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Caring and Learning Together: A Case Study of Slovenia

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About the Report

The present report was commissioned by UNESCO within the framework of the Caring and Learning Together: a Cross-National Study on the Integration of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) within Education, implemented as part of its 2008-2009 biennial programme. The study examines the policy of integrating ECCE within the education system, which is being adopted in a growing number of countries. It aims to generate a better understanding of the policy by looking at the experiences of five countries – Brazil, Jamaica, New Zealand, Slovenia and Sweden – and one municipality – Ghent in Belgium Flanders – which have chosen this option. The study also looks at why other countries have not followed this course of action. It offers an assessment of integration-within-education, and provides key policy insights and recommendations on the subject.

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1. Introduction

The Republic of Slovenia has been a democratic parliamentary republic since 1991; and a member of the EU since 2004. It covers an area of 20.273 km² with a population of 2,032,608 citizens. Since independence in 1991, Slovenia's economic development has been very successful, making it one of the most thriving countries in transition. Following economic growth, there has also been an increase in employment, which has exceeded the European average since 2004 (in 2005, employment in Slovenia was 66%, as against 63.8% in the EU). Compared to the EU average, Slovenia has a considerably high employment rate for women. The employment rate for women aged 25 to 49 years was 83.7% in 2008, 4.6% lower than the employment rate for men. The majority of women are employed full time. Maternity leave is 115 days long, 77 days of which the father can use. Fathers can also benefit from 15 days of paternal leave – during this period, both parents can stay with the child at the same time. Total parental leave for caring and nursing the child is 260 days; either the mother or the father can participate. The monetary compensation for the time of the maternity, paternal and parental leave is up to 100% of one's salary. A high employment rate of women indicates the need for quality preschool institutions for toddlers and children from the end of the maternity leave till entry into compulsory school.

The Slovenian education system, which is included under the Ministry of Education and Sport, consists of preschool education, compulsory education, (upper) secondary education (vocational and technical education) and secondary general education, higher vocational education, and higher education. The *Preschool Law* (1996) defines that preschools are established and funded by municipalities. Preschools are organized and integrated, and are intended for children from the end of maternity leave till entrance into the 1st grade of compulsory school, but they are internally divided into two age periods: the 1st age period includes toddlers aged from 1 to 3 years and the 2nd age period includes children aged from 3 to 6 years. Autonomous public preschool institutions, organizational units of preschools at compulsory schools, private preschool institutions as well as private persons can perform preschool education. Preschool institutions can also organize education in a childminder family. Preschools implement programmes of different length, namely full-day programmes; half-day programmes and shorter programmes. Preschool programmes can also be organized in a childminder family (it can be carried out at the home of the preschool teacher or her/his assistant, employed at a preschool institution, or at the home of a private preschool teacher). Preschool institutions can organize preschool education at the home of a child, who due to illness cannot be included into a preschool. Preschool classes can be homogenous or heterogeneous within one age period, or they can be combined (including children of both age periods). The highest number of children in the classes of the 1st and 2nd age periods is regulated by the *Preschool Law*. The local community is obliged to initiate the procedure of setting up a preschool if there is sufficient parent interest, however it cannot always ensure a sufficient number of admission places. According to the *Preschool Law*, in cases where there are not sufficient admission places, children from socially deprived families and children with special

needs are given the priority. The decision regarding children's participation in preschool education can be made by their parents at any time during the year.

In the school years 2007/2008 there were 68% children aged from 1 to 6 years attending preschool: 33% of one-year-olds, 54.9% of two-year-olds, 74.6% of three-year-olds, 82.9% of four-year-olds, 89% of five-year-olds and 4.3% of children aged 6 or above. The share of four-year-old children at preschool increased from 62.6% in 1999 to 82.9% in 2007. The majority of children (95.8%) are in full-day programmes. In the school year 2007/08 there were 309 preschool institutions, of which 17 were private; 61,359 children were attending preschools of which 1,211 children were in private preschools. In the calendar year of the child's 6th birthday, parents are obliged to enroll him or her in the first year of compulsory school. The *Slovenian Constitution* guarantees free education to Slovenian nationals. Compulsory education is mandatory, funded with budgetary resources and lasts for nine years. Statistics on labour market participation of mothers and fathers with young children are not available, although statistics show a relatively high employment rate for both women (83.7%) and men (88.3%), aged from 15 to 49 years, compared to several other European countries.

The *Preschool Law* describes some specific organizational solutions concerning children with special needs and Roma children. Data over the last five years show that the Roma children were attending approximately 40 preschools. The statistical data, needed for monitoring the inclusion of Roma children into preschools through a longer period of time, is not available and is still not collected at national level. The majority of children with special needs are integrated in mainstream programmes (from 75% to 80% in the period over the last five years), with just a smaller share attending separate developmental classes within the preschool institutions (from 20% to 25% in the period over the last five years).

Professional workers in preschool institutions are: preschool teachers, preschool teachers' assistants, counsellors, health and hygiene regime planners, meal planners and managing officials. For the school year 2007/08, a total of 7,708 preschool teachers (49%) and their assistants (51%) were employed in preschools, the majority of them women. A preschool teacher and a preschool teacher's assistant work in each class. In the separate developmental classes of children with special needs, 201 preschool teachers (special pedagogues) and their assistants were employed. The *Preschool Law* defines the obligatory educational level of preschool teachers and their assistants. The preschool teacher should have a higher education degree in preschool education or a university degree from some other field (pedagogy, art, humanities or social sciences), together with an added programme of preschool education. The preschool teacher's assistant should have an upper secondary school level in the field of preschool education or a general secondary school level along with a course in preschool education. Counsellors should have a university degree in psychology, pedagogy, social work, social pedagogy and special pedagogy.¹ The public network of preschools is organized in such a way that it

¹ Special pedagogues are educated in a university programme and are, with regards the chosen programme, qualified for working with persons with mental disorders, with deficits in specific areas of learning, the

enables parents and children accessibility and the option to choose a suitable programme for preschool children. In order to pursue their activities, public preschool institutions have to ensure that they have practitioners with the required qualifications and suitable facilities and equipment.

Education in preschool institutions in ethnically and linguistically mixed areas is provided in accordance with the *Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia*, educational legislation, and the law regulating special educational rights for the Italian and Hungarian ethnic minorities. An addition to the national *Preschool Curriculum* is provided for in these preschool institutions. In the ethnically and linguistically mixed area of Prekmurje, children attend bilingual preschools. Classes are mixed and the languages of instruction are Slovenian and Hungarian. In the ethnically and linguistically mixed area of Slovenian Istra, preschools offer Slovenian and Italian as the languages of instruction.

The creation of private preschools was legally regulated for the first time in Slovenia by the *Preschool Law* of 1996. The number of private preschools in Slovenia is relatively low (in the school year 2007/2008 there were 17 private preschools, the majority of which were Catholic preschools, some of which were preschools with special pedagogical principles, and 7 preschools which were granted the concession by municipalities for the implementation of the public preschool programme). The private preschools' quality at a structural level is comparable to the quality of public preschools. 85% of funds provided for each child enrolled in public preschool by the local community, for the wages and material costs, are granted for each child attending a private preschool. By the *Preschool Law*, parents have the right to choose between a public and private preschool and between different programmes.

The *Preschool Curriculum* (1999) is a national document established by the Council of experts for general education in the Republic of Slovenia. Slovenia has established an integrated approach to preschool education, combining care and education. The *Preschool Curriculum* is open, flexible and defines six areas of activity: movement, language, art, science, society and mathematics. There is a special emphasis on the role of play for a child's development and learning and on the interplay of different fields of activity within the daily routine. The role of adults in the process of pursuing different goals is also highlighted. The goals set in individual areas of activity provide the framework for the selection of contents and activities by preschool teachers and are designed separately for the first and second age period of children. Preschools also implement enriching (e.g. attending workshops and performances, visiting libraries and museums, playing sports) and additional activities (e.g. learning a foreign language).

blind and partially sighted, deaf and hard of hearing, persons with speech and language disorders, motor handicapped, persons with long-term sickness and persons with combined disorders.

2. Historical context of integration

At the beginning of the 19th century, there was no legal basis for the care of preschool children in the Slovene land. Nevertheless, before the enforcement of the *Law on public school* (1869), which established the legal basis for preschool institutions, some institutions for preschool children had already been established: shelters and kindergartens (*otroški vrtci*)². The first shelter was opened in Ljubljana in 1834. The shelters were attended by poor children, aged 2 to 5 years, who were in need of care. In contrast, kindergartens were established some ten years later, following the example of kindergartens in the German states, designed and expanded by Fröbel. The kindergartens included older preschool children, coming from urban families. After the enforcement of the *Law on public school* and other statutory acts, the establishment of kindergartens no longer depended on charity associations, private persons or church, as the responsibility was passed to the provincial education authorities. From then on, the kindergartens did not only represent the privileged rich, although shelters for poor children were still in place. The kindergartens included children of 3 to 6 years old, while nurseries were established to provide care for younger children, mainly for toddlers, for whom parents had trouble caring. In the period between the 1st and 2nd World War, the kindergartens were renamed as Play Centres and gained the status of national state schools for the education of children aged 4 to 7. According to the *Law on national schools* (1929), the establishment of Play Centres was mandatory in larger cities and industrial towns. Day shelters were also opened for children up to 4 - providing mainly care and nutrition.

After World War II, in former Yugoslavia, preschool care and education became an increasingly visible and integral part of the social, economic, health and educational care for children, thus enhancing the importance of children's care. The post-war period required that an increasing number of children should be cared for within the institutions for preschool children, as there was a growing number of mothers employed in production and who were taking on different roles within the socio-political context. The pre-war Play Centres were not sufficient, regarding their number and the activities they provided. New institutions were therefore established, called Homes for play and work (which were later again renamed kindergartens), intended for children from the age of three upwards. The number of these institutions grew fast and institutions for younger children, called nurseries, were also established (the nurseries were placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of health). The legal basis for the establishment of the Homes for play and work and the nurseries was the *Federal regulation for the establishment of nurseries and kindergartens*. Between 1958 and 1960 the reform of the education system was carried out as a result of the introduction of the workers' and social self-government. Two documents were important for the development of preschool care and education, namely the *General law on education* (1958) and the *Resolution on the tasks of communes and residential communities in childcare* (1961), which defined the principles of the entire childcare and social care system for children. In 1968, the Community of childcare in Slovenia was established, which monitored and provided the guidelines for

² The term “*otroški vrtec*” is a Slovenian translation of the German word “*kindergarten*”.

the development of preschool care and education. The stated conceptual basis and the two statutory provisions provided for the establishment of new age-integrated institutions for preschool children, which, for the first time, included children of all age groups (from the end of maternity leave until entry into compulsory school). These institutions were called Day care centres and provided care, education and nutrition for children. In 1971, preschool care and education received the first independent law called the *Law on the activities of education and care for preschool children*. The law governed the education, care, nursing and treatment of preschool children in day care centres as an addition to a child's upbringing within the family. The law defined that the day care centres could be established by a municipality, local community or working organization. The activities of the day care centres regarding education were financed, by 1977, with funds from the Community of education, while other activities were financed by the Community of childcare. After 1977, all the activities of preschool care and education were financed by the Community of childcare. Both communities, the Community of childcare and the Community of education, cooperated in the preparation of the *Programme for preschool education and care* and the statutory acts. The network of day care centres spread rapidly during this period. A new step towards the development of preschools in Slovenia was made in 1980 when the *Law on preschool education and care* was adopted, which governed the education and care of preschool children and also recognized the day care centres as a part of the overall education system. Already in the seventies the pre-primary school network had been intensively developed (it was carried out within various shorter or long programmes and was implemented on the premises of preschools, schools or local communities). Pre-primary schools included children in their last year before entering compulsory school and were intended to prepare children for enrollment into compulsory school. The 1980 *Law on primary school* defined pre-primary school as obligatory for all children before entering compulsory school. The obligatory preparation of children for compulsory schooling was implemented in 1981. It generally took place at day care centres, either as a full-day preparation for compulsory schooling for children who attended the day care centres (the assured *Programme for a child's preparation for compulsory schooling* of 25 hours a week) or as a shortened preparation for compulsory schooling aimed at children who did not attend day care centres (of 120 hours a year). The shortened *Programme for a child's preparation for compulsory schooling* was predominantly carried out in the afternoon, several times a week for several months, or was spread throughout the whole school year. It was implemented at the premises of a school or at other places considered suitable for children.

The *Law on preschool education and care* (1980) stated that education and care should be organized in classes for children aged up to 2 years, classes for children aged from 2 to 3 years, classes for children aged from 3 until pre-primary school and classes carrying out the preparation for compulsory schooling (for example, in 1985, 9.4% of children aged up to 2 years; 11.2% of children, aged from 2 to 3 years; 41.3% of children aged from 3 to 6 and 30.3 % of children aged 6 years and more were attending day care centres . The infants or toddlers started attending day care centres following their mother's completion of maternity leave, which until the mid-eighties lasted for 9 months and was then extended to 12 months. With regards the overall organization, day care centres have been integrated, but in relation to the existing solutions concerning the system and contents,

they were internally divided into classes for babies and toddlers, in which the emphasis was on care and nursing and classes for older preschool children, including the pre-primary school, at which the emphasis was on education and learning. In classes which included toddlers aged up to 2 years, the professional workers were preschool teachers with a medium or higher professional education or pediatric nurses with a secondary education; in other classes within the day care centres only preschool teachers were implementing the *Programme for preschool education and care*, while in the pre-primary school classes, school teachers were also employed. The division regarding the contents and the activities was also apparent in the *Programme for preschool education and care* (1979), the first national document concerning the contents of working with preschool children aged eight months to seven years (previously the day care centres worked under a plan for education and care, defined by the Council of experts at the Board of Education of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia in alliance with the Board of Health care of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia). It was followed by another programme called the *Programme for child's preparation for compulsory schooling* (1981), aimed at children from 6 to 7 years of age or children in the last year before compulsory school. The day-care centre programme was partly financed by the municipal community for education (part of which was responsible for the preschool education) and partly by the municipal Childcare Communities (nursing, care, nutrition within the programme).

The conceptual and systematic reform of the 90s abolished the term Day care centres and introduced the term preschool (*vrtec*), which represents a preschool institution, including children of all age groups, with a common organizational structure and the activities of preschool education.

From a historical perspective, the status and role of preschools has also been associated with the development of a basic school for the education of preschool teachers. The first school for preschool teachers was established shortly after the Second World War, in 1949. It included a 4-year high school programme for preschool teachers, a 1-year programme for preschool teacher's assistants and a 5-month training course for nursery nurses. In 1956, the 4-year secondary vocational school for preschool teachers was transformed into a 5-year secondary vocational school. In 1978, after the adoption of the *Law on directed education*, which resulted in the reform of secondary schools, it was again shortened to 4 years. After completing the 4-year education process, the preschool teachers also had to complete a traineeship. The programme of higher education for preschool teachers was first implemented in 1984. In 1995 the programme of professionally oriented high education for preschool teachers was implemented (it is at the Faculty of Education and lasts three years). The initial professionally oriented high education programme was a proper education for preschool teachers even after the education reform of 1996. The vocational school for nursery nurses was established within the School for preschool teachers in 1975 (till then the nursery nurses either did not have a proper education or underwent a training lasting several months). The *Preschool Law* (1996) stated that preschool teachers' assistants (formerly nursery nurses) should have a secondary level of education. The reform of the educational programmes for preschool teachers and their assistants was not directly related to preschool education reform but is the result of a continuous effort on the part of different experts to increase

the level of formal education for professional workers in preschools. This trend continues today, the result of which are the new Bologna programmes for preschool teachers' education. With the implementation of the Bologna programmes, preschool teachers will, for the first time, be able to study onto a 2nd (master's degree) and 3rd (PhD) level of education.

In the seventies and eighties, the social activities, in the then self-regulated socialist country, were organized within self-regulated interest communities. Until 1990, the Secretariat for Family and Social Protection (Community of Childcare in Slovenia) and the Secretariat for Education (Community of Education in Slovenia) were involved in day care centres. After Slovenian independence in 1990, the first Slovenian government was established. The preschools were first placed under the Republic Committee for Health and Social Welfare, and after the reconstruction of the government in 1992, under the Ministry of Health, Family and Social Affairs. The reorganization of social activities, which took place in 1990, also led to reflection on the division of childcare into two parts: nurseries for young children, under the jurisdiction of the Republic Committee for Health and Social Welfare or the Ministry of Health, Family and Social Affairs and educational preschools for older children, under the jurisdiction of the Committee or the Ministry of Education. The competent departments and other institutions invited experts, employed at the faculties, research institutions and the Board of education in the Republic of Slovenia, who were researching into preschools, as well as preschool institutions themselves, to reflect on the organization of preschool child care and education. One of the important contributions was the professional Colloquium, held in 1990 and entitled *Preschool care and education in the system of wider social care for the child*. A debate was held on how to ensure that childcare, which by then largely represented a means of achieving two goals: the employment of mothers and overcoming social differences would in the future become a quality part of the system of preschool care and education, while retaining its specificity, as »determined« by a preschool child. The debaters agreed that preschools should not be divided in two parts, namely care and education, while some expressed concerns about the "schoolification" of the preschools in case they were included as a whole under the committee or the Ministry responsible for education. Further analysis and professional debate led, in 1993, to the inclusion of the preschools as a whole under the Ministry of Education and Sport, where the planning and preparation of the reform of the entire educational system began. Solutions concerning the concepts, system and contents defined in the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* (1995), the *Preschool Law* (1996) and the *Preschool Curriculum* (1999), enabled the establishment of integrated preschools, which are divided into two age periods (from 1 to 3 years and from 3 to 6 years). The integrated preschool represents the first level of the educational system and is, regardless of the specificity of its organization, normatives or contents, directly connected to the compulsory school. Considering that day care centres have already been basically integrated (including infants, toddlers and children from the end of maternity leave till entry into compulsory schooling), their inclusion under the Ministry of Education has been smooth and without any notable opposition or conflict. The new *Preschool Law* was more favourable to all areas of preschool education as the *Law on preschool education and care* considered all the specifics of the preschools and was well accepted by the experts as well as the professional workers in preschools.

In the eighties and early nineties, day care centres were also established and financed by the municipalities. One part of the fund was given to the municipalities by the Community for Education in Slovenia (for the implementation of the educational part of the programme), the other part was given by the Community for Childcare in Slovenia (for nursing, caring and providing nutrition). Within the Community for Childcare in Slovenia, the users and participants defined detailed standards and norms for the implementation of preschool care and education, while day care opening hours were determined in the year's working plan by the Council of the day care centre in agreement with the local Community of Childcare. Private preschools were not legally regulated until the implementation of the *Preschool Law* in 1996.

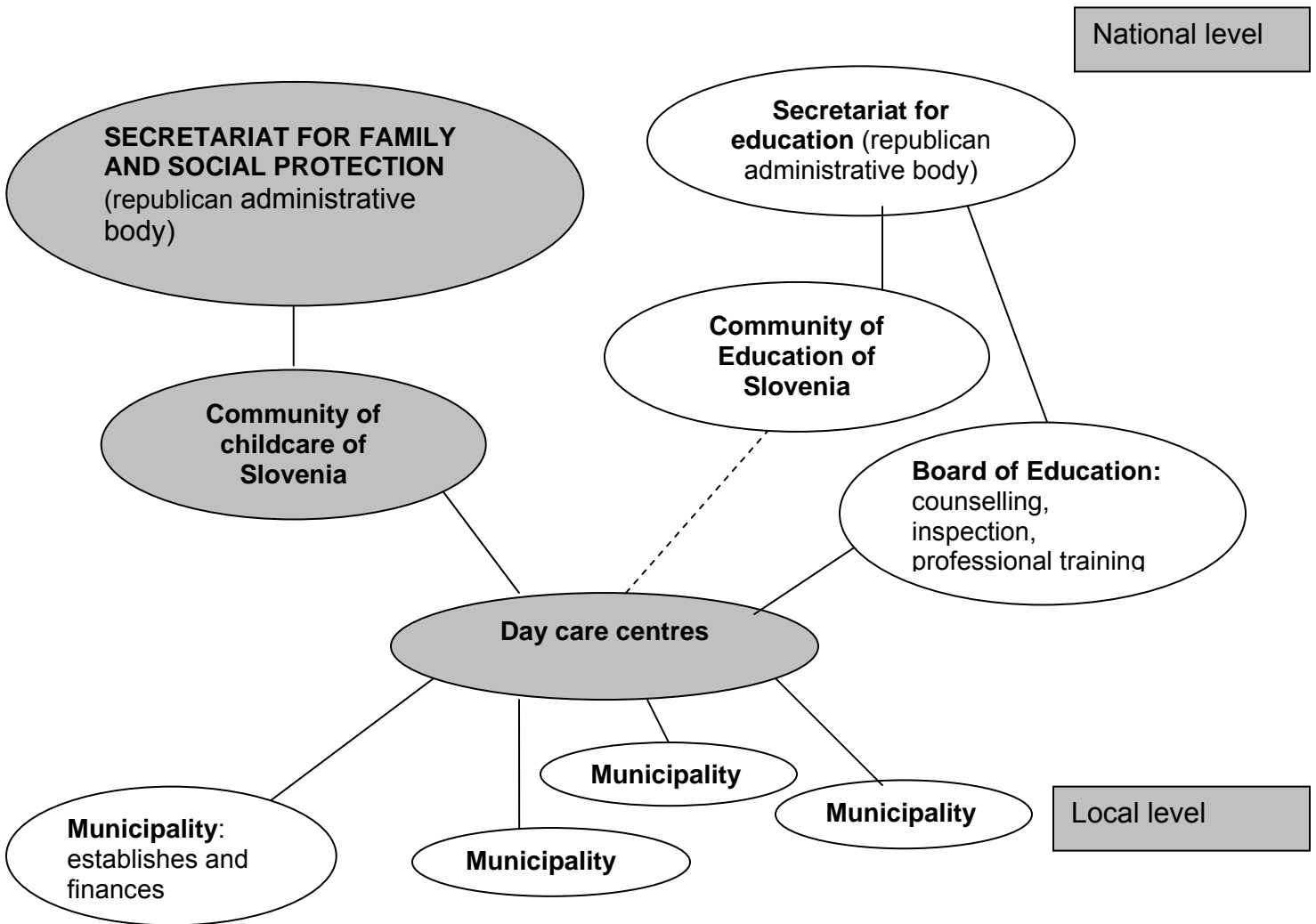
The Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia was established in 1956. The board was established as a professional body for the purpose of counselling and supervision in day care centres and schools, and for providing the professional training of professional workers in the field of education. As the national professional body it pursued mainly an advisory and developmental function in the field of education, while also supervising the work in day care centres and schools. In cooperation with other scientific institutions it also cared for the professional training of professional workers in day care centres and schools. The Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia is coordinated into organizational units for each geographical area of Slovenia. A separate Department of preschool care and education, within the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia, worked under the auspices of the Communities of Childcare in Slovenia and the Communities of Education in Slovenia until 1990 and later, from 1993 onwards, under the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs. The *Programme for preschool education and care* (1979) and the *Programme for children's preparation for compulsory schooling* (1981) were adopted by the government's body of experts, called the Council of experts for general education of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia after the Community of Childcare in Slovenia gave its consent. The organization charts of the administration of the sector before integration (the period between 1958-1961 and 1990) and that of the current coordination structures (the period after 1993 and after 1995) are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Note: Until enforcement of the General law on education (1958) and the Resolution on the tasks of communes and residential communities in childcare (1961), there were separate institutions in the Slovene land. The Slovenian independence took place in 1990.

→ for infants and toddlers: nurseries ← responsibility of the Ministry of Health

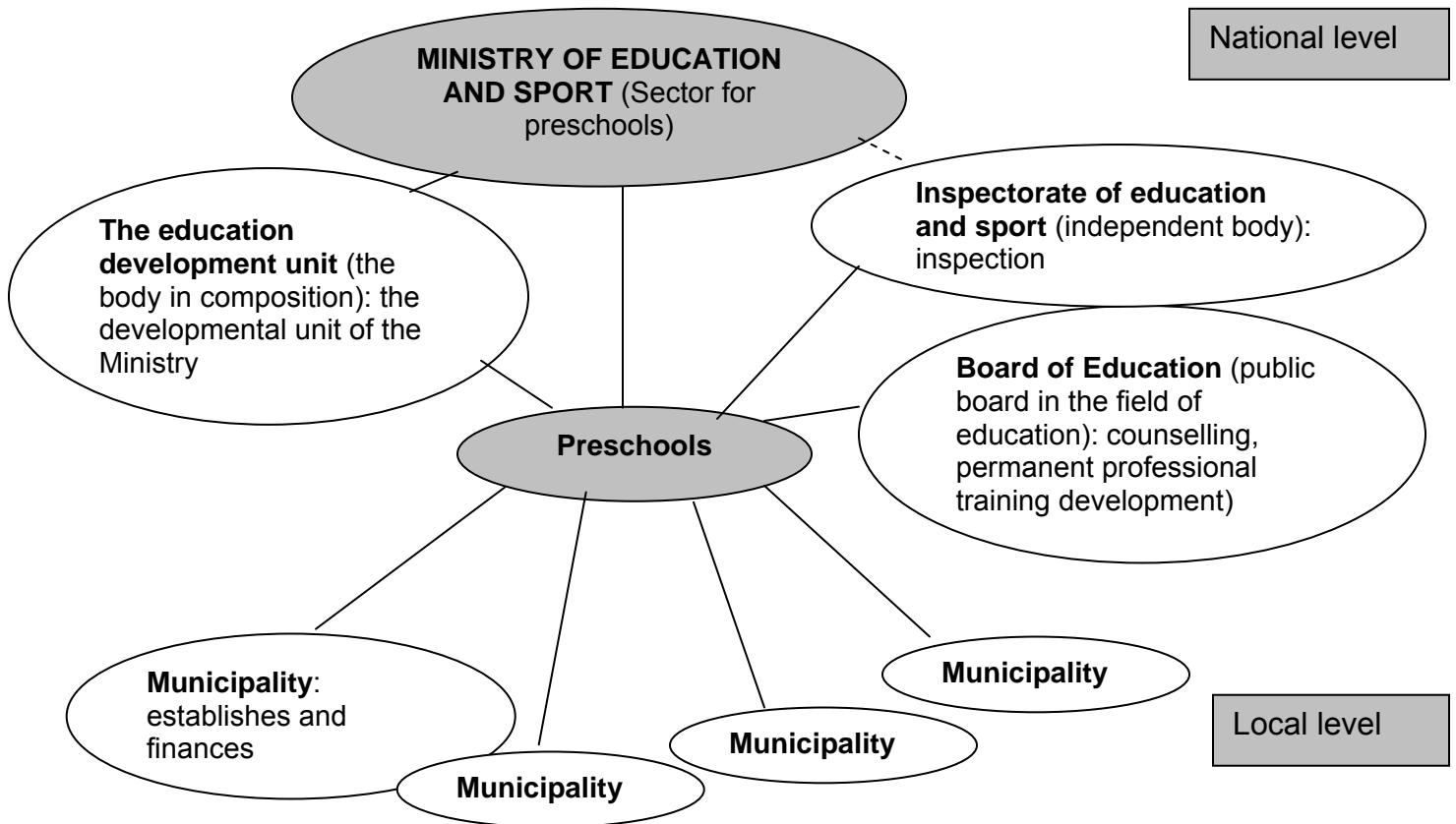
→ for older preschool children: kindergartens ← responsibility of the Ministry of education.

Figure 1: The period between 1958-1961 and 1990



----- after the year 1977, the co-financing of the day care centres was entirely transferred from the Community of Education of Slovenia to the Community of childcare of Slovenia (further description in the text).

Figure 2: The period after 1993 (inclusion of day care centres under the Ministry of Education and Sport) and after 1995 (reform of the educational system)



3. Rationales for integration

The reasons for integration

The theories for integration were both professional and political. During the period in which day care centres were included under the Ministry of Health, family and social affairs, some tendencies towards dividing the day care centres into early childcare centres and educational preschools appeared. Considering the solutions prevailing in the majority of European countries, the early childcare centres would be included under the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs while the educational preschools would be included under the Ministry of Education and Sport. Professionals working within different levels of education (faculty, institutes, preschools), especially emphasized that the dividing of

day care centres into early childcare centres and educational preschools is inappropriate as a child's development and learning represent a continuous process from the period of infancy till the child's entry into compulsory school; that it is important to provide children with an easy transition into compulsory schooling through several years of attending preschool; that not only the child's preparation for entering compulsory school, but also the preparation for learning is important and that the cooperation between day care centres and parents is important throughout all developmental periods. In their opinion, the integrated day care centres should develop in certain areas and retain their specific role and autonomy while at the same time, as part of an entire education system, be included under the Ministry of Education and Sport.

The share of children in day care centres remained very similar before and after the inclusion of preschools under the Ministry of Education and Sport, namely approximately 50% of all preschool children.

The advantages of integration

The advantages, connected to the inclusion of day care centres under the Ministry of Education and Sport, were: one minister was responsible for the solutions regarding the whole system of education as well as for state funds (based on the normative for standards of care and education and other definitions at a state level, the financing was carried out by municipalities) - this led to a more rational spread of funds on the specific levels of education, including the day care centres. The Ministry of Education and Sport developed its own independent Sector for day care centres; the Department of preschool care and education within the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia was, like the other board departments, professionally linked to the Ministry of Education and Sport. The Ministry of Education and Sport and the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia planned several joint projects for day care centres and schools (e.g. permanent professional training for preschool teachers and teachers, improvements on standards and normatives considering space, recruitment planning). Specific tasks and considerations (led by the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia in cooperation with independent experts) were carried out simultaneously in day care centres and schools, e.g. integration of children with special needs into day care centres and schools. Preschools, like schools, developed counselling services to a greater extent – a joint *Concept for counselling work* was established for day care centres and schools; a joint methodology was developed for obtaining and collecting some basic statistic data and sent to the Unit for Statistics of the Republic of Slovenia.

Official documents defining the goals of early childhood services

The *Programme for preschool education and care* (1979), which was the first national document relating to the contents of work with preschool children aged from eight months to seven years, while the *Programme for children's preparation for compulsory schooling* (1981), which was aimed at children aged from six to seven years or one year

before entering the compulsory school, are both documents relating to the contents of preschool care and education, prepared in the period when:

- In Slovenia the Piaget's theory of cognitive development was widespread and popular while the sociocultural theories and modernistic concepts of childhood, connected to the understanding of early development, especially within the periods of infancy and toddlerhood, were present to a lesser extent;
- The majority of European countries adopted somewhat modified *Head Start* programmes which showed some positive effects on development and learning (e.g. intellectual abilities, academic skills and academic achievements) of children, deriving from poor or socio-economically deprived families. A detailed analysis of these programmes emphasized the importance of several factors influencing the long-term effect of these programmes, namely the high quality of the programme (e.g. a small group of children per class, an appropriate level of the preschool teacher's education), children's' early entrance into the programme (already in the periods of infancy and toddlerhood) and the inclusion, which lasted for a longer period of time (for several years);
- Especially in the then socialist countries, the belief prevailed that one of the key goals of preschool care and education (especially one or two years before entering compulsory school), was to help all children obtain the same level of development (they were to be included in the same compulsory schooling), thus overcoming the relatively important differences in their development depending on the social, economic and cultural status of their parents.

In the *Programme for preschool education and care* (1979) the children's nursing and care, appropriate to their age, were defined as basic goals. These goals were based on the knowledge of the psychological science on the developmental abilities of preschool children and mainly on the biological and normative concepts of childhood. The *Programme for children's preparation for compulsory schooling* was, regarding integrated preschools for children aged eight months until entrance into compulsory school, divided into two conceptually different wholes relating to content with regards to the toddler's or child's age: part of the programme was intended for infants/toddlers up to three years old, and the second part for children aged three to six years.

The starting point for the part of the programme intended for infants and toddlers, states that "the enrolment of children aged from eight months to three years, into the activities of day care, did not derive from children's developmental needs, but from the needs of the modern family, in which both parents are frequently employed outside of the family". The starting point for the part of the programme intended for children aged from three to six years, emphasize the "educational goals and tasks relating to health and a physical, intellectual, moral, technical and esthetic education.

In both parts of the programme, which was highly structured, the general goals for certain areas are defined, and the tasks and contents were specified for each age group (e.g. separately for children aged four, children aged five, ...), while for the early developmental period, they were specified even for the period of a few months. The part

of the programme for infants/toddlers emphasized the well-being of infants/toddlers, the fulfillment of their basic needs, provision of toys for supporting perception-motor abilities, language development support during the time spent in day care centres. The everyday activities were specified and described in detail: e.g. sleeping, feeding, and nursing, and were carried out in the same or a very similar way for all infants or toddlers; while the day plan was defined as identical for all the infants/toddlers. The definitions of tasks included, e.g. “to develop and sustain basic hygiene habits and gradually make children independent when eating, dressing and performing hygiene”. Even for toddlers, aged from 2 to 3 years, there was a great emphasis on health, on developing and sustaining hygiene habits and providing an appropriate context for children’s well-being, while activities were already divided into several areas: physical, intellectual, esthetic education. For the period of early childhood (children aged from 3 to 6 or 7 years) the *Programme for preschool education and care* defined goals, contents, tasks and instructions in several areas, separately for each age period: health and physical education, intellectual development (including knowledge of the environment, development of language, development of mathematical representations and concepts, music, arts and rhythm). For the area of intellectual education, within the field of the development of mathematical representations and concepts, the following contents were defined for children aged from 5 to 6 years, regarding the representations and concepts of space: the use of the prepositions *in, inside, outside*. For children aged from 6 to 7 years the following prepositions were defined: *between, under, before, near, above, under, first, last*. It is evident from these examples that, for each of the following age periods, a few new concepts were added. A similar principle is typical for all of the other areas: based on the normative concepts of a child’s development, a few new mathematical and other experiences are added.

The *Programme for children's preparation for compulsory schooling* was adopted in 1981. The basic goal of the programme, carried out in the last year before the child's entrance into compulsory school, was to prepare a child for compulsory schooling. It included the following areas of education: physical and health education, intellectual education (including knowledge of the environment, language development, development of representations and concepts), moral education, technical and esthetic education. Different goals, contents, tasks and directions for carrying out the activities were defined within the separate areas of education. The *Programme for children's preparation for compulsory schooling* was highly structured, defining for example in time down to the last minute, how it should be spent on the activities, based on the movement or when and for how long the guided activities or the activities chosen by children should continue.

In 1999, after the reform of the concept and the system of preschools, the *Preschool Curriculum* was developed. It was adopted by the highest government’s body of experts, called the Council of experts for general education of the Republic of Slovenia, and has a national document status regulating the work in preschools. The *Preschool Curriculum*, in contrast to the *Programme for preschool education and care*, which was based on the planning of the contents, is entirely based on process-goal planning. The goals defined in the *Preschool Curriculum* are based on the contemporary, especially postmodernist views on the development, learning and teaching in early childhood, e.g. “a more open and

flexible curriculum within different programmes for preschool children”, “a greater support of individuality, differences and choices in contrast to the group routine”, “ a greater appreciation and respect for the child’s intimacy and privacy”, “re-conceptualisation and reorganization of time, space and equipment in preschools” and the principles of the implementation of curriculum’s goals, e.g. “the principle of democracy and pluralism”, “the principle of openness of the curriculum, autonomy and professional responsibility of preschool and professional workers”, “the principle of equal opportunities and consideration of diversity amongst children and the principle of multiculturalism”, “the principle of balance”, “the principle of professional justification of the curriculum” and “the principle of a developmental-process approach”.

The differences in the comprehension of educational concepts are particularly evident in the “replacement” of the concept of the programme with the concept of the curriculum, which is, in curricular theory, defined as a crossing of different factors, influencing the real everyday activities in the preschool or as all the activities, interactions, experiences and learning experienced by a child within a preschool setting.

The *Preschool Curriculum*, particularly in the first integrative part, contains the general goals and principles for achieving them; the explanation of a child’s development and learning in the broader social and cultural context with a particular emphasis on the role of everyday activities in preschool, the necessity for the continuous encouragement of communication and social interaction between children and adults and cooperation with parents of children in preschool. It provides a visible qualitative leap in the process of planning and carrying out the activities, compared to the *Programme for preschool education and care*. Different activities are, in the context of the *Preschool Curriculum*, defined separately for the first (toddlers aged 1 to 3 years) and the second age period (children aged 3 to 6 years), in six areas: movement, language, art, science, society and mathematics. All areas involve the combination of a learning-goal and a developmental-process oriented planning (the goals, examples of the activities and the role of the adults are described, but not the actual content or directions for the preschool teacher’s actions). There is also a special emphasis on a less visible part of the curriculum, for which the activities are not defined in the goals of the written *Preschool Curriculum*. Different factors of this less visible part of the curriculum (e.g. the overall climate in the preschool and the classes, the emotional relationship between the preschool teacher and children, respecting differences between children, peer relationships, the planning and organization of everyday activities, the organization of space, rules in the preschool, respecting the special characteristics of the environment, children and parents) are all important for increasing the quality of goal implementation, as described in the national document. Besides this less visible part of the curriculum, there is a special emphasis is on the role of the activities, which are woven into different areas of the curriculum (e.g. moral development, the use of language, health care, traffic education). They are to be found throughout the different areas of the curriculums and enable consideration for the characteristics of a child’s development and the strategies of learning in the periods of toddlerhood and early childhood in relation to curriculum implementation. In 2001, the *Preschool Curriculum*, after a gradual introduction period from 1999 till 2001 (during which preschool teachers were monitored, evaluated and professionally trained), become

the guide for all preschool institutions.

Children's well-being

In the part of the *Programme for preschool education and care* intended for infants and toddlers in nurseries and day care centres, the contents especially emphasized the care and well-being of infants and toddlers. In the part of the *Programme for preschool education and care* intended for older preschool children, academically oriented activities prevailed, while in the special pre-primary school programme, the *Programme for child's preparation for compulsory schooling*, a child's preparation for the entry to the compulsory school was further emphasized. With regards the content, the infant's/toddler's right to be cared for in the absence of parents was especially evident within the nursery classes while in the classes for older preschool children, their right to learn and achieve academic skills, connected to school, was emphasized. One of the basic goals of the *Programme for a child's preparation for compulsory schooling* in the last year before a child's entrance into compulsory school was to prepare all children equally, thus enabling them an equal base for the start of compulsory schooling.

The experts from different fields supported the inclusion of integrated day care centres within the Ministry of Education and Sport, while specially emphasizing that the day care centres should not be "schoolified" and that the characteristics of the specific developmental period should be considered, demanding that the organization, contents and didactic approaches be different from those of compulsory school.

4. Process and transition at ministerial level

The integration was based on several professional discussions. The professional colloquium (*Preschool care and education in the system of broader social care for the child*), which was held in 1990, should be in particular highlighted. Experts from different fields emphasized the inappropriateness of dividing a programme into care and education, which traditionally derived from the way preschools were financed and which might occur if, during the period of the social changes in 1990, the preschools for infants/toddlers (early childcare centres) were included within the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs, while the preschools for older preschool children (educational preschools) were included within the Ministry of Education and Sport. Some divisions of the programme for care and education within the organizationally integrated day care centres, which had not been appropriately discussed, already existed in the past, e.g. the *Programme for preschool education and care* (1979) defined that preschool teachers were responsible for carrying out the educational content, while nursery nurses were responsible for the caring for the children, which was not conceptually defined in the programme.

Expert discussions on the inclusion of day care centres within the Ministry of Education and Sport took place between the professional workers of both ministries (the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs, under which the preschools were originally included, and the Ministry of Education and Sport), researchers working in the field of preschool care and education and child development in the early developmental period. The discussions also took place with the ongoing cooperation of providers of preschool care and education and the professional workers employed at municipal levels responsible for this field.

The day care centres were included under the Ministry of Education and Sport in 1993. The discussions on the inclusion of day care centres under the Ministry of Education and Sport were particularly intense after 1990, when the Community of Childcare in Slovenia was abolished after the independence of Slovenia and the day care centres were included within the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs. During this period, although the day care centres were already integrated, discussions continued on the inclusion of day care centres intended for toddlers up to 3 years of age within the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs, while the day care centres intended for older preschool children would be included within the Ministry of Education and Sport. Some previously mentioned professional discussion and consultation had clearly stated that it was important to preserve the organizationally integrated day care centres and, in the case of their inclusion within the Ministry of Education and Sport, to search for new solutions regarding the concepts and contents of preschool care and education. By including the day care centres within the Ministry of Education and Sport, the given ministry obtained the jurisdiction of the entire education system (day care centres, compulsory school, secondary school, adult education) and thus also an insight into its overall operation. After 1990, in Slovenia, there was a period of global change, in particular with the establishment of independence, of a multiparty political system and the adoption of a new constitution. Shortcomings within the entire educational system were identified: the legislation (of education) was outdated, some innovation projects in day care centres and schools had brought modern solutions, which could not be carried out - all that was required was some conceptual considerations, which should serve as the professional basis for legislation of the system in the field of education. Consequently a new reform of the whole system of education was held in Slovenia in the middle of the 90s: the first step included the preparation of the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* by large groups of experts (the conceptual solution for preschools, compulsory school, secondary school and adult education were established), followed by the adoption of a new legislation for education in 1996 (*Preschool Law, Law on primary education, Law on the organization and financing of education, ...*) while during the period from 1996 till 1999, the entire educational system was renovated (the *Preschool Curriculum* was adopted in 1999). Educational reform in Slovenia led to the establishment of the modern integrated preschools, with their current system and programme content.

The responsibility was entirely transferred from the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs to the Ministry of Education and Sport. During the initial phase, the transfer of personnel, who were initially responsible for the day care centres within the Community of childcare in Slovenia and later within the Ministry of Health, Family and

Social affairs, was made to the Ministry of Education and Sport. The Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs did not include a special sector for day care centres, while under the Ministry of Education and Sport an independent sector was developed for them in a relatively short period of time.

Since 1993, when day care centres were included within the Ministry of Education and Sport, until the adoption of new legislation for education (including the *Preschool Law*) in 1996, the previous law, the *Law on preschool education and care* (1980), regulated day care centres. Until 1999, when the *Preschool Curriculum* was adopted, the *Programme for preschool education and care* (1979) and other statutory acts, which were gradually completed later or newly formed, following the adoption of the *Preschool Law*, governed the field of preschool education. The level of decentralization has remained the same as before the inclusion of day care centres within the Ministry of Education and Sport: the municipalities established and funded the day care centres.

The Departments for Social Services within the municipalities, rather than the Ministry of Education and Sport, were responsible for day care centres on a local level.

There have been several professional discussions on the transition for children from day care centres to compulsory school since the reform in the mid 90s which included both preschools and schools. Expert discussions have been held on organizational, regulatory and curricular issues. Discussions on the role of the pre-primary school programme were held separately, as it was specifically regulated by legislation before the reform, and on the earlier entrance of children into the first grade of compulsory schooling. Extending the compulsory school into the period of the former pre-primary school (before the reform, children started compulsory school at 7 years old, after the reform they started at 6) allowed all children to attend the 1st grade of compulsory school for a whole school-year, which provided a new link between preschool and compulsory school. It was not a case of pushing the former 1st grade of compulsory schooling, which lasted for 8 years, into the pre-primary school.

All of the organizational forms of day care centres, for example *Cicibanove urice* (periodic programmes, which had been held in the child's home environment, for example in "Preschool buses"), were simultaneously included under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Sport.

The inclusion of Day care centres within the Ministry of Education and Sport did not have any negative effects concerning the well-being or health of infants, toddlers and preschool children. After the reform, pediatric nurses no longer worked in infant and toddler classes as the new concept of preschools defined preschool teachers as the most competent persons to work with children of all age groups. However, preschools do still employ health and hygiene regime specialists, who are responsible for providing suitable nutrition and hygiene in preschools. Preschools have also preserved different forms of cooperation with health institutions (e.g. parents are obliged to bring a pediatrician's certificate of the child's vaccination and health report before enrolling him/her into preschool; preschools organize medical student, pediatrician and dentist visits to classes).

5. Process and transition at local level

The statutory responsibility of local government

The statutory base for establishing the day care centres was given to the municipalities under the following conditions:

- they had to provide proper facilities and equipment.
- they had to provide funds for the work and development.
- they had to provide a sufficient number of professional and other workers.

During the Communities of childcare period, they provided the majority of funds for the operation of day care centres. Under the jurisdiction the State was to ensure the implementation of public services in day care centres under the same conditions, which meant that it set the standards and normatives for the implementation of programmes and the preschool worker salaries while providing the assigned funds for the local Communities of childcare. The State had directly funded a part of the programme of the pre-primary school over the year before a child's entry into compulsory school (the other part of the programme (childcare) was financed by municipalities and parents) and the care for children with physical and mental impairments or the so-called guaranteed programme.

The integration process was carried out in parallel at a national and a local level; after the abolition of the national Communities of childcare in Slovenia and consequently of the local Communities of childcare (in 1990), which from 1969 cared for the implementation of the childcare programme within the municipalities and managed the childcare funds, all childcare activities were directly transferred to the Departments of Social Services within the municipalities. The *Law on local self-government*, which was adopted in 1995, established joint funds which were handed over to the municipalities. They could then independently decide on how to channel the money through a variety of fields, to fund, amongst other projects, preschool care and education (financing, therefore, was no longer directly allocated to preschools). Such a solution increased the different ways in which municipalities financed day care centres and consequently in the standards and normatives of such day care centres. It also led to discrepancies in parents' contributions for the same or similar programmes of preschool care and education, provided by different municipalities. In 2003, the Ministry of Education and Sport therefore prepared the *Regulations on methodology for determining the prices of programmes in preschools, which carry out public services*.

The organization of the responsibility for preschool care and education

With the inclusion of day care centres under the Ministry of Education and Sport, and in connection with the broader restructuring of local government (the *Law on local self-*

government, 1995), the responsibility and care for preschools at the level of municipalities was organized as follows:

- In the smaller municipalities, the municipal administration employed a consultant for social services who was also responsible for preschools;
- In the urban municipalities, the municipal administration included a Department of Social Services (covering activities in the following fields: education, preschool care and education, culture, sport, social affairs, health), within which the Unit for Education was established, responsible for preschools and school;
- In the large urban municipalities, the municipal administration included a Department of Preschool Care and employed separate consultants for preschools and schools.

In the smaller municipalities, the activities of preschools and social services were combined – they employed one consultant, while larger municipalities included a separate Department of Preschool Care and Education and a Department of Health and Social Services.

In 2003 the Ministry of Education and Sport adopted the *Regulations on methodology for determining the prices of programmes in preschools which carry out public services*. On the basis of these regulations, municipalities have to calculate and determine the price of the programme, which represents the basis for calculating the payments of parents and the difference between the price of the programme and the payments of parents, which should be provided by the local community. They must take into account the *Regulations on payments of the parents for the preschool programmes*, which includes the *scale of the classes, defining the payment for the preschool programmes* (1998), established by the Ministry of Education and Sport. The adoption of described regulations has eliminated major differences between municipalities relating to the price of the programmes. In the process of preparation for the *Regulations on methodology for determining the prices of programmes in preschools, which carry out public services* and the *Regulations on payments of the parents for the preschool programmes*, municipalities have coordinated with the Ministry of Education and Sport.

According to the *Preschool Law* (1996) and the *Preschool Curriculum* (1999), the Ministry of Education and Sport completed or redefined several other statutory acts: *Regulations on normative and occupational conditions for performing preschool education, Regulations on normatives and minimal technical conditions for space and equipment in preschool, Regulations on normatives for providing periodic childcare at home, Regulations on childminder families*.

Preschool autonomy

In the field of financing, the autonomy of preschools is limited to their obtaining grants and other sources of financing (such as funds collected from the sales of different products or services, created by the provision of care and education or other activities). These funds can be used for payment of material costs or capital maintenance. During recruitment, the preschool should follow the *Regulations of normative and occupational*

conditions for performing preschool education, but is autonomous in advertising the post for applications and in choosing the appropriate employee. It can choose between different professionals, defined as appropriate for a certain working position (e.g., a psychologist, a pedagogue, a social worker or a special pedagogue in a counselling service). When there are more applications for children's enrolment into preschool than there are free places, the Commission for the admission of children decides on their acceptance. The composition and principles of the Commission's work are defined by the preschool's council in agreement with the founder - the municipality. Preschools may prepare their own curriculum autonomously, choosing the relevant contents and activities (methods and forms of working) based on the national curriculum, and to pursue the goals defined in the national curricular document.

6. Consolidation and new reforms

The Ministry of Education and Sport took on all of the responsibilities for the operation of day care centres immediately after their formal inclusion under its jurisdiction from the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs. After their inclusion, there were still fears among some experts over the schoolification of day care centres, but this was already a time in which reform of the whole education system was being considered, with special emphasis on the connection between the individual subsystems.

New reforms and initiatives following the integration

The White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia was published in Slovenia in 1995. It describes the conceptual basis for the reform of the entire education system, from preschools through to adult education. In our opinion, the central-left and social liberal government influenced the preparation of the conceptual solutions of the *White book on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, which represented the start of reform in the mid 90s. In the introduction of the *White book on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, the Minister of Education stated that the acquisition of knowledge is the first and foremost objective of education on all levels of the educational system, which provides us with the ability to face the world in which we live reflectively, enables freedom of thought and is also connected to the world of child's play. The Minister also emphasised the importance of several indicators, which provide a higher quality of preschools (e.g. smaller groups of children per class, more highly educated preschool teachers and their assistants, a smaller ratio of children per adult). The conceptual basis for the *White book* was prepared by groups of experts from universities, research institutes and public services (preschools, schools); all proposals were reviewed by the experts and discussed in various professional associations, for example the Association of preschool headmasters. The proposals were also presented and discussed in Parliament, where members expressed their views and comments. Based on the concepts described in the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, the responsible ministry (the Ministry of Education

and Sport) prepared a draft proposal of the *Prechool Law*, which was adopted in 1996 in the National Assembly. The right wing parties in the opposition did not oppose the initial draft the *Preschool Law*, mainly because such proposals, to be regulated by law, were favourable for infants and toddlers and because for the first time the law regulated the establishment of private preschools, which principally interested the Catholic church. The right wing government, which was in power between 2004 and 2008, didn't question the integration of preschool care and education.

The relevant professional bodies for preschools: the Field Curricular Commission for Preschools and the National Curriculum Council later prepared the draft for the *Preschool Curriculum*, which the Council of experts for general education of the Republic of Slovenia adopted in 1999.

The formerly known day care centres included two types of activities, regarding the organization and the contents of education and care (*vzgoja in varstvo*). In the conceptual basis, written in the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, the concepts of *preschool (vrtec)* and *preschool education (predšolska vzgoja)*, instead of *preschool care and education (predšolska varstvo in vzgoja)* are introduced. Preschool education includes both, the activities concerning care and the activities concerning education, which are interwoven and complement each other. The solutions, both on the level of the system and on the level of the curriculum, were based on the modern concepts of childhood and education, which emphasise the important role of development and learning throughout all developmental periods. Instead of the internal division of the day care centres, comprising: the nursery (for toddlers up to 2 years of age); the classes for preschool children (for children from 2 to 6 years of age, namely classes for children from 2 to 3 years and classes for children from 3 years until their entrance into pre-primary school) and pre-primary school (for children one year before entering the school), the *Preschool Law* of 1996 defines two age periods: 1st age period for toddlers aged 1 to 3 years and 2nd age period for children aged 3 to 6 years. Pre-primary school was abolished; children aged 6 (previously children aged 7 entered the eight-year compulsory school) enter the first grade of the nine-year compulsory school. The *Programme for a child's preparation for compulsory schooling*, which was compulsory for all children one year before entering the compulsory school (defined by the *Law on primary school* of 1980, which was the only one to determine a compulsory programme for all children), was implemented as a full-day programme of 25 hours a week (an assured programme) for children at day care centres, while the remaining time was dedicated to care. For children who did not attend day care centres it was implemented as a shorter programme of at least 120 hours, usually in the afternoon, either once a week throughout the year, or cyclically several times a week for several months). In parallel to the *Preschool Law*, the *Law on primary school* (1996) was adopted, defining that 6 year old children should be included in the 1st grade of compulsory schooling. A new curriculum was designed in the context of the renovation of compulsory school, which took into consideration the younger age of these children. During the process of preparation for a curriculum for the 1st grade and the first triad of compulsory school, the experiences of the *Programme for a child's preparation for compulsory schooling* were also considered.

The *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* and also the *Preschool Law* define the following quality standards as most important: the size of the classes, the ratio between the number of children and adults in the class and the level of education of the professional workers in preschools. Before the reform, the *Regulations on the maximum number of children in classes and on escorting children* (1981) stated that in classes for children up to 2 years of age, the maximum number of children should be 16; in classes of children aged 2 to 3 years, the maximum number of children should be 20 children, while in classes for children aged 3 years onwards, including pre-primary school classes, no more than 30 children should be included. In accordance with the *Preschool Law* (1996), The *Regulations on normative and occupational conditions for preschool education* was prepared, defining that classes for the first age period should not include more than 12 children (10, if they are age-heterogeneous). The preschool teacher and his or her assistant should work together in a class of children for 6 hours. Preschool classes for the second age period should not include more than 22 children. The preschool teacher and his or her assistant should work together in a class of children for 4 hours. Preschool classes should be smaller if they are age-heterogeneous (19) or if they include children from the 1st and 2nd age periods (17). According to the condition and situation of the preschool care and education in the local community, the community can raise the prescribed number of children in a class by no more than 2 children (this change was made to the *Preschool Law* in 1998). The *Regulations on normative and occupational conditions for preschool education* further provide that in each class there should be no more than two children with special needs, while the number of children in the classes in which there are children with special needs may be reduced to a lower number of children. In preschool developmental classes in which the adjusted programme is implemented, at least three and a maximum of six children with special needs should be included. In classes in which there are Roma children, there should also be provision for a more favourable ratio between the number of children and adults in the class, i.e., additional preschool teacher's assistants (if possible Roma assistants).

Before the reform, care and education in day care centres was carried out by preschool teachers and nursery nurses (*varuške*). The preschool teacher had a medium or higher education in the field of preschool care and education; in nurseries (toddlers up to 2 years of age) a pediatric nurse with a secondary education could work as a preschool teacher, while in the pre-primary school classes, a primary school teacher with a higher or a high level of education could work. The nursery nurse, who, during certain periods, shared the work together with a preschool teacher, completed a 2-year vocational school for nursery nurses and had to be over 18 years old. Special pedagogues with a higher or a high level of education worked in the classes for children with physical impairments and mental retardation. Assignments for preschool teachers or nursery nurses were divided, in other words the preschool teachers implemented the educational part of the programme, while the nursery nurses would assist (in activities) and were responsible for caring for children (especially in the early morning or the afternoon). Today The *Preschool Law* defines the obligatory educational level of preschool teachers and their assistants. The term "nursery nurses" was abolished as it referred to professional workers who didn't have an appropriate education and did not fully assist the preschool teacher in preschool care and education. The term "preschool teacher's assistant" was introduced, for a helper should

be adequately educated and who works with the preschool teacher throughout all of the activities of the preschool curriculum and in both age groups of children. The preschool teacher should have a higher education degree in preschool education or a university degree from some other field (pedagogy, art, humanities or social sciences) together with an added programme of preschool education. The preschool teacher's assistants should have an upper secondary school level in the field of preschool education or a general secondary school level. They should also have finished a course in preschool education. The *Preschool Law* also requires that qualified preschool teachers and their assistants work in 1st and 2nd age periods classes. Counsellors should have a university degree in psychology, pedagogy, social work, social pedagogy and special pedagogy. They should collaborate with professional workers in preschools in the process of assessment, identification and resolving problems concerning e.g. children's behaviour, special needs, interaction with parents. They should also provide counselling services for parents, considering the needs of their children and interaction with preschool teachers; organize different lectures on specific topics for parents and professional workers. In developmental classes, in which there are children with special needs, a particular pedagogue with a high level of education can implement an adopted programme.

The working-hours of preschool teachers remained the same, i.e., 30 hours' direct work with children a week, while those of the (previously 'nursery nurses) preschool teachers' assistants has fallen from 42 hours a week to 35 hours a week. The wages of preschool teachers, (previously nursery nurses) preschool teachers' assistants and other professional workers and counsellors are, since the inclusion of day care centres within the Ministry of Education and Sport, governed by a collective contract, which determines payment grades at a national level, similarly to the teachers employed in compulsory and secondary schools. School teachers are educated in a university programme in primary teaching and cannot work as preschool teachers in preschools. According to their formal education school teachers who complete the university programme have a relatively higher salary than preschool teachers, relative to the professionally oriented higher education. Their amount of working hours, including the direct work with children, is the same. Both school teachers and preschool teachers have the right to a permanent professional training, regulated by the *Collective contract for education in the Republic of Slovenia*.

Before the reform, the legal inspection of preschools was carried out by municipal administrative bodies responsible for matters of education and care for preschool children, while the pedagogical supervision was carried out under a special law through the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia. Professionals employed at the board were consultants as well as being responsible for carrying out the pedagogical supervision. After the reform, the inspection services were taken over by an independent body composed by the Ministry of Education and Sport, called the Inspectorate of Education and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia, which also covers the field of preschool education. Its inspectors carry out regular and irregular checks on the legality of operations (such as the implementation of activities in accordance with the constitution of provision; meeting standards and normatives for the implementation of preschool education in preschools; the adequacy of the working plan; exercising children's rights

and obligations), while the Council of experts for general education of the Republic of Slovenia, as proposed by the inspectorate, confirms the list of independent experts responsible for carrying out the pedagogical supervision. The pedagogical supervision is defined by the *Law on school inspection*, which states that the experts should begin the process of pedagogical supervision if the circumstances of a certain case suggest:

- the violation of the rights of children and participants in the educational process to achieve certain standards of knowledge, as defined by law or other documents, which enable them to develop or to be included into the following levels of education;
- the violation of the rights of a professional worker to work autonomously;
- that the professional worker does not work objectively, critically and does not implement the principle of plurality.

In the second and third cases, the principal inspector should define two experts for the pedagogical supervision in order to prepare two separate, written opinions. The experts for the pedagogical supervision should have at least a higher education and ten years of working experience in pedagogical, counselling or developmental-research field. They should have the academic title of research counsellor, assistant professor or professor.

Since the adoption of the new *Preschool Law*, preschools are established and financed by the municipalities. Preschools implement programmes of different length, i.e., full-day programmes (lasting from 6 to 9 hours, in the morning, the afternoon, throughout a whole day or in parts); half-day programmes (lasting from 4 to 6 hours, also in the morning, in the afternoon, throughout a day or in parts) and shorter programmes (lasting from 240 to 720 hours a year). The preschool programmes can also be organized in a childminder family (it can be carried out at the home of the preschool teachers or her assistant, employed at a preschool institution, or at the home of a private preschool teacher). Preschool institutions can organize preschool education at the home of a child, who due to illness cannot be included in a preschool. A specific structure for private preschools and schools was created and on that basis, the creation of private preschools was legally regulated for the first time in Slovenia by the *Preschool Law* (1996).

The reform, which was carried out in the middle of the 90s (the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, 1995) has brought some conceptual changes also in the field of education of children with special needs. It is because of the conceptual changes that the term “children with physical impairments and mental retardation” was replaced by the term “children with special needs” (consistent with the *Preschool Law* and the *Law on children with special needs*, the group of children with special needs is defined as children with delays in their intellectual development, blind and visually impaired children, deaf children and children hard of hearing, children with language delays, movement impaired children, and children suffering from long-term sickness). In 2000, the *Law on guidance for children with special needs* was adopted, replacing the then current *Law on education and training for children and adolescents with physical impairments and mental retardation* (1976). The new law provided some innovations, important for preschool education, as it defined the guidance of children with special

needs within an adapted programme, and in relation to the curriculum, while including added professional assistance throughout. Such adapted programmes were destined for mainstream preschool, which means that children who are, by the decision of the Commission for guidance of children with special needs, guided into this form of programme (typically a maximum of three children per class), receive appropriate professional assistance, either as a group or individually for 3 to 5 hours per week. Additional professional assistance is provided by experts such as psychologists, pedagogues, social pedagogues, or special pedagogues, depending on the child's specific need, hindrance or delay. Children for whom the Commission for guidance of children with special needs concludes that it is professionally justified to do so, are included into the adapted programme of preschool education, in a separate class (developmental class), typically within the preschool, in which all the other children are included. In this way, children with special needs who attend developmental classes have the opportunity to be included occasionally into mainstream classes of regular preschool education. The system of preschool education has thus become much more inclusive, while a significantly larger share of children with special needs are included into mainstream classes than into adapted programmes, which are implemented in special classes (developmental classes). The entire process of guidance (the operation of the Commission for guidance of children with special needs) was transferred from the Centres for Social Work to the school managements, or later to the special units of the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia. The commission now also includes preschool teachers, who have the best knowledge of work in preschool; a special emphasis is put on collaboration with parents, both during the first phase and later in the preparation of individualised programmes for integrated children.

The different structures leading to successful cooperation between the various actors who contribute to a better quality of life for preschool children and their parents have been preserved. Within major cities, the Counselling centres for children, adolescents and families continue to operate; various civil associations offer, for example, care for children in the evening; professional lectures and workshops for parents of preschool children (e.g. Sesame) are provided; several associations help to acquire funds, which enable socially deprived children to, for example, go on holiday to the seaside (the municipal Connections of friends of the youth). Additionally, the legislation (the *Preschool Law*, 1996) provided for the option of occasional care for children at their homes, carried out by preschool teachers or their assistants, employed in preschools or external professionals, who have at least a secondary education or five years' experience in preschool education. The preschools keep records of persons who occasionally care for children at their homes, thus facilitating parents' search for appropriate persons to care for their children outside a preschool's opening hours. The preschool can organize the preschool education at home for children who, due to illness, cannot attend preschool.

Oppositions to the reform

In the initial stages of the reforms, several headmasters and preschool teachers, united under the Community of childcare in Slovenia, and some individual experts expressed fears that the day care centres included under the Ministry of Education and Sport, in

relation to some of the reform proposals, especially the abolishment of the pre-primary school and earlier entry into compulsory schooling (formerly at 7 years of age, and after the reform at 6 years of age), would experience schoolification. The experts preparing the reforms responded to such concerns with certain systemic solutions. For example, the *Law on primary school* (1996) states that preschool and school teachers teach together in the 1st grade of compulsory school as a team for the majority of teaching hours; the defined standards and normatives "protect" the specificity of the preschools compared to schools (e.g., the number of children in classes, preschool teachers and their assistants working together, the specific education of professional workers in preschools), and the later reform of content (the preschool curriculum is different from the curriculum for specific subjects within the compulsory school), according to structure, goals and activities proposed.

7. Consequences of integration

The integrating concept of care and education

Slovenian day care centres have had an integrated organizational structure ever since the period, in 1990, in which they were first included in the Republic Committee for Health and Social care, and then in the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs, but the conceptual preparation of integrated preschools in terms of system and content began only after the inclusion of preschools within the Ministry of Education and Sport, in 1993. The reform carried out in the second half of the nineties began with the preparation of the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* and continued with the preparation of the *Preschool Law on the organization and financing of education* (which regulates the conditions for provision and determines ways of managing and financing in all areas of education), the *Preschool Law* (1996), followed by the *Preschool Curriculum* (1999). Solutions provided in such documents overcame the internal systemic and substantive division of preschools into two parts: care was predominantly provided for infants and toddlers, and for children until entry into compulsory schooling, where education was then predominantly provided. The programme or curriculum was also divided, concerning the care of children in one part, and their education on the other. The preparation of the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, the *Preschool Law* and the *Preschool Curriculum* is based on the comparative analysis of various indicators of high-quality preschools in countries with a long tradition of an integrated approach to preschool care and education, e.g. in the Scandinavian countries, or New Zealand, as well as on the analysis of weaknesses, vulnerabilities and the positive aspects of Slovenian preschools.

Extension of the values and principles of the public educational system to all ECCE services

The principles and values of public preschool education, defined in the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, the *Preschool Law* and the *Preschool Curriculum* were gradually extended (during the three-year, gradual introduction) to all public preschools. The *Preschool Law* defines that preschool should be available to all children and directs municipalities to provide for preschool care by opening additional classes or units (in cases where preschools cannot meet the demands of parents for the preschool education of their children). In these cases, when the capacities of a separate preschool are full, municipalities can establish new preschool classes or grant concessions for the implementation of the public programme of preschool education to the interested parties (e.g. childminder family, an existing preschool). Parents are also provided with access to a common base, informing them of free spaces in all the preschools in Slovenia, on the internet homepage of the Ministry of Education, which is regularly updated. The *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* emphasizes that the state should provide a network of high quality public preschools, available to all children and ensuring a child's optimal development, while considering the characteristics of each developmental period, individual differences amongst children in connection to differences in their developmental progress, as well as the characteristics of a child's family environment. Legally defined conditions or structural indicators, which are important for the quality of the preschool: the educational level of the professional workers, the ratio between the number of children and adults in a class, the number of children in a class, are required for all public preschools as well as for private ones. Public and private schools also have a common service. The number of private preschools in Slovenia is relatively low (in the school year 2007/2008 there were 17 private preschools in Slovenia (the majority of them were Catholic preschools, others were preschools with special pedagogical principles) and 7 preschools granted with a concession by the municipalities for the implementation of the public preschool programme), while their quality at the structural level is comparable to the quality of public preschools. Private preschools do not enjoy a special status of providing high quality preschool education, in which only children from well-situated parents are included. The relatively high level of education amongst professional workers and the high quality of other structural indicators is typical of all public preschools, enabling preschool teachers and their assistants to achieve the high quality also on a performance level. Because the *Preschool Curriculum* is prepared as an open and unstructured national document, a high degree of autonomy and accountability in the process of implementing the curriculum is provided to professional workers in preschools. Given that the share of the price of the programme, paid by parents, depends on the monthly income per family member, compared with an average salary per employee of the Republic of Slovenia and on the property of the family, and that for some children the cost of the preschool's programme is fully covered by the municipalities (e.g. children from low-income families), the quality of public preschool education is also available to children from families of lower socio-economic status. Parents with higher incomes or assets do not have an advantage over the inclusion of their children into preschools. 85% of funds is provided for each child enrolled in a public preschool by the local community for wages and material costs, and is also granted

for each child enrolled in a private preschool, while the highest payment by parents in private preschools is limited.

The conditions or structural indicators of the preschool's quality regulated by the *Preschool Law* are comparable to those in countries with high-quality preschools, providing possibilities for the achievement of high quality work on a performance level, and thus the well-being of children and a high degree of their involvement in various activities and learning. The well-being of children, their development and learning, are provided at several levels in preschools, both on a material level (e.g. appropriate playroom size, suitable play and other teaching materials, appropriate diet for toddlers and children of different ages), as well as at the level of the preschool teacher's direct work with children in the class and her or his cooperation with parents. All parents can have the option to introduce their child into a preschool gradually, so that they extend the time which their child spends daily in the preschool little by little, depending on the speed of the child's adjustment to the new environment. While introducing their children into the preschool setting gradually, parents can also be present during the various activities in a preschool. In the process of self-evaluation (conducted at the level of the preschool teachers, their assistants, and parents), the well-being of children and the encouragement of a child's development and learning are defined as special and important areas of the quality of preschool education. In most cases a preschool teacher and her assistant accompany the same class of children within a certain age period that is from 1 to 3 years old and from 3 to 6 years old.

Impacts on important matters for young children and families

The *Law on preschool education and care* (1980) stated that preschool care and education was, in terms of the guaranteed programme (the preparation of children for compulsory schooling one year before entering primary school for 25 hours a week; the education and care of children with special needs), free for children's parents. The remaining costs of preschool care and education were paid by the parents in a way similar to the one following the implementation of the *Preschool Law*, when the *Regulations on payments for parents of the preschool programmes* (1996) were prepared, defining the share of the price for the preschool programme that should be paid by the parents. According to such regulations, payment by parents is defined by the municipality on the basis of the *Scale of the classes, defining the payment for the preschool programmes*, which classifies the parents into eight payment classes, taking into account the monthly income per family member, compared with an average salary per employee in the Republic of Slovenia, and considering the family's property. With regards placement in a specific class, the parents pay from 0 to 80% of the price for the preschool programme. Parents who receive the allowance under the regulations on social security are exempt from payment (approximately 8% of parents). The average payment of the costs of preschools contributed by parents is approximately 29%. The cost of preschool includes the cost of professional work, the cost of the material and services and the cost of nutrition, but not the cost of investments and the maintenance of investments. The changes to the *Preschool Law*, of 2008, brought two novelties concerning parents' payment:

- preschools are granted a budget from the national budget to co-finance payment by parents who have more than one child enrolled in preschool;
- 50% of parents' payments will gradually (till the year 2014) be granted from the national budget for children of the 2nd age group, (in 2010 for five-year-old children, in 2012 for four-year-old children and in 2014 for three-year old children).

Already since the sixties, a highly diversified network of day care centres has been established in Slovenia, including units or classes in rural environments and demographically remote or endangered areas. This network has ensured a relatively easy accessibility to day care centres. The increase in the proportion of children included in preschools over the last ten years (both children from the first and the second age period) probably also reflects the positive attitude of parents towards the enrolment of children in preschool and increasingly widespread understanding of the importance of preschool education for a child's development and learning. At the time of the reforms of the mid 90s and later, the experts who participated in the preparation of the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* and later in the preparation of the *Preschool Curriculum* along with the professional workers of the Ministry of Education and Sport and the consultants from the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia, organized expert meetings, not only at a national, but also at a local level. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce new concepts of preschool education to professional workers in preschools and parents along with the results of the studies showing the importance of early enrolment of children into a high quality preschool, which represents the first level in the whole education system.

Impacts on important education subsystems

The *Preschool Law* (1996) and the relevant statutory acts have contributed to a more transparent funding of preschools. In Slovenia, approximately 6% of GDP is intended for the entire educational system, while 0.65% of the national GDP and an additional 0.01% of the national budget for investment is intended for preschool education (the share of GDP was, in the period from 2001 to 2007, similar or stable, while for the period before 2001 data was not collected in a way in which to allow for comparisons). Because the entire system of education (from preschools through to adult education) is under the jurisdiction of the same ministry, there has been greater transparency in the preparation of the budget for education as well as in the allocation of money for each level of education.

The *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* emphasizes that the quality education and permanent professional training of professional workers in preschools represent a fundamental condition for their professionalism, autonomy and accountability. At the time that the *Preschool Curriculum* was gradually introduced into preschools and even later, permanent professional training for preschool teachers and their assistants was prepared and carried out by different faculties, institutes and the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia.

Inspection control of preschools is performed, unlike in the period before the

implementation of the new legislation, by the Inspectorate of Education and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia, an independent body within the Ministry of Education and Sport. Before that, the inspection and advisory service were united under the same institution (the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia). The advisory service for preschool operates within the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia, the Department of preschool education, where several advisors are employed at different organizational units of the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia within various geographical regions of the country. The advisors provide the necessary professional support for professional workers in the process of introducing the new preschool curriculum into preschools. They are also responsible for monitoring the curriculum and the quality of the work in preschools as well as providing assistance to the professional workers in preschools in resolving professional issues. Professional workers from several preschools of a certain geographical region and their advisors meet regularly in organized study groups, where they discuss current problems. Preschools are organized into networks of preschools, in which the professional workers of a certain geographical region can meet and oversee the implementation of innovations on the level of preschool education.

Before the enforcement of the *Law on the protection of personal data* (1990), followed by the *Preschool Law*, preschools were able to collect information on the education of parents whose children were attending the preschool. On the basis of the *Law on the protection of personal data* the *Preschool Law* defined the collection of personal data which can be collected by preschools and kindergartens, and also as the method of data collection, their storage and protection. They include:

1. The records of children who are registered and enrolled in the preschool institution (name, surname, residence of the child and parents, date of birth, gender, address and telephone number of a person who is available at the time of the child's attendance, specifics concerning the child's health, the knowledge of which is essential for the child's safety and for the appropriate work with the child).
2. The records of parents' payments (the amount of parents' payments, their monthly payments; in order to determine the extent of parents' payment, the local community collects some information on the social situation of parents, namely on their incomes, earnings and assets of family members, number of family members, payments by parents as well as on some other circumstances that could affect the level of payment).
3. The records of children who need counselling or support (family and social history, developmental history, diagnostic procedures, procedures of professional support, expert opinions of other institutions, e.g. Centre for social work, Health care institutions, Counselling centre). This information is collected on parental consent, unless the family environment represents a threat to a child. The counselling and other professional workers are obliged to protect the data as a professional secret.
4. The records of persons who occasionally care for children at their homes.

The preparation of new solutions concerning the concept, the system and the contents of preschool education has encouraged direct cooperation between the professional workers in preschools and schools. After the abolition of the pre-primary school, and now that children of 6 were entering the nine-year compulsory school, the decision was taken that in the first year of compulsory school, a preschool teacher and a primary school teacher should teach at the same time (during the majority of the teaching process). The legislation defined a common professional training for those preschool teachers and primary school teachers who teach in the 1st grade of compulsory school. Only preschool teachers and school teachers who have already worked in preschools and schools before the implementation of the 9-year compulsory schooling, and have been set to teach in the 1st grade of the primary school, can be included in the common professional training. The appropriate topics and knowledge needed for teaching in the 1st grade of compulsory school are included in the programmes of formal education (a higher education degree in preschool education for preschool teachers and a university degree in class teaching), after the implementation of the 9-year compulsory school. A preschool teacher with the required professional training can only teach in the 1st grade of compulsory school, while both professional workers, the school and the preschool teacher, have an equal role in the teaching process. The formal assessment of children's school readiness, which was defined by the *Law on primary school* of 1980, as a mandatory for younger children (aged 6 years old) and optional for school children (aged 7), was abolished by the new *Preschool Law* (1996), which also does not define a mandatory pre-primary school. Because the pre-primary school was abolished and all children, aged 6, enter compulsory school while children younger than 5 years and 8 months cannot be included into the 1st grade of compulsory school, the assessment of school-readiness for younger children is no longer needed. The estimation of a child's school readiness is decided upon only by the initiative of the parents and the health institution which has previously treated the child, or a preschool, but only in agreement with the parents. A team consisting of a psychologist or a pedagogue, a pediatrician, the child's preschool teacher and the teacher of the 1st grade of compulsory school in which the child will be enrolled, collaborates in the estimation of the child's readiness for school. The cooperation between preschools and schools is particularly noticeable in smaller towns, where they are often situated close together. School children often visit the preschool children and prepare various activities for them, for example puppet shows or dancing. They organize different celebrations jointly and often share common rooms and areas, for example gymnasiums, or the children's playground. If the preschool is organized within the primary school (preschool at school), the preschool and school also share a common counselling service and some other areas, such as corridors or kitchen. There are 193 preschools at school in Slovenia, in which 20% of children attending preschools are included. With this type of structure, preschool and school children of the first triad of compulsory schooling have the opportunities to meet more frequently and to collaborate. Preschools at schools are organized in such a way that they share the same headmaster while employing their own pedagogical leaders, who are responsible for the pedagogical work or the contents of work in the preschools. With the abolishment of the pre-primary school and mainly because children now enter 1st grade of compulsory school at 6 years of age, some approaches and work methods used by the preschool teachers with children in preschools have become more frequently used in the 1st grade and the first triad of compulsory

school (e.g. the introduction of descriptive grading in the first three grades, the use of play as a method of early learning, working in small groups, co-operational learning, development of pre-reading and pre-writing skills). The nine-year compulsory school is divided into three periods (triads), each of them made up of 3 grades. In the first three grades, a special emphasis is put on the individual differences of a child's development and learning, thus enabling all children to achieve the standards of knowledge at the end of the first triad in their own time. The opposite has not occurred, i.e., there has been no schoolification of preschools nor have preschools taken on work methods specific to schools. Preschools have preserved the specificity of their domain, both in terms of the system and the curricular level.

Impacts on programme quality

The new conceptual bases have presented a shift from older biologicistic and normative views of a child's development to the latest theoretical knowledge, based on the sociocultural theories of a child's development and learning as well as a shift from the understanding of preschool care and education as a preparation for school to its understanding as capable of preparing children for learning. The *Preschool Curriculum* was adopted in 1999 as a replacement for the *Programme for preschool education and care*. The concept of a curriculum was introduced as it is broader and more complex than the concept of a programme. It also implicates a shift from the traditional emphasis on content to an emphasis on the process of preschool education as well as the shift to a complexity of interactions and experiences from which a child can learn within a preschool setting. The concept of curriculum also includes a broad field of the hidden curriculum. The *Preschool Curriculum* is established as an open and flexible national document, intended for children aged 1 to 6 years. The introduction defines the basic principles and goals of preschool education, followed by the chapter *Child in preschool*, which describes the characteristics of a child's development and learning during the preschool period, the routine of activities in preschool, social learning, space as an element of the preschool curriculum and cooperation with parents. The central part of the *Preschool Curriculum* introduces the six areas of activities: movement, language, art, science, society and mathematics. The goals, examples of activities and the role of adults are defined for each goal. The goals are defined together for children of the first (aged 1 to 3 years) and second age period (aged 3 to 6 years) within all six areas; while the examples of different activities are defined separately for the first and the second age period. Some of the activities, such as moral development, health care and safety, go beyond an individual area and are interwoven in all six areas, representing a way of living and working in preschool. A whole logic of integrated preschool is thus also established on the curricular level, taking into account the developmental characteristics specific for toddlers compared to children in early childhood. Special emphasis is put on the main principles for exercising the goals of the preschool curriculum, which have contributed to the re-conceptualisation of preschool education in preschools:

- the principle of democracy and pluralism (different programmes; different theoretical approaches; different methods and ways of working with preschool children in preschool settings; flexibility in the organization of living and working

- in preschools considering the space and time organization; diverse selection of content and activities);
- the principle of democracy and pluralism in public preschools does not refer to the implementation of different pedagogical principles (e.g. Steiner or Montessori), which can be implemented in the private preschools (the Waldorf preschools); the principles of curriculum openness, autonomy and professional responsibility of preschool and professional workers (the curriculum allows for the enforcement of the characteristics of a certain environment, children and parents);
 - the principle of equal opportunities and consideration of diversity amongst children (respecting the characteristics of different developmental periods; respecting individual differences in development and learning; respecting the differences between groups, e.g. regarding gender, social and cultural origins, the global outlook);
 - the principle of a provision of choice and otherness (different programmes from which parents can choose; the choice between different activities in preschool, which may not mean the choice between cooperation and non-participation or directed activity and free play);
 - the principle of respecting one's privacy and intimacy (an organization of space and time which allows the child to withdraw from the group routine and to express his/her individuality during different preschool activities);
 - the principle of balance (the balance between a child's development and curriculum; between different aspects of the child's physical and mental development and between different activities in specific areas);
 - the principle of a professional justification of the curriculum (in terms of the specific characteristics of development and learning of preschool children; in terms of scientific knowledge, which defines the areas of the curriculum; in terms of knowledge of educational sciences and cultural studies);
 - the principles of horizontal and vertical linkage (linking the various areas of activity in preschool; cooperation between the family and preschool as well as between preschool and primary school);
 - the principle of cooperation with parents (written and oral notices of the various programmes of preschool should be publicly available to parents; parents have the right to introduce their children into preschool programmes gradually; parents have a right to a continuous and real-time exchange of information; while cooperating with parents, the private domain of families, their culture, language, life philosophy, values, views and traditions should be respected);
 - the principle of critical evaluation;
 - the principle of a developmental-process approach.

In the various areas of activities within the preschool curriculum, in addition to the objectives and examples of different activities, the role of parents is especially emphasized: their responsiveness; ability to communicate and sensitivity; continuous observation, monitoring and encouraging individual children to cooperate; involvement (at least indirectly) in various children's activities; creating a supportive, symbolically

rich and interesting environment for children; a constant concern for the safety and welfare of children.

During the process of reform of content and preparation of the curriculum, special attention was paid to the principle of equal opportunities and consideration of diversity amongst children. To ensure equal conditions for the optimal development of each child while taking into account individual differences in development and learning, additional instruction and content were prepared for children with special needs in preschool, for children of nationally mixed areas and for Roma children, and were, similarly to the *Preschool Curriculum*, adopted by the highest professional body, i.e., the government's Council of experts for general education of the Republic of Slovenia.

For children with special needs who are included in mainstream preschool programmes, *Instructions for working with children in preschool programme with adjusted implementation and additional professional support* were introduced, describing the necessary adjustments for certain groups of children with special needs, allowing children a successful inclusion and participation in a preschool class. Some recommendations for preschool teachers and additional professional workers who occasionally work with children, were also presented. For children with special needs in developmental classes, the *Curriculum for the adjusted programme for preschool children with special needs* was prepared, derived from the *Preschool Curriculum* but emphasizing certain principles of working with children (especially the principle of individuation, and the principle of cooperation with parents). Some goals on certain areas of activities in preschool and the proposed exercises were also adjusted, modified or replaced. For children in preschools of ethnically mixed areas a special document was prepared and adopted, relating to the contents of the preschool education, called *Addition to the preschool curriculum in ethnically mixed areas* (there are ethnically mixed areas in Slovenian Istria and Prekmurje). The established document presents the particularities of models of preschool education for members of the Italian and Hungarian communities, exposing some principles included in the *Preschool Curriculum* and adding several goals in certain areas of activities, especially in the areas of Language, Society and Arts. Special attention was paid to the Roma and their preschool children who, in Slovenia, do not have the status of an indigenous minority. In Slovenia, there are two models for the integration of Roma children into preschools: Roma classes or Roma preschools, in which there are only Roma children of Roma (in Prekmurje and Dolenjska) and the integration of Roma children in classes in which Roma children are not dominant. In Roma classes the *Regulations of normative and occupational conditions for preschool education* determines that in classes of the 1st age period a preschool teacher's assistant should be included when at least 6 children are enrolled, and a second assistant should be present when at least 12 children are enrolled. In classes of the 2nd age period a preschool teacher's assistant should be present when at least 11 children are enrolled and a second assistant should be included, when at least 21 children are enrolled. Following the adoption of the *Preschool Curriculum* an *Addition to preschool curriculum for working with Roma children* was specially prepared and adopted. In particular it highlights some of the principles for the achievement of goals on a practical level of the curriculum, i.e.:

- the principle of the curriculum's openness, autonomy and professional responsibility of preschool and professional workers (choice of content, methods and forms of work at the preschool level and at the level of the preschool class concerning the heterogeneity of Roma culture in Slovenia);
- the principle of equal opportunities and consideration of diversity amongst children as well as the principle of multiculturalism (cross-cultural education, which requires consideration of both cultures, the majority and Roma);
- the principle of cooperation with parents (the importance of preschool for a child's further education should be presented to parents, both before the enrolment of children into preschool and most importantly during the implementation of certain areas of the curriculum);
- the principle of active learning ensuring verbalisation and other forms of expression (Roma children should be included in all activities and especially encouraged and supported in learning in those areas in which they have most difficulties due to cultural and linguistic diversity).

New solutions regarding the content of preschool education (*Preschool Curriculum* along with the subsequent adjustments and additions) also demanded new and additional knowledge for professional workers in preschools. All preschool teachers were obliged to enroll in and successfully complete an in-service training programme of 32 hours. The training included two modules, namely Module 1: Development and Learning of preschool children (16 hours) and Module 2: hidden curriculum (16 hours). Upon completion of the training, they received a certificate. The programme was implemented by the Faculty of Arts, Department of Psychology and Educational Research Institute in cooperation with external experts. All preschool teachers who were, like second teachers, teaching in the 1st grade of the 9-year compulsory school, also had to complete an additional training programme. They had to enroll in the *In-service training programme for preschool and school teachers for teaching in the 1st grade of the 9-year compulsory school* lasting 210 hours (the contents related to, e.g. descriptive assessment of knowledge, literacy in the first three grades, psychological characteristics of younger children and special characteristics of teaching in the 1st grade) and after completion of the programme were given a certificate. The programme was implemented by the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Education in Maribor. Preschool teachers also had to further improve their knowledge of working with children with special needs. All the preschool teachers who wished to work with children with special needs who were integrated into regular preschool classes, were required to do an in-service training programme of 16 hours. The program, which included contents on the characteristics of children with special needs as well as methods for working with these children, was implemented by the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, in the Department of Special Pedagogy. After completion of the programme, the preschool teachers received a certificate.

The process of continuous professional development is defined by the *Collective contract for education in the Republic of Slovenia*. It states that professional workers have a right to continuous professional training and development. The institution has to enable and finance at least 5 days a year or 15 days every 3 years for the professional training of all

professional workers who work in positions for which at least a secondary education is demanded. For all other workers, at least 2 days a year or 6 days every 3 years should be enabled or financed for professional training. The permanent, professional development of professional workers was already introduced, in a similar form, before the 1990s reforms.

The professional development of professional workers was also upheld in the process of self-evaluation in preschools. Since the implementation of new solutions regarding the system and content of preschool education within preschools, the focus has been on the internal development of preschools. In the context of developmental and research projects and when taking into account the systemic and curricular solutions in Slovenia, several instruments (grading scales, questionnaires) for determining the quality of work in preschool were designed, along with recommendations for the analysis of data collected, the preparation of quality estimations, and the search for the mechanisms and approaches that would ensure such quality. Self-evaluation is a process which is gradually coming to preschools through the preschool network, which is funded by European Social Funds.

The ratio between the number of children and adults in the preschool class was determined by the *Preschool Law* (1996). In the classes of the first age period the preschool teacher and her assistants work together for 6 hours a day (the maximum number of children in the class is 14), while in the classes of the 2nd age period the preschool teacher and her assistant work together for 4 hours a day (the maximum number of children in the class is 24).

In the *Preschool Curriculum* special emphasis was placed on the re-conceptualisation of the space as an important element of the curriculum. In this regard several principles have been defined:

- organizing a healthy, safe and pleasant space (both internal and outdoor spaces);
- ensuring privacy and intimacy;
- providing the flexibility and stimulativity of the space (the organization of the playrooms should vary depending on the age of children and on the activities taking place in the playroom).

There is a written recommendation that the playroom should be equipped with different screens, improvised walls, racks, low cabinets and shelves, which can be used to divide the space into several smaller parts or corners. There should also be specific corners of the playrooms offering different toys and unstructured play material, books and statuary products, all within the reach of children's hands. In corners containing water, sand and other materials for designing and creating, protective clothing should be available to children. There are two aspects of the space in the *Preschool Curriculum* that are of a special importance, namely the quantity (the statutory act defines that there should be at least 3 m² of an internal surface area per child, which is significantly more than before the new legislation) and the quality of space (e.g. the diversity of internal spaces, the access to outdoor spaces).

The principle of balance included in the *Preschool Curriculum* stressed that the objectives should be pursued in such a way that there is a connection between the various aspects of a child's physical and mental development. It should also be considered that toddlers and children in early childhood perceive and understand the world in its complexity which is why it is important to encourage all of the areas of a child's development with appropriate activities. The novelty of the curriculum relates to the integration of different areas, i.e., when a preschool teacher pursues defined objectives with the chosen contents and activities in several different areas of activity (e.g. language, movement, society, art). Certain activities, for example communication or health care, are specifically described as the activities which go beyond a certain area, and thus have an important role throughout the time the child spends in preschool. The new solutions regarding the system and contents of preschool education attempted to improve the previous, relatively sharp division of preschool care and education, which had been, for example, designed as a highly defined agenda of preschool activities (the duration of each activity as well as the role of a nursery nurse and a preschool teacher were defined). The division of care and education was replaced with the introduction of the concept of a curriculum, emphasizing the process of preschool education and the whole context of children's daily life in preschool. A special chapter of the *Preschool Curriculum*, entitled *Resting, eating and other everyday activities as an element of the curriculum* stresses that the communications and interactions with children, the use of praise and criticism, establishing rules for controlling the time and the space, which take place throughout the entire length of a child's time in preschool, are as important as the recorded goals in different areas of activities (and related planned and structured activities). Those are the activities during which the hidden curriculum can be most exercised - such hidden forms of education may be even more effective than the direct activities. Some written recommendations are set for the organization of a daily routine in the preschool (e.g. to limit the waiting time and inactivity, to organize rest periods with regards to the individual needs of children, to make the transition between different activities more gradual), which represents an appropriate context for the different educational activities (not only related to care), and is equally important as the planned and guided activities within different areas of the curriculum. Overcoming the division of preschool care and education is also reflected in the organization of working hours for professional workers in preschools: the preschool teachers and their assistants are usually present both during the daily routine and the planned activities, whether together or separately (there are no morning hours, "reserved" for the nursery nurse; intermediate morning hours, during which the preschool teacher works with the children on planned activities; and afternoon hours, when the nursery nurse is once again present during routine activities). The organization of the work within each preschool is defined by its head teachers.

Impacts on the achievement of wider social objectives

The *Preschool Curriculum* also includes the principle of horizontal and vertical linkage - the latter refers to connections with the school and other institutions involved in the work with children and families (such as Counselling centres, Board of health care, various civil associations). Some municipalities organize a school for parents, which takes place

in the preschool during the afternoon. Different experts (e.g. child psychologists, pedagogues, pediatricians) conduct lectures and workshops for parents on subjects that are interesting and important to parents. During lectures and workshops, some preschools also provide free care for the children of parents involved.

Statistical data on the health of children in preschool are not available. Otherwise, the data show that the number of children, especially toddlers, in preschool is increasing. This may indirectly indicate that preschools represent an environment which promotes the well-being of children and also represents a place in which children can spend a relatively large number of hours per day (on average about 8 hours) in a healthy and secure environment. Before enrolling their children into preschool, parents are obliged to bring a certificate from the child's pediatrician providing information on the toddler / child's vaccination and health report as well as on any potential health problems or special characteristics. In preschools there is special concern over toddlers' / children's nutrition. Toddlers and children are provided with several meals, i.e., breakfast, morning and afternoon brunch and a warm lunch (or dinner for afternoon programmes). Between meals children are served with fruit and drink. Preschools also employ health and hygiene regime advisers, who are responsible for assembling modern, quality menus, advising and monitoring hygiene and safety at work. Nutrition is provided separately for toddlers and older preschool children, while preschools provide special menus for children who, due to various health problems (such as allergies, diabetes) need an adapted diet. The Board of Health care in the Republic of Slovenia organizes professional training on health care for preschool teachers and lectures for parents of children. The experts at the Board of Health care also prepare a variety of written information in the form of pamphlets or leaflets to inform parents about preventive activities and appropriate care for their infants/ toddlers. The leaflets and pamphlets are available for preschool parents free of charge. The ongoing projects *Healthy preschool* (under the auspices of the Board of Health care of the Republic of Slovenia) takes place in a large number of preschools. *Healthy preschools* carry out different activities aimed at encouraging children, parents and professional workers to make the everyday choices for a healthy lifestyle in all areas which affect the quality of health (movement, nutrition, prevention of the spread of infectious diseases, avoiding harmful substances).

The data suggest that there is a trend towards the extension of opening hours in preschools, as there is a growing share of parents working according to European working hours. At the start of the school year a survey is distributed to parents at preschools, giving them the opportunity to say at what time they want to bring a child to the preschool and at what time they want to take him or her home. According to the data collected, the preschool then tries to follow the needs of parents regarding the length of time that each child can spend in the preschool or when defining opening hours. There is also a growing number of full-time programmes carried out in the afternoon, lasting till 10pm, which are intended for children of parents who finish work late in the evening.

The share of male professional workers in preschools is slowly increasing: in the school year 1990/1991 there were 0.9% male professional workers, in the school year 1999/2000 0.8%, while in the school year 2007/2008 they were 1.4%. In the last decade there has

also been a trend of a greater number of men enrolling in the Programme for preschool education and care, which may be partly connected to the fact that it is the case of a higher education programme, enabling them to work in preschool as well as to continue their education in several other university programmes.

The conceptual basis, defined in the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* along with the principles and objectives of the *Preschool Curriculum* specifically emphasize multiculturalism and the consideration of equal opportunities and diversity amongst children. Both at the levels of research, development and concrete work in preschools, there are ongoing projects in which experts and preschool teachers systematically get involved with different groups of children, for example with children from families with less favourable social, cultural and economic conditions; with children from different cultural backgrounds; with children with special needs (particularly in the direction of greater, but professionally justified integration of children with special needs); with Roma children included in regular preschool classes. Different systemic solutions supporting the inclusion of marginal or different groups of children in preschool have been introduced, e.g. placement in lower payment classes reducing payment for parents; free preschool for children of parents with low incomes; reduced normatives concerning the highest number of children in preschool classes in which there are Roma children whereby an additional professional worker should present – a Roma assistant; a reduced normative also applying to the highest number of children in which children with special needs are included. As regards content, it concerns finding ways of implementing the principle of equal opportunities, consideration for differences amongst children, the principle of multiculturalism and the implementation of specific additions to the curriculum for Roma and bilingual children in all areas of activities for the *Preschool Curriculum*. The Roma classes are financed by municipal funds, state funds and parents. Higher costs, due to more favourable normatives are based on normatives and standards, covered by state funds.

Formal evaluation of the changeover

The social and educational success of children in preschools is very important for the further development of preschools and has been studied for several years in different projects and research. In one study funded by the *Public agency for research in the Republic of Slovenia*, researchers examined the effect of a child's enrolment into preschool and his/her school readiness. The study included a randomly selected a group of children aged six who were in the 1st grade of one of the compulsory schools in different geographical regions of Slovenia. 70% of children attended preschool from 1 to 3 years before entering the compulsory school while 30% of children did not. The authors established that children who entered preschool at different ages or did not attend preschool prior to entering the compulsory school expressed a comparable level of school readiness. School readiness included estimations of a child's language comprehension, reasoning, graphomotor skills, and comprehension of quantities. A child's enrollment in preschool had an effect on his/her school readiness only in relation to his/her parents' education. The results showed a positive effect of preschool on the school readiness of children whose parents had a low level of education. In the group of six year old children

who did not attend preschool prior to entering compulsory school, the differences in school readiness between children of parents with high or low levels of education were statistically significant. Within this group, children of parents with a low educational level who did not attend preschool achieved significantly lower results on the *Test of School Readiness* than children of parents with a high level of education. In contrast, the parental educational level did not prove to be an important factor for school readiness amongst children who attended preschool for five years. The findings suggest that enrollment in a preschool institution has a positive effect on school readiness for children whose parents have a low level of education as it at least partially compensates for the shortcomings of a child's development which may be related to a less supportive family environment. Enrollment in preschool does not represent an important factor of school readiness for those children whose parents have a high level of education and often provide a more supportive and often higher quality of home environment for their children.

New proposals, on both a systemic and curricular level, were gradually introduced from 1999 to 2001. Since 2001, all preschools use the *Preschool Curriculum*. At a national level, two approaches to the evaluation of systematic and curricular solutions were introduced, namely the monitoring of the implementation of the *Preschool Curriculum* and the external evaluation. The advisors for preschool education, employed by the Board of Education of the Republic of Slovenia, carried out such monitoring in preschools. Using different approaches (by observing and recording the performance of different activities in preschool classes; by employing semi-structured interviews with headmasters on the operation of the preschool as a whole; by introducing questionnaires which were aimed at different target groups: preschool teachers and their assistants, counsellors, parents). During the monitoring, the advisors prepared semi-annual and annual reports, which they also presented to the Ministry of Education and other responsible institutions. The findings collected during the monitoring were also forwarded to the actual preschools, which had already introduced the new proposals and to those which were intending to do so at a later date. The findings were also important for the preparation of subject matter for the permanent professional training.

The external evaluation was held under the auspices of the National Commission for the implementation and monitoring of the new proposals and programmes of education. The *Basis for curriculum renovation* (1996), which was prepared by the National curriculum council of the Republic of Slovenia before the beginning of the curricular renovation, states that the achievement of the objectives of curricular renovation should be verifiable and measurable. The members of the National Commission for the implementation and monitoring of the new proposals and programmes of education, who were well established experts working in various fields of education, as well as experts on research methodology, were appointed by the Minister of Education in 1999. In the *Basis for evaluation of the curricular renovation in education in the Republic of Slovenia* (1999) the National Commission stated that the evaluation should be carried out through evaluation studies, led and carried out by researchers from different research institutions. In the field of preschool education several studies were ordered and carried out. The findings showed no major deficiencies in curricular provisions, but pointed out that some

curricular changes, particularly those based on the more recent theoretical basis and associated with implicit theories of preschool teachers on the concepts of childhood and education (e.g. ways of supporting children's language development during all preschool activities) were being implemented rather slowly. The results also suggested that preschool teachers and their assistants need a large amount of additional training and professional help (evaluation study: *Preschool Curriculum: The effects in the area of communication and socio-emotional development*).

The evaluation process has been and still is implemented in the form of targeted research programmes funded by the Agency for research in the Republic of Slovenia and the Ministry of Education and Sport. In the context of the targeted research programmes (in the period from 2002 to 2005) a model for assessing quality in preschools, which takes into account the solutions regarding the system and the contents of preschool education in Slovenian preschool, was designed. Within this model there were three levels considered for assessing quality: structural (organization of work and life in preschool, space and materials), indirect work (cooperation between employees, between preschool and parent, professional development and satisfaction of workers, cooperation with other preschools and institutions), and the process level (curriculum planning, implementing the curriculum, routine activities, children's relationship to the process of curriculum implementation). Questionnaires and rating scales were designed for each level and area of quality, aimed at different target groups (parents, preschool teachers and their assistants, headmasters, counsellors). A semi-structured interview was designed for children from around the four years of age. With the introduction of a system of experts (external experts from different institutions who played the role of critical associates) and by gradually building up a network of preschools involved in the process of self-evaluation, the identification and provision of quality in preschools has become part of the developmental work of most preschools.

The first Slovenian longitudinal study on the effect of preschool on a child's development and learning was carried out in the context of targeted research programmes during the period from 2002 to 2006. The researchers wanted to establish the effect of preschool on different areas of a child's development and learning, e.g. language and intellectual development, development of personality, academic achievement in the 1st grade of compulsory schooling. In addition to the different areas of a child's development, the quality of preschool was assessed once while the quality of the home environment was assessed twice during the duration of the study. The study included approximately 350 children aged 3, approximately half of which entered preschool at the age of 1, and the other half when they were 3 years old. After three years of assessment, when the children were 6 years old and had entered compulsory school, the sample was expanded to a group of children who did not attend preschool prior to entering compulsory school. The authors concluded that children who entered preschool early (between 10 and 15 months of age), expressed less internalizing problems (e.g. they were less depressive, anxious, excluded from the peer group and less dependant on the preschool teacher), had more will-power (e.g. they were more assertive, they wanted to lead a peer group, they were more manipulative and frequently "got what they wanted") and were also more social (they actively searched for friends, had many friends, became involved in social

interaction without major difficulties) than children who entered preschool later (between 31 and 45 months of age). Early (around the first year of a toddler's life) or late (around the third year of a child's life) entry into preschool had a significant effect on children's language development, which was assessed when children were 3, 4, 5, and 6 years old. Early entry into preschool acted as a protective factor for the language development of children whose mothers had a low level of education. The findings suggest that preschool has contributed to reducing the differences in the language competence of children whose mothers have different levels of education. Results in the area of children's pragmatic ability (storytelling) are slightly different: early entrance into preschool did not have a positive effect on a child's storytelling ability as the 6 year old children who entered preschool at the age of three or did not attend preschool before entering compulsory school expressed a higher level of storytelling than children who entered preschool at the age of one and therefore attended preschool for five years. Considering such results, the researchers concluded that there was a potential, through different preschool activities (along with the play and routine activities), to increase the development of a child's pragmatic ability, especially in the first age period (toddlers aged from 1 to 3 years), and that was not yet fully exploited. The quality of preschools on procedure, which was assessed when children were 5 years old, had no significant effect on the language development of five year old children. The established interactions showed that early entrance into a high-quality preschool reduces the differences in language development of children whose parents differ in their level of education. On the basis of the results obtained authors also noted that Slovenian preschools meet the appropriate and, in comparison with European preschools, relatively high quality on a structural level (e.g. the number of children per class, the ratio between the number of children and professional workers, the education of professional workers); while on a procedural level, which refers to the quality of the implementation of the curriculum, the differences between preschools and between different classes within the same preschool are relatively high, irrespective of structurally identical or comparable work conditions.

Conclusions

Slovenian day care centres have had an integrated, organizational structure already ever since 1990, when they were first included in the Republic Committee for Health and Social care, and then in the Ministry of Health, Family and Social affairs. The conceptual preparation of integrated preschools in terms of system and content began after the inclusion of preschools within the Ministry of Education and Sport, in 1993. The reform carried out in the second half of the nineties began with the preparation of the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* and continued with the preparation of the *Preschool Law on the organization and financing of education*, the *Preschool Law* (1996), followed by the *Preschool Curriculum* (1999). The principles and values of public preschool education, defined in the *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*, the *Preschool Law* and the *Preschool Curriculum*, were gradually extended to all public preschools. The quality of preschools on a structural level is regulated by the *Preschool Law* and is comparable to that in countries with high-quality preschools, providing possibilities to achieve a high quality of professional work on a procedural level. The preparation of new solutions concerning the concept, system and content of

preschool education has encouraged direct cooperation between professional workers in preschools and schools. The *Preschool Law* (1996) and the relevant statutory acts have also contributed to a more transparent funding of preschools. The *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* emphasizes that the state should provide a network of high quality public preschools, available to all children and ensuring the possibilities for a child's optimal development, while considering the characteristics of each developmental period, individual differences among children relating to differences in the progress of development, as well the characteristics of a child's family environment. Because the *Preschool Curriculum* is prepared as an open and unstructured national document, a high degree of autonomy and accountability in the process of implementing the curriculum is given to professional workers in preschools. The *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia* emphasizes that the quality of education and permanent professional training of the professional workers in preschools represent a fundamental condition for their professionalism, autonomy and accountability.

Given that the share of the price of the programme paid by parents depends on the monthly income per family member, compared with an average salary per employee in the Republic of Slovenia, and on the family's property, and that for some children the cost of the preschool's programme is fully covered by the municipalities, quality public preschool education is also available to children from families of a lower socio-economic status. For children with special needs in mainstream preschool programmes, *The Instructions for working with children in preschool programme with adjusted implementation and additional professional support* were introduced, describing the necessary adjustments for certain groups of children with special needs, allowing for the successful inclusion and participation of children with special needs in a preschool class. Some recommendations for preschool teachers and additional professional workers who occasionally work with children were also proposed. For children with special needs in developmental classes, the *Curriculum for the adjusted programme for preschool children with special needs* was prepared, derived from the *Preschool Curriculum* but emphasizing certain principles of working with children. For children in preschools in the ethnically mixed areas a special document was prepared and adopted relating to the contents of the preschool education, called *Addition to the preschool curriculum in ethnically mixed areas*.

8. Lessons, implications and remaining challenges

The main lessons and implications

Slovenian preschools are now, with their inclusion in the Ministry of Education and Sport and the subsequent adoption of the *Preschool Law*, bound by statutory acts while the *Preschool Curriculum* has achieved quality on the level of the organization as well as on content comparable to that enjoyed by preschools in countries with a long tradition of integrated preschool (particularly Scandinavian countries). The adoption of the *Addition*

to the preschool curriculum in ethnically mixed areas, the Addition to the preschool curriculum for working with Roma children, the Curriculum for the adjusted programme for preschool children with special needs and the Instructions for working with children in preschool programme with adjusted implementation and additional professional support, enable quality professional work with “special” groups of children, in both 1st and 2nd age period classes. The parallel reform of the entire education system has proved to be professionally justified. It has drawn up some important considerations for solutions regarding both the system and the contents of educational programmes, which can be vertically upgraded and connected, while obtaining the specificities of certain subsystems (we would like to emphasize the apparently successful solution concerning the transition between preschool and the first triad of compulsory schooling, which is based on the modern concepts of childhood and learning). The results of the research, in which the effect of preschool on a child's current and later development and learning was assessed, confirm the important role of the early entrance of toddlers into a quality preschool, while emphasizing the need for further reflection on how to increase the share of children from families with less stimulating social, cultural and economic environments, in preschools.

The main benefits and disadvantages of the integrated system

The integration of preschools overcomes some of the conceptual and substantive division of preschools into services predominantly involving care, and services predominantly involving education, thus following the modern concepts of a toddler's/child's development and learning throughout all developmental periods. The implementation of the curriculum, which defines the principles of openness, flexibility, professional accountability and autonomy of preschools and professional workers and consideration of diversity amongst children, allows for the establishment of an optimal environment for a child's development and learning. It also provides a new understanding of the concept of childhood and learning, replacing preparation for entering school with preparation for learning. In this context, the role of routine activities and the hidden curriculum were redefined, with special emphasis on the reorganization of space in preschools and the possibility of choosing the level of programmes and activities carried out in the preschool. The inclusion of preschools under the Ministry of Education and Sport has allowed for the establishment of important links regarding both system and content between the various levels of education as well as the creation of a system which takes into account the characteristics of individual subsystems which are at the same time linked to the following levels.

The drawback that should be highlighted is the relatively rapid implementation of the *Preschool Curriculum*, which with its open and unstructured form and process-oriented planning, requires high professional qualifications of professional workers in preschools and also a longer period of time for them to acquire new knowledge and become aware of the implicit theories of childhood related to their professional work with children. The characteristics of the curriculum described also require continuous self-evaluation and external evaluation of the quality of work in preschools.

The essential factors for successful integration

The essential factors for a successful integration of preschools include:

- a broad consensus of experts, professional workers in preschools and parents on the reform and development of preschools, otherwise the changes, regarding system and contents are difficult to introduce.
- it should be noted that the "pressures" of the higher educational levels are not transferred to the lower levels or that the effect of preschool is not measured by children's academic achievements in compulsory schooling.
- the implementation of the new proposals, concerning the contents of early education and care, should be brought about gradually, with constant monitoring, continuous consultation and possible additions as well as independent evaluations and targeted research. The new solutions should be supported by the professional training of professional workers in preschools, shifts in educational programmes aimed at training of professional workers who work in preschools, and the preparation and issuing of different supportive professional materials (including theories, didactics and methods of work).

The obstacles hindering the process of introducing change could also be presented as changes in the conditions for the implementation of preschool education, especially those that would result in the rationalisation of work, for example increasing the number of children in classes, or lowering the present level of education for professional workers and counsellors in preschools. Special attention must be paid to the completion of content and of different preschool programmes so that, at implementation level, different programmes do not differ only in their duration.

Further challenges

In the future, special attention should be paid to the inclusion of specific or marginal groups of children in preschools: toddlers/children of parents with a low-level education or from a less favourable social, economic and cultural environment; toddlers/children with special needs, and to the professional guidance of children into the adapted programmes of preschool education and care. There should also be provision for the adapted implementation of the curriculum with additional professional assistance as well as possibilities for transitions between different programmes and the inclusion of Roma children into mainstream classes or preschools. During the preparation of such solutions, system and content should be researched for the described groups of children, with a special emphasis on the important role of a child's linguistic, cognitive and social development.

The continuous development of preschools represents a particular challenge for the future, both at the level of systematic solutions (e.g. different shorter programmes, the compensation programmes) and at the level of curriculum proposals (e.g., the introduction of teaching and learning a foreign language in the preschool period). The broader social context as well as the expectations and views of the parent should be taken

into account. A constant internal and external evaluation of preschools and the evaluation and analysis of possible obstacles in the development of preschool are also of great importance.

The remaining challenge, concerning professional workers in preschool, is the provision of permanent professional development and training, which should “equip” professional workers with knowledge on how to work with special or marginal groups of children as well as to analyse the findings of recent Slovenian and foreign studies in the field of preschool education. A specific challenge is the employment of preschool teachers with a master’s degree or PhD, to work as counsellors for the development of preschool education.

Glossary

Celodnevni program: Full-day programme

Drugo starostno obdobje: Second age period

Jasli: Nursery

Javni vrtec: Public preschool

Oddelek vrtca: Preschool class

Poldnevni program: Half-day programme

Pomočnica vzgojiteljice: Preschool teacher's assistant

Predšolska vzgoja: Preschool education

Prilagojen program predšolske vzgoje za otroke s posebnimi potrebami: The adjusted programme for preschool children with special needs

Program prilagojenega izvajanja z dodatno strokovno pomočjo: Preschool programme with adjusted implementation and additional professional support

Prvo starostno obdobje: First age period

Ravnatelj vrtca: Preschools headmasters

Razvojni oddelek: Developmental class

Krajši program: Shorter programme

Svetovalni delavec: Counsellors

Varstvo in vzgoja: Care and education

Varuška: Nursery nurse

Vrtec: Preschool

Vrtec pri šoli: Preschool at school

Vzgojiteljica: Preschool teacher

Vzgojno varstvena družina: Childminder family

Vzgojno varstvena organizacija: Day care centre

Zasebni vrtec: Private preschool

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