TEAM WORK IN INTEGRATING A CHILD WITH BORDER INTELLECTUAL CAPABILITIES AND SOTOS SYNDROME INTO PRIMARY SCHOOL (INTERDISCIPLINARY COOPERATION)

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Two years ago a girl, called Hana, with border intellectual capabilities and Sotos Syndrome was about to enter first grade of our school – Sostro Primary School in Ljubljana. "We wish our child felt good at school and that school wasn't too much of a burden for her." Those were parents' personal expectations for the child.

Children with special needs or Equal chances for everybody

Population of children with special needs is very diverse; most of them need individualized forms of education to develop their potentials. Most of these children get individual help of a special pedagogue already in the pre-school period, according to the Law on Guidance of Children with Special Needs. This additional help is defined and planned in an individualized programme. This binding document is adjusted to each individual child. Due to legal designations the school has to elaborate and perform the programme into which a child with Decree for Guidance of Children with Special Needs is directed. Parents have an important role in planning and performing the individualized programme.

Cooperation of kindergarten and school or My kindergarten teacher goes to school with me

Parents of children with special needs more and more frequently wish that teaching is continuous and institutions are cooperative. They reluctantly accept the explanation that school and kindergarten are two separate institutions. Parents think very rationally about reasons for some work and cooperation to end in such an important period of a child and in such a delicate moment for the whole family. Why won’t special pedagogues accompany their child to school; at least to the first grade of primary school? Special pedagogues know their children very well, they know their developmental specialities, and both, parents and children trust them. Why starting the whole procedure from the beginning and double all the effort? In our case, parents themselves suggested that Hana is accompanied to first grade by her mobile special pedagogue from kindergarten.

After Hana’s parents suggested that the mobile special pedagogue from kindergarten accompanies their child to first grade, we established a professional interdisciplinary team (including parents, teachers, special pedagogue, psychologist, basketball coach…). The team’s role was to direct the innovation project on the integration of this girl. We got the support of National Institute for Education. The members of the team were determined to help the girl’s parents accomplish their expectations. Problems were expected at maths (abstract problems) and mother tongue (reading and writing skills).

In the last few years, schools have already got many experiences with children with special needs. However, it happens too often that a school does not get necessary information soon
enough to prepare the suitable conditions for those pupils. There is no data of a child being accompanied to school by a mobile special pedagogue from kindergarten, where consequently two various institutions (kindergarten – school) cooperate; which also means two various managements and various financing sources. These factors might have a negative influence on the process of child’s inclusion and professional accompanying as well as offering individual help. Integration of children with special needs may also be positively or negatively influenced by the school climate, teachers’ viewpoints, the attitude of management and knowledge about special pedagogics field. Important contributors of inclusion are also the child’s classmates and their parents.

Teachers feel uneasy when they first meet children with special needs (findings on the basis of several questionnaires). Lack of knowledge of teaching methods and of cooperation with the special pedagogue in the classroom can also represent an obstacle. A teacher has to separate his or her role and competences and accept the help of a special pedagogue not only to the child but help in a wider meaning – even to himself or herself. It is a great advantage for a pupil to receive help of a special pedagogue inside the class.

A teacher has to pay attention to individual specialities of a child in his or her teaching process, which demands a lot of time and specific knowledge, therefore the child’s accompanier – special pedagogue can offer great help. By systematic monitoring and accompanying the child through early childhood the special pedagogue collects important information about the child’s development and inclusion into the group. He or she also collects information about the child’s behaviour and emotional response, capabilities and knowledge, which all contributes to a greater quality of teaching.

**Team work or We like what we do**

We used new approaches and solutions in organizing our team work. The teacher and the special pedagogue worked together in cooperation, which was based on daily contact with the parents. Our team work was so much more than a »technical cooperation«. The dilemma »team work – yes or no? « in our case did not exist!

Our team was created for a very clear and simple reason which has until today stayed the same. That reason was: helping Hana to feel good at our school. It was very clearly defined and understood by everybody.

Our research questions were:

- How does the integration of a pupil with border intellectual capabilities and Sotos Syndrome progress on the basis of interdisciplinary cooperation if the child is accompanied to school by somebody familiar (special pedagogue from a kindergarten)?
- Can we arouse interest for inclusive school at our colleagues and wider professional publics by presenting the child's integration to school?

Our aims were:

- to influence the quality of work with integrated children with special needs on the basis of achieved experiences;
- to find effective ways of informing wider professional publics about the progress of the project;
- to present the advantages of quality team work.
While working in the team we learned that it is better to work in smaller teams. Number five to seven people is what we would recommend for successful school working. It is important to involve only people that are absolutely necessary. Other co-workers must not be forgotten, even though they are not directly members of the team but work with you at school. Our co-workers are kept informed through seminars and stuff meetings.

There was a clear division of roles in the team. Apart from work inside the class intensive work outside the class proceeded as well. Two teachers were present in the classroom all the lessons in first grade, which enabled individual assistance to Hana while whole class activities proceeded. We were often visited by the psychologist, who observed the class climate. The psychologist and the pedagogue prepared questionnaires for evaluating co-workers’ willingness to accept children with special needs into their classes. The team members continuously shared information about obstacles we had met, we solved these obstacles and were delighted with Hana’s and our success. The extended team, which included the members from outside the school, met once in every two months. The outside members, who cooperated with us in the team, were outstanding critical observers. Their founded critiques and praises contributed to successful following of our goal. The inclusion would probably not have succeeded without quality cooperation with the parents since parents are, in a way, teacher’s co-workers. We shared information all the time. We actively observed Hana’s feelings and talked about everything in a sincere way.

We are all (teachers, parents and Hana) already by nature positive thinkers, which helped a lot when facing the barriers. If we didn't succeed one way, we tried another because where there is a will there is a way. Until today we have not given up and we are very proud of it.

When you try to work in the best interest of your team, there is no place for selfishness. We trust and respect each other. All what we do is in the first place for Hana to feel good at our school. Following that goal we manage to develop each other, our self-confidence, self-respect and teaching profession.

Furthermore, it is very important to be ready to listen and actually hear other people's ideas. When people are allowed to freely express their ideas, these ideas can produce other ideas. We try to encourage each other to exchange, defend and rethink all what is on our minds. You have to know that all members of the team must be interested and encouraged to participate in the team if you want to succeed together.

Finally, one more aspect needs to be pointed out: every team needs a good leader. You can have a group of talented people, good ideas, a project that is worth trying, but certainly the leader is the one who makes a team succeed. Our colleague who was the leader of our team was persisting enough to keep us going and supported our stubbornness enough to show all who doubted in our expectations. Hana coming to school happy was a proof that we were on the right way.

As written above: in our team we are always able to say what is on our minds. It is normal that our opinion is not always the same, our approaches to work are different but all this is not a problem. It is a challenge...and even more...we all get respect for that.
The teacher’s experiences or Hana likes Maths

I am delighted to be teaching first and second grade of primary school for sixteen years now. Since the introduction of the 9-grade primary school system I have been teaching the first three grades.

I was first informed about teaching a girl with Sotos Syndrome already in January and I accepted this with all responsibility and positive attitude. Hana was directed already before entering school. We made a connection to the kindergarten special pedagogue and I visited the girl in kindergarten together with the second teacher who was going to teach her. Good cooperation with Miškolin Kindergarten brought a lot of useful information, which enabled a better preparation for teaching in first grade. The school psychologist formed a class with a reduced number of pupils (16 pupils). The next step was to formulate an expert team. The headmistress of our school appointed members of this team, which consisted of the special pedagogue from kindergarten, the kindergarten headmistress, the school headmistress, the girl’s teacher, the second teacher in the girl’s class, the school psychologist, the school pedagogue, the child’s parents, a counsellor from Institute for Educational System and a counsellor from Mobile Special Pedagogues Service.

Hana included into the group very well. Her classmates invite her to join the play and they play together. Since the very beginning Hana has never stood out from the rest of the group. At the beginning of the school year Hana’s classmates were told that she would receive help provided by a special pedagogue and later on none of these pupils asked any further questions about Hana. The special pedagogue helps the girl five hours a week. This project represents a great advantage for Hana as well as for me because she was accompanied by a familiar person from kindergarten. I am aware of the fact that Hana has special adjustments but I am glad to be able to tell that Hana has successfully finished first and second grade of primary school according to same programme as other pupils. We have achieved one of our goals here. She is very good at the area of speaking, dramatisation. She is delighted to show her singing, playing or other skills she had learned to others. She is curious and willing to cooperate. In mathematical operations, such as addition and subtraction she helps herself by the so called “Maths Caterpillar”. In my opinion the most important is that Hana likes coming to school, is in a good mood, always smiling and willing to learn new things.

Her progress was surprising: classmates gave her a spontaneous applause at reading. She turned to the special pedagogue in the middle of the maths lesson and said: »I think I don't need you any more. My favourite subject is maths! «

The parents’ perspective or Hana has the best possibilities here

The first step and perhaps the most difficult one is to accept the fact that our way is different and to handle this with all responsibility. Some children require a little, some a bit more and others much more. We have to ensure exactly what they need.

The next step is to get as much knowledge, information as possible, which is not difficult nowadays. Knowledge gives you the courage to search, question and ask. Then some luck is needed to meet the right people, people who work with dedication and love. We were really lucky to find them.

Hana is taken care of by a team which:
puts her feelings in the first place in the individualized programme,
- shares sincere delight with us every time Hana shows progress,
- accepts me as a completely equal member of the team,
- can be fully trusted. And this is the most important.

I am convinced that Hana has the best possibilities here. I can never be grateful enough for this.

**The conclusion or Perhaps we will make a change in teaching practice**

We have dedicated a great deal of time and attention of our action research to social-emotional and ethical viewpoint of inclusion. We have been monitoring Hana’s feelings and position in her class systematically and instrumentally.

All team members have contributed to the child's feelings of acceptance. She likes coming to school, she feels safe, cozy and comfortable in her class, her attitude towards school and classmates is positive, she is also emotionally stable. She gets affirmation among her classmates through her strong areas, they accept her the way she is, they encourage her and invite her to take part in common activities. Basketball lessons also helped and encouraged this child to improve her movement and agility, she became more self-confident. The girl is also very much favoured by teachers and other workers at school.

All in all, we have succeeded in changing the school climate for the better, influencing teachers' view-points on children with border intellectual capabilities by presenting them the innovation project.

We made a presentation of the project to teacher groups, State Association of Special and rehabilitation pedagogues and to our co-workers at school. The participants’ response reassured us that we were on the right way and that our team meetings reach their purpose. We assist Hana and successfully share our experiences with a growing group of experts.

The analysis of the answers obtained from the questionnaires given to our co-workers shows that after the presentation a higher percentage of teachers:

– can define the following concepts: »children with special needs«, »children with disturbance in mental development«, »children with border intellectual capabilities«;
– is in favour of integration of children with border intellectual capabilities to regular classes of primary school;
– would accept a child with border intellectual capabilities into their class without hesitation.

A lower percentage of teachers deal with fears about accepting a child with border intellectual capabilities into their class.

The members of the project group have found out that Hana as well as her parents and school staff had a great advantage in her already familiar accompanier – the special pedagogue from kindergarten. Knowing Hana’s developmental, emotional, social skills was vital at her entering school and accepting her with all her specialities. Teachers have, on the other side, gained the feeling of safety.

Sharing our findings has at all times been one of the tasks of the project group. Re-formulated innovation project is still going on at school. On the basis of gained knowledge, findings,
solutions and results we are all aware that we could make a great contribution to a better teaching practice (which has to be planned by the needs of pupils) and perhaps even changes in teaching practice.