

## **Slovak Republic takes up the challenge of introducing inclusive education**

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### **Introduction**

Integrated education in primary schools is being introduced in the Slovak Republic through a three-year project (2003 - 2006) with help from the Dutch Government (MATRA) and Sensis, a centre of expertise for the visually impaired.

At the start of the new millennium the Slovak laws on education said that every child in Slovakia has the right to education close to home. For a number of people in Slovakia this was the right time to initiate a move towards integrated education for children with a visual impairment. With funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands (MATRA), Sensis set up a three-year project with the concrete aim of training at least ten full-time itinerant teachers to provide professional support for one hundred fifty children with a visual impairment in ninety schools.

Alongside this main, concrete aim, Sensis also has some secondary goals:

- the project fits in with the Slovak educational system;
- itinerant teaching is designed by the Slovak people involved;
- the ministry will develop regulations to give these new specialists formal status (and remuneration).

When the project started there were only two special schools for visually impaired children (in Bratislava and Levoca) and one annex situated in a mainstream primary school (in Kosice). Most of the visually impaired children in the Slovak Republic had to go to normal schools without any support.

In the Slovak Republic, education legislation and funding falls under the Ministry of Education, but the provincial government also plays a part in the financial implementation of policy.

Under the current legislation, primary schools receive extra money from the government for children with a visual impairment.

### **Start**

The project was launched with a three-day workshop, where everyone concerned with the education of blind and visually impaired children identified the issues involved in introducing integrated education. The twenty five participants of the workshop also jointly formulated the aims for the project and the various activities required to achieve those aims.

When the project started, it was not clear where specialists like itinerant teachers might be based organisationally and professionally. The approach taken was to link them to the special schools for the blind and partially sighted, because the schools are the focus of the specialised knowledge of children with a visual impairment.

The special teachers are experienced in the visual impairment field and with that background it is easier to acquire the competencies as itinerant teacher.  
From subject teacher to advisory expert!

From the outset, the boards of the special schools were sceptical about the development of integrated education. They were afraid of losing pupils to mainstream education, which threatened their position.

There has been little cooperation at a substantive level from those in the visually handicapped field, but the project has prompted the first cautious moves.

The MATRA budget is opening new doors, but there is also the temptation to consolidate personal positions.

### **Developing itinerant teaching and embedding it in the Slovak system**

Generating new ideas, developing products, and training people are obviously the key features of the project. Another aim is embedding integrated education in the Slovak education system.

From the start the Slovak and Dutch experts have worked together on the development of itinerant teaching. This collaboration largely takes place in the task groups:

- Itinerant Teachers Task Group
- Adapted Aids Task Group
- Parents Task Group
- Legislation and Finance Task Group

Each task group has an average of eight members, including representatives of the relevant target group, experts on the task group subject, and a specialist from the Netherlands. Each group has a Slovak chairman who is also a member of the Steering Group. The proposals put forward by the working groups are discussed and decided by the Steering Group. As well as the chairmen of the task groups, the Steering Group has representatives of the Blind Union, the Blind Library, the university, the directors of the special schools, the Slovak project coordinator, and the Dutch project manager.

In Slovakia the technique of developing new ideas in task groups was very hard to get off the ground. Having a steering group as a decision-making body in a project is a new way of working in Slovakia that the participants have to get used to.

The Slovak coordinator has played a vital part in keeping the project moving: taking care of practical matters, solving problems, monitoring progress, maintaining networks, and liaising with the Dutch project manager.

The proposal to recruit the new itinerant teachers from the special schools met with resistance from the schools' directors. They were convinced they would lose their 'best teachers'. Their worst fear, though, was of an exodus of pupils from their schools while getting nothing in return. The special school had the expertise and that was very much where it should stay! Despite the example of good practice at the annex in Kosice primary school (which is mainstream and has both special classes and integrated pupils), the special schools did not see transformation into a centre of expertise as an opportunity.

Initially it was not possible to start training ten full-time itinerant teachers, because only five people from the schools concerned (four full-time places) were registered for the course. In view of the geographical position of the three schools, covering the target group of one hundred fifty children at ninety schools with only five people was not feasible. On the initiative of the Dutch project manager the Steering Group was consulted about a radical change to the project, which involved seeking cooperating with other education centres (known in the Slovak Republic as Integrated Child Centres and Special Advisory Centres). These centres were approached on the basis of geographical position, and of course their willingness to change, and the presence of pedagogical knowledge in their staff.

Six centres were keen to participate and this brought the number of trainee itinerant teachers up to thirteen (together forming nine full-time places). The future itinerant teachers were then linked to educational and non-educational organisations. This would have consequences for future funding: from education and care, and from national and provincial governments. The Legislation and Finance task group started working on this and had discussions with the ministry and provincial authorities.

After eighteen months of preparation in steering groups and task groups, training began in the Netherlands. The thirteen trainee itinerant teachers were given an intensive ten-day course at Sensis. As well as successfully training participants in the job skills required, the development of a strong group feeling was also seen as essential to the success of the project.

The thirteen individuals hardly knew one another, but would soon be members of the group that would act as the driving force behind the development and implementation of itinerant teaching in the Slovak Republic. Starting the course in the Netherlands helped to nurture this group process. The Dutch experts managed to cover a large number of topics in a relatively short space of time.

The basic principle with all aspects of the course was to start with the knowledge the trainees already had and expand on it with the knowledge and insights brought in by the Dutch experts.



Training Visual Function

As cultural background, hierarchical relationships, financial opportunities, and accessibility problems (no car ownership!) were discussed, it became clear to the Dutch team that implementation in the Slovak Republic had to take these differences into account. In other words, imposing the Dutch model on the Slovak Republic would not work. So a Slovak model had to be developed.

The various parts of the course were based on a 'self-discovery and self-development' approach. There was an interchange between the Slovak way of working, which stresses in-depth study of a topic, and the Dutch 'learning by doing' approach.

The following subjects were addressed in modules and short training sessions:

- visual functioning
- ophthalmology
- the Corn model
- braille
- adapted ICT aids
- individual educational plans
- observing in class
- the In-Sight programme
- the Intelligence Test for Visually Impaired Children (ITVIC)
- setting up depots for adapted aids
- developing and putting together a mobile case full of adapted aids
- intervision
- discussion techniques
- orientation and mobility
- working visits to schools for special education (Slovakia and Netherlands)
- working visits to mainstream primary schools in the Netherlands



Training In-Sight

## **Products**

### **Planned results**

What has the project produced?

- Cooperation at national and regional level. The project has resulted in more intensive cooperation and dialogue between the two special schools for visually impaired children and the mainstream school with a special education department for visually handicapped pupils. Hopefully the positive form of cooperation will broaden to include contacts between the schools and the CHICs and SPACs.
- The Parents Working Group has developed informative flyers and posters to inform people nationally about the new itinerant teaching system. Two parents are acting as contacts for people who are interested, and their telephone numbers are listed on the posters. This information is being spread by doctors, health centres, hospitals and ophthalmologists. Regular items on radio and television have produced a lot of positive publicity.
- All thirteen itinerant teachers have a mobile case with adapted materials for visually impaired pupils. This enables the itinerant teachers to give these pupils in mainstream schools additional visual functioning examinations and provide them with proper aids. In consultation with the IT working group was decided which specific aids were to be included in the case.
- To supplement the cases, depots have been opened in three locations around the country where parents and their children and itinerant teachers can go to borrow adapted materials which are not available in the cases, to undergo additional assessment, and to try out adapted educational aids.
- The whole IT group, along with some special teachers from the two special schools were trained to use In-Sight. This Dutch programme has been translated into Slovakian. It is used to accurately determine children's visual functioning.
- In workshops the Dutch experts' knowledge was used to help the itinerant teachers develop documents applicable to their own work situation. For example they now have an Individual Educational Plan, and Screening and Observation lists.
- Most of the itinerant teachers work individually from a base in their school or centre. Initially this made it difficult for them to get together for consultation among colleagues. The itinerant teachers were trained to use the Dutch Intervision programme. This provides them with a structured form of consultation they can now use to discuss their work problems with one another.

### **Additional results**

- There has been more intensive contact between the Blind Union, the Library for the Blind and the schools. Under the direction of project participants a proposal

was put forward for the transcription and production of braille books for both the special schools and the pupils in the mainstream schools who read braille.

- There has been more intensive contact between representatives of the world of the visually handicapped and representatives of the provincial government.
- The Blind Union has produced some course modules on ICT and the use of adapted software for the itinerant teachers.
- Parents have also made a start on planning the organisation of parents' groups in the country. The Dutch parents' organisation FOVIG has put forward different ideas drawn from its own experience.
- Several psychologists from the special schools and CHICs have asked for a training course on the use of an intelligence test for blind children developed in the Netherlands. Training these psychologists and purchasing the ITVIC test is a big step forward in the professional testing of blind children. This has resulted in positive input into both the special and mainstream schools.
- Some of the special school experts participate in the training of the itinerant teachers.
- The itinerant teachers have been introduced to the organisation and practice of Early Intervention in the Netherlands.

The MATRA project "Developing a new quality of supported integrated education for visually impaired children in mainstream primary schools in the Slovak Republic" kick-started a huge process of change.

Cooperation between Slovak and Dutch experts has set an irreversible process in motion. Once the project formally comes to an end, it will be up to the Slovaks to decide how they wish to continue to meet the challenge.

### **Interactive workshop**

In an interactive workshop we would like to guide participants in small groups and plenary sessions through the process of starting and carrying out this project. Starting with a short introduction and a mind map, participants are free to choose which topics they would like to explore, focus on, discuss and brainstorm, and discuss what decisions they would make.

During the presentation we will look at different aspects of the project – the start, the training of itinerant teachers, the embedding in the Slovak system, and the results of the project – using different interactive approaches.