

Sarajevo, a chronicle of reconstruction

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The ONCE's Joan Amades Resource Centre in Barcelona provides services for a total of 1,000 pupils with visual impairments, who receive attention throughout their school years, from the very moment their disability is detected. The 400 pupils who have other major disabilities in addition to their visual impairment are enrolled in special schools. The 200 children of compulsory education age whose chief disability is visual are all enrolled in ordinary schools.

In order to better explain our relationship with the education professionals from Sarajevo, I'm going to summarize our own inclusive schooling process.

1. Integration in Barcelona from the outset to the present.

In 1978, five years before legislation on the integration of people with disabilities was enacted in our country, in Barcelona we began to mainstream pupils with visual impairments in ordinary schools. Based on the experience acquired in countries over a number of years previous, we set out to introduce the concept, adapted to our own cultural realities and the possibilities open at the time.

Special schooling and integrated education have co-existed and complemented one another in our country for many years. After initiating the process, we proceeded very gradually to reach the current situation in which all pupils with visual disabilities are enrolled in ordinary schools.

Special schooling provided the context in which we reflected on strategies to renovate the status quo and draw up programmes to be applied for each child enrolled in ordinary school. In addition to internal reflection, we conducted analyses and/or exchanged views

with parents and mainstream school teachers, laying the groundwork for joint learning and progress in educational intervention in support of integrated pupils.

The pedagogical principle on which our project was based was to provide visually impaired children with an education that would enhance their potential, offering them a richer and more stimulating environment in which to structure their personalities as people with visual disability living among persons with normal vision.

We soon realized that early care was essential to the success of integrated education. Children should not have to deal with difficulties in their development other than those characteristic of visual disability.

Over time, the special school was converted into an educational resource centre in support of integrated education for visually impaired children.

The resource centre provides the educational community with systematic support to respond to pupils' educational needs. It is also a place where visually impaired children can meet schoolmates with similar disabilities and perfect the specific techniques needed to work independently.

The former special school professionals re-oriented their experience to support integrated education.

From a very early stage, our government supported the conversion of special schools into resource centres and the integration of pupils with special education needs in ordinary schools. The authorities made great efforts to train professionals in inclusive schooling.

We view educational integration to be but one aspect of social mainstreaming. The process is complex, as society's everyday treatment of other minorities shows, but after nearly thirty years of successfully integrating pupils with visual disabilities we feel optimistic about the general possibilities of bringing all citizens closer together.

2. Cooperation to rebuild education systems in developing countries or countries affected by war

For a number of years, the training programme for professionals working with blind or partially sighted people sponsored by the ONCE's Joan Amades Resource Centre has been cooperating with professionals from other countries who, for different reasons, need to retrain in educational intervention to adapt to new pedagogical developments.

To date, such cooperation has included:

- Teacher training in Saharan camps.

- Cooperation with the Vicente Ferrer Foundation in Anantapur, India.
- Establishment of an educational resource centre in Nicaragua.
- Training for professionals in different Latin American countries.
- Cooperation with education professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The purpose of our work with educational professionals in Sarajevo was essentially to reflect with them on the path to follow to improve educational intervention for pupils with visual disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

3. Cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina

Background:

The physical and moral reconstruction of the population of Sarajevo began shortly after the Dayton peace agreements were signed in December 1995.

Our cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina began in 1997. At that time, the ONCE signed an agreement with the consortium of “Architects and engineers without borders” to deliver training in Mostar. These courses addressed different types of disabilities: visual impairment, deafblindness, motor disabilities and autism.

A parallel endeavour was undertaken with the Autonomous University of Barcelona’s Fundación Autónoma Solidaria in several refugee camps in the area. Our contribution consisted in participating in a course for education professionals delivered in Tuzla.

Current project:

Our present cooperation dates from 2002 when, at the request of A.D.L. (Ambasada Demokratije Lokaine) Barcelona-Sarajevo, a seminar titled “Changes in educational models for people with special education needs” was organized in Sarajevo by MestresxBosnia, an NGO.

For a full week, specialists from Barcelona in visual, hearing, motor and mental disabilities and in orphanages participated in the seminar.

In the wake of the seminar, working relations were established with professionals affiliated with the *Association for the Blind of Sarajevo* and the *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

The *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina* is an educational institution catering for a group of 120 pupils between the ages of 6 and 20. The school offers primary and secondary education for both blind and partially sighted pupils. The children and young adults whose families do not reside in Sarajevo live at the school, which as an institution is open to the surrounding

neighbourhood and the city as a whole. It participates in many activities with the city's ordinary schools.

The two institutions described the issues that were of greatest concern to them at the time:

One such concern was the need for **orientation and mobility instructor** training since, after the war and due to the involuntary relocation of the population, there was no professional in Sarajevo able to teach these techniques to the city's blind: children, youth or adults.

The *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth* professionals, in turn, were debating about how to **begin to integrate** their pupils in ordinary schools.

In response to these needs we organized two projects with the NGO MestresxBosnia:

- We delivered a course on "Orientation and mobility techniques" in Sarajevo in July 2003. The course was attended by four people with visual impairments, *Sarajevo Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth* professionals and *Association for the Blind of Sarajevo* staff who had begun to work in the area the winter before. In all, 11 people participated in the course.
- In November 2003 four professionals (the director and three specialists) of the *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth* visited Barcelona. For a week they witnessed how integration was handled in situ and became acquainted with the procedures in place in Barcelona through people who had introduced integrated schooling in Catalonia.

The objectives of the visit were as follows:

- To see what working with visually impaired pupils integrated in ordinary schools involves:
 - Pupil support
 - School support
 - Family support
- To exchange experiences with the people who introduced inclusive education for blind children in Catalonia.
- To learn how the special school was converted into a resource centre for pupils with visual disability.
- To participate directly in working sessions with personal independence instructors.

The professionals from Sarajevo participated in the everyday work performed by the Joan Amades Resource Centre professionals and accompanied them in their tasks and routes for an entire week.

4. Initiation of support for integration in Sarajevo

In academic year 2004-2005, as soon as the new Bosnia and Herzegovina education act acknowledged the right of all pupils to be enrolled in any of the country's schools, Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina initiated two projects

- To support the integration of two visually impaired pupils of compulsory secondary school age in two ordinary schools in Sarajevo.
- To teach these pupils to use a white cane for independent mobility.

The *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina* decided to support the integration of two blind pupils in ordinary schools in Sarajevo: Vedin, age 14, in a secondary music school and Hasim, also 14, in a regular secondary school.

Vedin, who has a severe visual disability as a result of retinitis pigmentosa, goes to his new school every day, where he studies music. He has a special talent for musical expression and studies a number of instruments: piano, drums and guitar. He can work with large type and Braille.

The support that Vedin's music school teachers received from the *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth* teachers revolves around the working methodology and techniques to use in his education. This youngster, who lives at the *Centre*, takes a bus every day to the music school. He feels more self-assured and independent every day in his daily commute, and with his cane training, night time travel will soon be easier for him as well.

Hasim, blind and lacking one hand because of a landmine explosion when he was only four, is beginning to learn to read Braille. Hasim also lives at the *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth* from which he commutes to his new school every day. He's learning to get around Sarajevo on his own with a cane and to take the bus to school. Hasim is excited about the school, his new classmates and teachers and is learning strategies to be more and more independent.

In May 2005, three professionals from Barcelona and two from Sarajevo spent a week reflecting on and exchanging experiences about mainstreaming pupils with visual disability in ordinary schools and attempting to define ways that special schools might

help in this process. Workshop participants discussed the support teacher's role in the integration of the two pupils who have begun to attend ordinary schools and how to enhance their personal independence, particularly with respect to orientation and mobility.

Vedim and Hasim, with the support of the *Centre for the blind and sight-impaired children and youth*, while working towards their own independence and educational mainstreaming, are building a model that will help many other visually impaired pupils who will eventually enrol in ordinary schools.

As noted above, our work has consisted essentially in accompanying the professionals concerned in this process of reflection on the path to follow to improve educational intervention. In Spain, we found a model suited to our social and cultural reality. Our colleagues in Sarajevo are certain to find a model of their own that will help them ensure the integration of all the personal, social and cultural realities prevailing in their country, since people with disabilities can only be integrated in an open society, willing to accept all its citizens regardless of their personal, social or cultural realities.

5. Project continuity

Project continuity will depend on the priorities defined by the professionals in Sarajevo.

A lot remains to be done:

- Support for pre-school children with visual disability.
- Acquisition of self-assurance, overcoming fear, on the part of professionals as well as pupils and their families, as children and teenagers learn to use their white canes to gain greater independence and mobility.
- Definition of a model, adapted to reality, for supporting integrated education.
- Introduction of new technologies in education...

This path, that the school is taking in parallel with society, will contribute to bringing all citizens closer together.

We carried this project through and are eager to continue to do our part because we're under the conviction that it's worth the effort, that tiny changes like this are what move the world.

We wish to thank all those who made it possible to participate in such a rewarding experience. Thank you.