

## **Positive examples useful for system of Inclusive education of persons with visually impairment**

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### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

I am Bratimir Joksimovic. I lost my sight in 1965, just when I had finished the second grade of primary school. I continued attending the next two grades in the same school in a small town in southern part of Serbia. I did not have any technical aid for blind people, to make my studying easier. No Braille typewriter, no slate and stylus, no tape-recorder. I developed highly effective acute alertness and concentration at that time so that I was able to memorize most of the lessons just by listening to teacher's lectures. It was said that I had great talent for mathematics and that I was able to solve all given mathematical tasks without writing any math sign. Some textbooks were read to me by my father or some classmates at home.

Then I spent four years in the special boarding school for children with visual impairment. I learnt to write and read Braille by using both slate and Braille typewriter,

and to use some tools for geometry (wooden board filled with beeswax and paraffin admixture, metal dividers; ruler and triangle with raised dots, 3-dimension models of geometrical bodies; wooden board with holes to insert Braille plastic numbers for algebra). Good side of this school was that its employees were excellent educators and rehabilitators. They worked seriously with us and transferred the knowledge effectively to us (this was confirmed by the fact that I was one of the best students in my grammar school). Also, it was good to learn Braille and to know to use technical aids for education. However, bad side of this school was that it was a school of closed type. We were separated from our families and only aloud to go home on Sundays or holidays. Also, it was very rarely that we had contacts or meetings with schoolchildren of regular schools.

During my four-year high school studying, my father read all textbooks to me. He narrated some of them by recording them onto audio tapes (like history), some of books were dictated to me and I transcribed them into Braille (like textbooks of foreign languages). Only a few books I could find in the library of the Union of Blind.

The state supported me occasionally: I got Braille typewriter and tape-recorder, and a more serious financial support I got from our government for my specialist studies of anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. I was paid a semester of my studies. I also had the state scholarship during my master studies in the University of Belgrade which was meant to cover the costs of needed books. My father read to me hundreds of philosophy and anthropology books in order to help me finish my studies successfully. I had already acquired my master degrees in Belgrade and New York when I bought my first computer with screen reader and speech synthesizer.

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I am Dragana Stanimirovic. My sight started diminishing in 1966, just when I was at the beginning of the third grade of primary school. I spent next two years in an eye-hospital and paused one schooling year. Among the inpatients, there was Mrs. Draginja Popovic (MA in psychology at the time; later she became a professor in the University of Belgrade; she was blind, too). She organized the hospital-school for patients ranging between the first and the fourth grade of primary school. Lectures were held at the clinic on Jahorina. Patients (teachers and university students) and parents had the task to prepare and carry on the lectures. Technical and professional support was given by the army, by the School for Pupils with visual impairment «Veljko Ramadanovic» (Zemun), and by a local regular school at Pale, which sometimes we attended, and teachers of that local school examined us and gave us final grades. Our temporary school was provided with Braille slates and Braille typewriters, tape-recorders, apparatuses for mathematics, relief maps, 3-dimensional models, lessons written in large print and Braille. We were taught to read and write in Braille, trained in daily-life skills. Also,

speech therapy and psychological counseling were organized for some pupils and parents.

After leaving the hospital, I was able to read with the help of magnifying glass. I continued attending the same school in Belgrade where I started my schooling. I was lucky to have teachers who had both sensibility for needs of any child and very high demands. I helped my classmates to master with taught matter and they read to me or explained those things I could not follow visually. Teachers of higher grades of my primary school accepted the same practice. Then I started rapidly to lose my sight. I was in fifth grade when my parents bought my first tape-recorder (since that time and further, financial investments for technical aids have become priority in our family). My mother read and recorded lessons and books on tapes. My father made models in order to explain me matters of mathematics and physics. I was extraordinarily satisfied in school when I, together with the teachers, prepared experimental material for demonstrating some of physical or chemical reactions. I learnt Braille alphabet very quickly. I borrowed a Braille typewriter and other educational means from the school «Veljko Ramadanović». I finished primary school with highest grades and got the highest acknowledgements.

I was among the best students in grammar school as well. I had no privileges. To the contrary, sometimes I was alternatively given more difficult tasks. Professors put great efforts into teaching to adjust it for my easier reception. They gladly accepted my suggestions how to do it. Besides that, some of them had already had experience with Bratimir and my brother (also blind) who attended the same school. All three of us took part in most of class sports activities.

The only support I got from our government during my schooling was two tape-recorders and one Braille typewriter. Without parents support my integrative education would be impossible, or almost impossible, as well as for all other blind students in our country.

### **PRESENT SITUATION IN SERBIA**

According to data collected in 2003, 18 blind and severely low-sighted pupils attended primary and secondary education in regular schools. At the same time, there were 352 pupils in schools for visually impaired children (including the special class of visually impaired physiotherapists in a regular Medical School in Belgrade). Most of the children with visual impairment live in residential institutions during their schooling time. According to an action survey carried out by the UNICEF and the Child Rights Centre (2001), here is what blind adolescents said about the residential school where they live: "This is a ghetto. We are indeed physically marked, which is normal and we can't run away from that, but we are being fettered here as well. Beside some rare positive exceptions, we are mostly fettered when it comes to making contacts".

Long time ago, in 1982, Kalember and Miljkovic pointed out a nonsense that, aside from being blind, a child must attend a special school to be entitled to achieve some rights. We find now, in 2006, that the situation is the same. Analysis of children's position and rights in Serbia emphasizes that blind children foremost lack appropriate technical support (Brkic et al, 2003). There are no regulations or services for technical support of blind and children with low vision. There are only some exemptions in the sense of providing some technical equipment: Braille typewriter and tape-recorder free of charge every seventh year.

In a large research, done by the Serbian Ministry of Education and Sport, Save the Children Foundation and UNICEF in 2003, practically, all parents have expressed their wish that their child attended school together with their peers (85% think that it is an inalienable right of any child, and 15% would readily agree with that "only if schools would accept their children"). At the same time, more than 50% of educators expressed an openly negative attitude towards common schooling of children with and without difficulties. Further research showed significantly more adverse results both in regular and special schools. Non-preparation to work with children who have developmental difficulties creates a feeling of professional incompetence in educators. On this base they develop their value system and negative attitudes (Hrnjica et al., 2004). The educators often state that the reason they are against an inclusive education are prejudices of peers. An action research done by Jablan and Hanak (2005) showed that peers' attitudes are much more positive than adults presume, and that regular-school children could easily be prepared, through relatively short and simple programs, to accept their blind peers in the same classroom.

There are more and more projects concerning inclusive education, for example: Save the Children Foundation's started in 2000 in few pre-school institutions; Institute of Psychology's and Save the Children Foundation's realized in two primary schools in Subotica and Belgrade during 2004. The Republic Ministry of Education and Sport contributed to inclusive education in 2003 and 2004 by administering the programs for sensitizing which included 250 relevant participants of educational process.

### **HOW TO REACH THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?**

Certainly, it must be systematically worked on decreasing educators' resistance to including these children into regular schools. Teachers also need supplemental education which will give them the knowledge of specifics of blind and low-sighted children, as well as the knowledge of methodic changes in teaching some subjects, etc. Work with a child with visual impairment should be a professional challenge for an educator, a challenge that's giving him a chance to demonstrate his creativeness. Initial readiness of some educators should be supported by the school experts and parents, and this would create conditions for establishing a positive attitude. Special educators

and rehabilitators for people with visual impairment must have an important role in teams of experts. Providing the appropriate assistive and adapted educational means is necessary as a support to educators and this must be regulated by law.

All equipment (adaptive educational technical aids for geometry and algebra, slate and Braille typewriter, folios for relief writing and drawing, relief geographical maps, models of objects like houses, bridges, computers equipped by screen readers, TTS and magnifiers, Braille displays, embossers, CCTVs, etc.) should be available to visually impaired students attending regular schools and universities, both at schools/universities and at home.

It would be ideal that new service models (technical and expert support) exist in educational institutions attended by a students with visual impairment. Since such support would be very expensive, it is more realistic to get this support from regional resource centers (we could call them «Support Centers for Inclusive Education»). It would be logical and good that existing schools for students with visual impairment transform themselves into Support Centers for Inclusive Education. This occurs with a school in Pec (Kosovo i Metohija), as part of a Finish project. Fundamental task of a resource centre would be to carry out a good preparation of any student with visual impairment for his inclusion in regular schooling group. Content of this preparation would be: acquiring the knowledge about special assistive technical aids and new technology, mastering the use of these adaptive devices (both students and teachers are included); learning the Braille alphabet, mobility and spatial orientation, daily living skills; visual training; tactile training, etc. Psychological preparation of all subjects in education process is of great importance.

The experts should encourage the development of characteristics such as: curiosity, dynamism, internal locus of control, effectiveness, good memory, self-confidence that is grounded on actual capacities and social and self-advocacy skills in children with visual impairment, to make their inclusive schooling easier.

Parents should be included in programs for sensitizing and developing positive attitudes because, first of all, they have to give their emotional support to their child with visual impairment treading a path of inclusive education. That is why parents should be financially disburdened. The state should give various subventions and exemptions such as providing contemporary adaptive technology for blind and low-sighted students, especially for university students; organizing and paying for transportation; stimulating the family by some financial compensation, for instance, for costs of boarding school, etc.

Introducing personal assistant services would facilitate implementing the inclusive education, especially in universities. Other important helpful support to successful

inclusion would be work of people who are temporarily in army under civil servicing, who should work in resource centers on textbooks- and other literature adaptation (Braille, enlarged print, electronic formats). Some qualified and eligible people would be obliged to take care of supplying students with equipment, counseling, advocacy, mediation, etc.

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