HOW TO EDUCATE A PROSPEROUS PRE-SCHOOL TEACHER

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Abstract

This paper presents a part of Slovene school system which is quite unique and innovative. It describes how our kindergarten and pre-school education is organized and the programme which future pre-school teachers have to pass. The secondary school programme is intended for pre-school teacher’s assistants, who are, after successfully completing the programme, skilled to work with children but only under guidance and supervision. In order to become the main teacher in the pre-school group, a university diploma is needed. The author of the paper has been teaching English in the programme for pre-school teacher’s assistants for 7 years. Experiences gained in those years are presented in the paper.

Slovene kindergartens or pre-schools are well-organized and carefully structured. The majority of them are governed by the state; however, there are some private ones as well. Regardless the funding, each has to follow the national curriculum and thus employ skilled professionals. After successfully finishing primary school, students (aged 15 years) can enrol the programme which takes four years to complete. It ends in final examination known as Matura, which includes examination in four subjects: Slovene, Maths or English (according to students’ preference), work practice and an exam in psychological science and national curriculum for pre-schools.

In these four years, students gain an abundance of useful skills and experiences needed to perform their job well. They are taught how to play the piano and the flute, they are taught psychology, pedagogy, psychology and development of infants and toddlers, the national curriculum etc. They acquire methodology of teaching specific contents, for instance maths, (foreign) language, science, art etc. Furthermore, each class has to prepare a theatrical performance, where they are required to write their own script and incorporate dancing, singing and music. In addition, they are obliged to make all the prompts by themselves. This enhances students’ autonomy and demands a great deal of independence, creativity, communication and negotiation skills.

In these four years of schooling, students undergo around 10 weeks of work practice in local kindergartens - two weeks in the first and the second year and eight weeks in the final two years of training. Students’ main tasks are to observe their mentor and prepare and conduct lessons according to the guidelines given by the school and the mentor. More ambitious students have the opportunity to apply for a 3-week work experience abroad as there has been Erasmus+ funding available for the last few years. Working abroad broadens students’ horizons. Firstly, their professional knowledge is enhanced and secondly, their independence and self-reliance are developed. So far, our students have worked in England, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Malta and Spain. Regardless the country, all of our students have been highly appreciated and recognized as potential experts in the field of pre-school education.

Keywords: education, pre-school teacher’s assistant, Slovenia, school system.

1 INTRODUCTION

The school discussed in the paper has a long and rich history. The building was designed and built in 1921 in the secessionist style by the Austrian architect Richard Class. It is located in the centre of Celje, which is the third largest cities in Slovenia, also known as “the City of Princes and Counts”. From the beginning, the building has been an educational institution. In began as an all-boys school, continued as a teacher’s college between 1949 and 1989, and since then it has been a grammar school. For the past decade it has been offering three educational programmes: Grammar school, Grammar school – Arts department (painting and fine arts) and Preschool teacher’s programme.

Everyone employed in the school strive to respect and help develop positive values and characteristics of employees and our students. We share useful knowledge and build a safe school environment with good communication among all its participants in educational process and find it important to spend time together in various extracurricular activities.
2 STRUCTURE OF SLOVENE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Slovene children can attend a preschool unit at the age of 11 months, when maternity leave ends. It is not compulsory to enroll children to any sort of public institutions until the age of 6, when they start their primary school. However, most parents decide to enroll their child into the public preschool institution, as it is (usually) the cheapest and most convenient day care.

There are around 890 preschool units, out of which around 35 are private [1], the rest are public preschools. Private institutions are obliged to follow the same national curricula [2] with some modifications, depending on their philosophy (Waldorf, Montessori, religion, etc.) Public preschool units are founded and partially financed by local communities. The contribution of the parents depends on their annual income per family member. The highest possible fee is around 450 EUR, depending on the local community. If parents have an extremely low income or are unemployed the attendance in preschool might even be free of change.

There are two teachers per group – a preschool teacher and an assistant. The number of children per group depends on their age: from 11 months to 2 years – up to 12 children; from 3 to 4 years - up to 14 children; from 3 to 5 years – up to 18 children and from 5 to 6 years – up to 24 children.

On average, preschool units open around 6AM and are open until around 5PM. There are units that are open until 8PM as many parents work shifts. Parents can enroll their children to a 6 or a 9 hour programme and the majority of children is enrolled to the 9 hour programme. This means they are brought to the preschool unit around 7 AM and picked up around 4 PM.

Every day is carefully structured and follows a routine. At 8 AM children eat breakfast, made by professional cooks in the unit. Around 10 AM they get a light snack (fruit or yoghurt) and around 12.30 they have lunch. Lunch is a warm meal, typically a soup, meat, a side dish, a salad and sometimes a dessert. Around 2.30 children get another light snack (fruit or yoghurt or a bread roll). This offers children a balanced diet. Between 9 AM and 12 PM preschool teachers prepare structured activities according to the national curriculum. Every unit has a playground and gym intended only for children attending the unit. Moreover, teachers often decide to take children for a walk to the nearest park, up the nearest hill or around the city. After lunch, children are given time to take a nap. Older children are allowed to only rest for about half an hour, afterwards they can play freely but quietly in order not to disturb those who sleep. This means they draw, look at books, listen to the teacher reading a story, do puzzles etc. Around 2 PM most children are awake and get ready for their afternoon snack. After afternoon snack, it is free play time and sometimes they are taken outside again and wait for their parents to pick them up.

3 EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND ASSISTANTS

The author of this paper teacher in the secondary school programme for preschool teachers assistants. [3] Having finished primary school, which lasts for 9 years (6-15yrs), students can enrol the program. It lasts for four years and completes with final examination, called Matura. After passing Matura, students can work as preschool teacher’s assistant. In order to become independent teachers, they are obliged to study at the Faculty of Education. Most students decide to continue their studies at the Faculty, mostly because the salary of the assistant is much lower than the teacher’s. The majority of students continue to study preschool education or they study to become class teachers in the first five years of primary school. Secondary school for preschool teacher’s assistants is described in detail below.

3.1 Secondary school for preschool teacher’s assistants

There are 12 schools in Slovenia which offer this programme. Besides this programme, our school offers general upper secondary school, and fine arts programme. The number of students is around 950. There are around 90 first year students of preschool programme each year, who are divided into 3 classes of 30 students. Regardless the school, school year starts on the 1st September and ends on the 24th of June. There are four one-week holidays during the school year. Autumn holiday around the 1st November, Christmas holiday, Winter holiday in February and Spring holiday around the 1st May. Drop-outs are very rare, however, there are a handful of students each year who find the programme overly demanding or come to the conclusion that they do not see themselves as teachers. Such students decide to switch to an easier programme or to a programme that suits their future career better.
3.1.1 The first year

Students are obliged to pass 15 subjects [4]. General subjects are Slovene, Math, English, History, Geography, PE, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Music, Fine Arts and ICT. Course specific subjects are: National Curriculum for preschool 1, piano lessons, Games for children and Practical Arts. Furthermore, a swimming course, a course in roller-blading and ice-skating are compulsory. Additionally, there is a field trip, several theatrical performances and concerts.

The first year students have a one-week practice in April [5]. Their main task on their work practice is observing children’s play “Fig. 1” – what do the children play with, when, interaction patterns, conflict resolution, the role of the adult in play etc. Each year, students have to write a diary of their observations. The diary is handed in at the end of their work practice and evaluated.

![Figure 1: A nice spot for play and games observation.](image)

3.1.2 The second year

There are 13 subjects in the second year [1]. General subjects are Slovene, Math, English, History, Geography, PE, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Music, Fine Arts. Course specific subjects are: Psychology, Sociology, piano lessons, Practical Arts and Science for children. Second year students are taken to a three – day skiing course. Besides attending various theatrical performances and concerts and visiting art galleries, they are taken to the ZOO. There they are taught how to handle animals in the presence of children.

The second year students have a one-week practice in April. [6] In the second year, they focus on activities connected to art and science. They observe in detail activities that are to do with these two subject areas – how, when and why the activities were conducted, possible difficulties, outcomes, reactions of children etc.

3.1.3 The third year

In the third year, students take only 5 general subjects: Slovene, Math, English, PE and Fine Arts. The number of course specific subjects in increased: Pedagogy, Cognitive and emotional development of a preschool child, Healthy and safe environment, piano lessons, Practical Arts, Math for children, Language for children, Foreign language for children and Social science for children. Additionally, every class has to prepare a 20 – 30 minute performance. There are three possible topics: winter/Christmas, ecologically oriented story or a story with a moral. As there are three classes, each class is assigned with one of the topics. Students write the script and enrich it with music, songs and dance. Moreover, they prepare costumes and prompts by themselves. They perform in local preschools and libraries and children are invited to our school to see the performance. [4]
The focus of work practice is on the areas of Math, Language, Social science and Healthy environment “Fig 2”. Third year students have 4 weeks of work practice which is organized differently than work practice in the first two years. [7] They go to their assigned preschool every Friday between November and April. They are required to work 20 Fridays. The main reason why work practice is distributed across almost the entire school year is the possibility to fully observe the work process and how it changes according to the season. Additionally, students can observe the development of children and the changes that occur in those 6 months. And last, but not least, had work practice been organized in 4 consecutive weeks, it would have been difficult for students to readjust to school afterwards.

![Figure 2: An example of observing healthy and safe environment.](image)

### 3.1.4 The fourth year

The two general subjects that are compulsory to all students on the same level are Slovene and PE. In Math and English they are divided according to their preferences. [4] They can choose which of the subjects they would like to study into more detail and prepare for their final examination. For example, students who choose English, have four lessons of English and two lessons of Math per week or vice versa. They continue their piano lessons and Practical Arts and study two new course specific subjects: Communication skills and National Curriculum for preschool 2. In addition, they have to choose one of the following subjects: Sports for children, Foreign language for children, Music, Dance or Art.

Work practice is organized as in the third year, the only difference being that they are placed to preschools on Mondays. [8] In their final year, students are required to focus on the role of the assistant in the daily routine (morning arrivals, meals, organization of activities, tap time, afternoon departure etc.) Furthermore, students have to focus on observation of teacher-parent relationships, dealing with conflicts of any sort, children’s play, toys and equipment etc. All in all, they are obliged to look at the broad picture and observe their future profession as a whole. In their final year, students are assessed three times by their teacher mentor. The assessment is part of their final examination.

### 3.1.5 Work practice abroad

For the past few years our school has applied for Erasmus+ funding of work placement abroad. So far our students have had the chance to work in preschools in England, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Malta and Spain. Students are placed in an English speaking preschool unit for three weeks. They usually have a homestay accommodation which is a wonderful opportunity to get acquainted with the real life of the local people and the culture of the country. Students gain valuable experience for their future career, they become even more motivated for the job and experience the value of being relatively fluent in English.
4 CONCLUSIONS

"I continue to believe that if children are given the necessary tools to succeed, they will succeed beyond their wildest dreams!"

— David Vitter, Former U.S. Senator

The tools mentioned in the quote are given by parents and preschool teachers. Due to the employment of the parents it is the teachers who often spend more time with children and therefore have a bigger influence. It is our, teacher educators’ responsibility to equip future preschool teachers with all the necessary knowledge and skills that are required for a young person to become a loved and appreciated role model for children. Additionally, being a preschool teacher demands specific personality traits which can be enhanced and developed in the process of education. This can only be achieved with the support of a carefully structured curricula and extra-curricular activities. Our school is a school which offers both and is thus highly respected for producing prosperous future (preschool) teachers.

REFERENCES