearing impaired children (20 children aged 8 to 14) and other children (20 children). However, it would not be appropriate to generalise these conclusions as the survey included only a small number of children.

A survey by Kuhar (1996) of 30 classes integrating hearing impaired children aged 7 to 15 reached the conclusion that only a 17% of the hearing impaired children held very high social status (they were class stars) whereas the majority of them (43%) were not liked or felt lonely. On the other hand, Platiše (1998) in her survey concludes that hearing impaired children progress better in integrated rather than segregated classes having better chances to acquire higher education at a later stage

The last survey I would like to mention (Fabrizio-Filipič, 1997) included 461 teenagers aged 14-16. Its aim was to establish how healthy classmates saw their peers with special needs. It transpired that they were quite happy to make friends with them. Most of them said they would prefer to make friends with a hearing impaired classmate (64.1%) but they could also be friends with a visually impaired, physically handicapped and/or mentally handicapped peer. 90.8% replied they would protect their classmate with special needs if somebody mistreated him/her. They also thought their peers with special needs could join all their after class activities. As to their success in school, most teenagers (67.7%) thought their physically handicapped peers could achieve the same results as them. They believed the same about their hearing impaired (61.1%) and visually impaired peers (54.9%). However, not so many believed that a mentally handicapped classmate could be as successful as themselves. 46.3% of those surveyed answered this question with 'I don't know'. 50.8% also said they did not know whether pupils with special needs should attend regular primary school or not.

As we can see, feelings about pupils with special needs are not as negative as expected by professionals. Most of the surveys above are taken from the latest issues of the *Slovenian Special Educators Guild Review*, the leading Slovenian journal in this area, on the assumption that they publish only the most up-to-date research. It seems that the hearing impaired children and the children with learning difficulties are currently most interesting in respect to how other children and their teachers see them. However, these surveys do not provide a realistic picture of how children with special needs are received in regular schools. They are not representative as they did not include the total population of children with special needs. It is also questionable how reliable these answers really are, namely, to what extent children agree with these answers on principle and whether they would really act upon them in a real life situation. Nevertheless, the surveys at least show that other children and teachers are willing to accept children with special needs in their midst. They also show some doubt on the part of special educators as to whether such children can be successfully taught in regular schools, due to the attention they require because of their educational needs. For a clearer picture of the status of children with special needs in regular schools it would be necessary to get more detailed answers about teacher attitudes as well as answers from the children with special needs themselves about their feelings in integrated classes.

### **Teacher training**

The surveys I mentioned earlier show a fairly positive picture of attitudes towards integrated children with special needs. They also point out however that teachers are not well enough prepared to work with these children. Teachers seem to lack knowledge about children's needs, they find it hard to adjust, they adjust in an inappropriate way, or they offer too much assistance. Teachers who teach integrated classes often feel they have an unfairly high workload. This means they do not believe that teaching children with special needs is their problem. One reason for this attitude can be found in their training system.

There is a dual system of teacher training in Slovenia. Training for teachers who teach children with special needs is separate from training for teachers of other children. There are undergraduate degrees available in both cases. According to the old legislation, special educators were allowed to teach children with special needs only in special schools. In regular schools they could only play a counselling role: they could advise teachers or help children after school. According to the new legislation, however, special educators can act as

supplementary teachers by helping classroom teachers teach children with special needs either during class or separately. This change, however, opens the question of mainstream and special teachers' training.

At the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, one of the core courses in the undergraduate programme for class teachers<sup>7</sup> is called 'Pedagogy of Children with Development Disorders'. It is a 60-hour course. Students can also study teaching children with special needs as an option. Thus, they do acquire some knowledge about the subject. It is questionable, however, whether this suffices to help them integrate children efficiently. It is also debatable whether the knowledge acquired is suitable for the needs of integration. In order to be effective, such courses should concentrate on issues of education, organisation, mixed ability teaching methods, rather than recognising various disorders. It is my belief that the educational goals should be the same for all children while the help they receive to reach these goals may vary. In order to achieve these goals, teachers need to be able to organise individual and group work and should be flexible in liaising with other professionals.

As I said before, special educators can now teach in regular Slovenian schools but that raises questions about their training. Special teacher studies in Slovenia are not a postgraduate course one takes after teaching for a few years in a regular classroom, as the case is in many other countries (Peček, 1998). In Slovenia, this is an undergraduate programme where knowledge about children with special needs and their education in special schools is acquired. It is thus problematic how a special teacher with no knowledge of teaching in regular school and no training for this job can help a classroom teacher integrate children with special needs. His/her credibility can become questionable and an obstacle to the successful cooperation between him/her and the classroom teacher. It also seems hypocritical to lobby for abolishing children's categorisation on one side and then organise teacher training based on this very categorisation.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore necessary to rethink current teacher training for mainstream and special teachers in order to create suitable conditions to accommodate integration. As I mentioned at the beginning, integration is a practical project largely depending on teachers and their willingness to undertake this task, as well as their ability to handle it in a suitable way. It no doubt begins with a suitable teacher training.

## Conclusion

I will conclude with a question I could have asked at the beginning: what is, in fact, integration? It transpires from my account so far that there are a few applications of this term in Slovenia. At one end there is the narrow interpretation

which covers integration of pupils with special needs in the regular school underlining the location of the pupil's education. At the other end there is the broader sense which presumes a different quality of education for children with special needs. In practice this usually means a mixture of the special/different and what is used as a standard, defining integration as a process in which segregation is avoided while every effort is made to ensure children with special needs are treated as equals to the others. However, integration can also be defined in terms of goals and means to achieve this aim. It implies integration of children with special needs into their broader social environment at all levels, and is also called 'social integration'. When it is seen as the means to achieve this goal it entails common education – hence also called 'educational integration' – or rather, it entails setting the grounds for a cooperation between people with and without special needs (Novljan, 1992, p.196).

Evidently, there are many definitions of integration, and they all have their limitations, a fact often pointed out by people with special needs themselves (see Note 5). While discussing the educational and/or social integration the central issue remains the process of adaptation. Yet an integration based on respect for human rights and for personal identity cannot anticipate adaptation of persons with special needs to some dominant culture and dominant system of values. It must rather indicate support for people with special needs. It should moreover facilitate a group of such people to grow with the community and create a new whole.

Integration, thus, cannot equal assimilation, in other words, adaptation of a minority (persons with special needs) to the majority (everyone else) rule. It should rather be seen as a process requiring changes in both groups. The process of living in and with the community is the key element. Yet, a level of personal identity needs to be preserved. For this reason some authors prefer to talk about 'inclusion' rather than 'integration' (Šučur, 1997), while others favour 'emancipation' (Rutar, 1997). Yet others are providing empirical evidence to show that persons with special needs are not, and should not be treated as helpless objects influenced by other people, and should be accepted as responsible and equal partners capable of planning their own life and contributing to the community (Kobolt, 1999). These are the questions the Slovenian special educators will have to address in the future. Let people with special needs make their own decisions and encourage them to lead their own life responsibly and independently.



## Notes

1. Slovenia used to be part of Austria and later Austro-Hungary until the end of World War I. After World War I it became part of Yugoslavia, and since 1991 it has been an independent country.
2. The most evident change in primary school (i.e., compulsory education) is extending it from eight to nine years. Children will start school at the age of six (now seven). Primary school will consist of three three-year periods. Contrary to the current situation which does not allow for selection and optional subjects, the new legislation establishes a selective primary school: in the last three-year period, students will be ranked at three levels in the three core subjects, Slovenian, mathematics and a foreign language. In this last three-year period they will also have the option of choosing three subjects from the pool of humanities and science subjects. Other changes concern integration of children with special needs, assessment, external examinations and team-teaching. A foreign language will be introduced a year earlier, i.e., at the age of nine (Grade 4). Primary class teachers will teach in the first and partly second period, and primary subject teachers will teach in the third and partly second period. In Grade 1, a preschool teacher or second primary class teacher will also be present in the classroom for half of the time, which means that the two teachers should be able to work together as a team. This will also be the case if children with special needs are integrated in the class. In such a case, a special teacher will work together with the primary teacher. In the classes with integrated pupils with special needs the number of children in the class will decrease. These changes will be introduced gradually. In September 1999, 42 primary schools in Slovenia (out of 820) started introducing the new programme in Grade 1 and Grade 7 of the new nine-year primary school. With each new academic year the number of schools implementing the new programme will increase, until 2003/2004, when the new programme will be finally introduced into all Slovenian primary schools.
3. The *White Paper on Education* in the Republic of Slovenia is the theoretical basis for the new legislation in this area. It was prepared in 1995 after lengthy discussions about the vision of future education in Slovenia and comparative analyses of education systems in selected European countries (English translation in 1996). In 1996, a number of acts regulating the education system in Slovenia were passed, some of them, as already mentioned, not before June 2000. New curriculum programmes have been approved too.
4.
  - prisons, asylums (high disorder level and severed links with the environment);
  - special establishments (children are unable to go home and are only visited by parents);
  - hospitals and health resorts (children with chronic diseases that cannot go home);
  - homes for the handicapped, special educational establishment (children go home week-ends only);
  - special schools;
  - special classes in regular primary schools;
  - regular classes with periodic special treatment in accordance with specified topics and subjects (home-class teacher, special educator, psychologist, social worker, social pedagogue);
  - regular classes with additional assistance within and outside the class (special educator, psychologist, social worker, social pedagogue);
  - regular classes with additional assistance outside the class (special educator, psychologist, social worker, social pedagogue);
  - regular classes with higher degree of additional assistance (home class teacher and special educator);
  - regular classes with normal additional assistance (home-class teacher);
  - regular classes without any assistance. (Krek, 1996, p.140)
5. The most radical advocates of this type of idea are handicapped people organised in YHD (Association for Theory and Culture of Handicap). Among other activities, they publish expert articles in their magazine AWOL (Paper for Social Studies) and organise public protests.

According to them, it is the handicapped themselves who should train people to help them for they are the ones to know best what it is they need. They oppose integration because they believe that as long as handicapped people are seen as aliens they cannot be integrated. They will only be integrated when they cease being aliens. They also state that integration is not possible without a loss of freedom in decision-making and freedom to recognise non-existence of the society. They finally believe in emancipation (Rutar, 1997, pp.32-45).

6. Slovenia covers an area of 20.273 km<sup>2</sup> and has about 2 million inhabitants. In 1998/99, primary school was attended by 193,914 pupils, 3,361 of them in classes with adjusted programme. 98% of primary school graduates continued their studies in high school and 84% of high school graduates continued their studies at the tertiary level (Plevnik & Žižmond, 1999, p. 3, 10).
7. I will refer only to class teachers, i.e., teachers who teach all subjects in the first four years of primary school. Subject teachers who are trained to teach only specific subjects spend much fewer hours studying this topic. There is no specific course in their undergraduate programme that would prepare them to teach pupils with special needs. Some relevant topics are discussed in other psychology and pedagogy courses. The information they get, however, is very limited as these courses occupy very few hours in their programme. Subject teachers study mainly their own subject and spend less time building up their teaching skills.
8. Similar problems also exist in Spain, for example (see Latas, 1995; Balbas, 1995).

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