

# Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities

Country Descriptions

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN EUROPE: TACKLING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INEQUALITY

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### SLOVENIA

#### I. General approaches to Education and Care in Early Childhood and definitions of 'risk'

##### 1.1. General approaches

Slovenia has a single structure of preschool education system providing comprehensive education and care (educare) for children aged one to six (more precisely, from the end of maternity leave to the child's entering compulsory school). It is offered mostly by public preschool institutions (vrtci). Preschool education is a part of the whole system of education, thus enabling children to make a smooth transition from preschool to compulsory education. It falls within the competence of the Ministry of Education and Sport. The system is regulated by two key Acts: Organization and Financing of Education (Official Gazette of the Republic Slovenia no. 12/1996; Amendments: 101/1999; 64/2001; 108/2002; 34/2003; 79/2003; 65/2005; 129/2006; 101/2007; 36/2008) Act and Pre-school Institutions Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia no. 12/1996; Amendments: 44/2000; 78/2003; 72/2005; 25/2008). They determine conditions necessary for the establishment of preschool institutions and for their organisation and administration. Public preschool institutions and preschool institutions with concession are obliged to follow the principles and directions of the national Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions (1999).

Preschool education in preschool institutions is conducted according to the following principles:

- the principle of democracy,
- the principle of pluralism,
- the principle of autonomy, professionalism and responsibility of the teachers and others working in preschool institutions,
- the principle of equal opportunities for all children and parents with due consideration given to differences among children,
- the right to choose and to be different,
- the principle of keeping the balance among various aspects of the child's physical and mental development.

The goals of preschool education in preschool institutions are:

- to develop the ability to understand and accept oneself and others,
- to develop the capacity to negotiate, allow for differences and to participate in groups,
- to encourage emotional perception and expression,
- to foster curiosity, inquisitive spirit, imagination and intuition, as well as to develop independent thinking,
- to encourage language development for the efficient and creative use of language and later also reading and writing,
- to encourage artistic expression and the perception of artistic works,
- to transfer knowledge from various fields of science and everyday life,

- to foster motor capacities and skills,
- to encourage independence in hygienic habits and health care.

Due to the high employment level of women in Slovenia, an important motive of many parents enrolling their children at preschool institutions is a need for childcare while they are at work. Beside comprehensive childcare, however, the primary goal of preschool institutions in Slovenia is to ensure each child a quality and development-stimulating learning and socialisation experience. Preschool education is regarded as supplementation to family education. The National Curriculum indicates continuity between preschool institutions and elementary schools. However, it is emphasized that preschool institutions should not become school-like, but rather they should consider the basic developmental characteristics of preschool aged children and preserve the specificities of teaching in that period.

## 1.2. National definitions of risk

### 1.2.1. How is risk defined?

There is no generally valid operational definition of 'risk' at the national level, but only definitions of single concepts existing in specialised literature. Concepts such as **disadvantaged**, **vulnerable** and **minority** groups of population are also in use. Based on the curriculum documents and other regulations of the preschool system, the following groups of preschool children in Slovenia can be regarded as at-risk children:

- children with special needs,
- children from the Italian national minority,
- children from the Hungarian national minority, and
- Roma children.

In the Chapter Special Social Concern of the Government's policy document *Programme for Children and Youth 2006-2016* the policy of special social concern is defined in particular for the following groups of children:

- socially disadvantaged children (children from low-income families),
- children who are victims of neglect and violence,
- children with special needs,
- Roma children,
- unaccompanied children, and
- children with behavioural problems.

The National strategy of inclusion of the immigrant children and youth into education in the Republic of Slovenia (2007) and the National report of Slovenia on the implementation of education and training 2010 (2007) are two recently adopted documents providing grounds for classifying as at-risk children also children of immigrants.

The Slovene Constitution and the legislation on national minorities assure the highest level of protection of rights protection to the Italian and Hungarian national minorities.

The **full-protection model** is in place for those, so-called historical national minorities; it is based on about eighty regulations and the Constitutional provisions (article 11; article 64) <sup>(1)</sup>. Protection of the Roma community is assured on the basis of the **selective extending of provisions**; the most important is article 65 of the Constitution <sup>(2)</sup>, which stipulates the status and special rights of the Roma community. The so-called modern minorities (mostly immigrants from the countries of the former Yugoslavia and also the German ethnic community) are assured the right to preserve their national identity by the **rudimental model**, defined in articles 61 and 62 of the Constitution <sup>(3)</sup>.

The preschool legislation and the national Curriculum follow these fundamental provisions. Two *Supplements* to the curriculum have been adopted for this purpose, which define education specifics in preschool institutions, in which children of the Italian and Hungarian minorities and Roma children are included. The rights of these minorities are also explicated in the interpretation of the curricular principle of equal opportunities. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Sport has made an important step forward by adopting the **National Strategy for social inclusion of migrant children and youth into the system of education in the Republic of Slovenia – 2007** defining goals and measures for social inclusion of immigrant children.

### 1.2.2. Are there aims that explicitly mention at-risk children in your country?

a) National objectives for at-risk preschool children are covered by the Government's *Programme for Children and Youth 2006-2016* of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs. The document defines a set of general objectives for all children and youth aged up to nineteen, and the strategies for their implementation.

The objectives of the education policy are:

- to ensure equal opportunities for education and schooling and to enable all children and young people to have access to education. The state ensures systemic conditions for successful integration of children from socially vulnerable groups into the system of education and training,
- to ensure quality education for mutual tolerance, reduction of inequalities in society and respect for difference and human rights,
- to promote life-long learning at all education levels. All children should have the opportunity to continue education after completing the compulsory schooling.

The objectives of the social policy are:

- to reduce poverty and social exclusion of children and their families and to ensure effective measures which will enable those families to find an appropriate solution as soon as possible,
- to ensure social benefits for the most disadvantaged groups of children and youth and to ensure that the benefits are at an appropriately high level,
- to monitor and analyse overall effects of social benefits on the social situation of families not only at the aggregated, but also at the individual level,

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<sup>(1)</sup> 'The autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities and their members shall be guaranteed the right to use their national symbols freely and, in order to preserve their national identity, the right to establish organisations and develop economic, cultural, scientific and research activities, as well as activities in the field of public media and publishing. In accordance with laws, these two national communities and their members have the right to education and schooling in their own languages, as well as the right to establish and develop such education and schooling. The geographic areas in which bilingual schools are compulsory shall be established by law. ...'

<sup>(2)</sup> 'The status and special rights of the Romany community living in Slovenia shall be regulated by law.'

<sup>(3)</sup> 'Everyone has the right to freely express affiliation with his/her nation or national community, to foster and give expression to his/her culture and to use the language and script. Everyone has the right to use his/her language and script in a manner provided by law in the exercise of his/her rights and duties and in procedures before state and other bodies performing a public function.'

- to improve the social situation of Roma children, to ensure their social inclusion in the wider environment and their integration into the education system, to form mechanisms of encouraging and strengthening positive relations between the Roma community and the majority population, to invite members of the Roma ethnic groups to assist in teaching, to encourage measures of school policy intended to improve the educational structure of the Roma population, to ensure the possibility of preserving the Roma language and culture, to train experts for conducting special help programmes for Roma children, to ensure appropriate and successful cooperation of social services engaged in helping the Roma community in different environments, to enable all Roma children to have regular health inspections and vaccination.

The objectives of the leisure activity policy are:

- to ensure such provision of the leisure activities that pays special attention to children and youth with special needs, socially disadvantaged children and youth, children of immigrants and refugees, unaccompanied children, and children and youth from different cultural-ethnic environments.

The objectives of the cultural policy are:

- to ensure equal opportunities of social, cultural, artistic, spiritual, recreational and leisure activities for all children and youth,
- to assert a positive influence of the mass media, to encourage a media policy which points out the problems of discrimination of children and youth from certain social groups.

The evaluation of the Programme for Children and Youth 2006-2016 is conducted by the Institute for Social Welfare of the Republic of Slovenia within the *Child Observatory Programme*. A list of indicators for monitoring changes for the benefit of children and youth in Slovenia and for monitoring the implementation of the key political documents concerning children and youth was designed to this effect.

b) National objectives for Roma children are also stated in the ***Strategy of Education and Training of Roma Children in the Republic of Slovenia***, which was adopted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in May 2004.

The key principles for education and training of Roma children are:

- ensuring education and training which enables Roma children to achieve the goals and standards defined in the national Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions and in course syllabi,
- exercising the right to maintain and respect the Roma language and culture in education and training,
- inclusion in the society, whereby education enables Roma children to assume the functional requisites of society as well as respecting their differences and identity,
- inclusion in society, whereby education in the curriculum ensures the principles and values of equality in connection with social justice (fighting prejudices, approaching universal values, respect for culture and language).

The key goals of the Strategy are:

- **Early integration in the education and training system aiming at** increasing enrolment of Roma children in preschool institutions at least two years before the start of elementary school; learning the languages (both Slovene and Roma); and socialisation of Roma children within the preschool institution, which provides experiences needed for the child's entry and integration into elementary school.
- **Introducing Roma assistants** helping Roma children to overcome the emotional and linguistic barriers, which will represent some sort of bridge between a preschool institution or elementary school and the Roma community.

- **Introduction of the Roma language** on an optional basis in elementary schools, teaching Roma children the Slovene language, identification of goals (e.g. multiculturalism) or standards of knowledge that is obtained through topics including the Roma culture, history and identity.
- Continual professional development and supplementary training programmes for educators.
- **Providing special organisational and material conditions** – preserving the more generous standards and criteria for the financial aid already established by the Ministry of Education and Sport.
- **No segregation policy.** A homogeneous Roma class-unit should generally not to be formed. The statutory forms of individualisation of learning, internal and flexible differentiation – either team teaching or within-class groupings or subject streaming – may be used (it is up to the school to choose among these options). Roma children are not to be considered as children with special needs. The child's academic under-achievements due to insufficient knowledge of the language or due to the specificities of the Roma culture should not be the basis for guiding Roma children to choose the lower-standard educational programmes
- Introducing various forms of learning assistance.
- **Establishing trust in school and eliminating prejudice.** Developing a special school plan determining the nature of communication and partnership relations with the parents of Roma children. Developing a plan for identification and continuous eliminating of stereotypes and prejudice of the majority population towards Roma pupils.

c) The third document is the **Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion** (2003). Based on the agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Slovenia, the state is obliged to actively contribute to fostering the national and common European objectives concerning the reduction of poverty and social exclusion by 2010.

d) The objectives of the National Strategy for social inclusion of migrant children and youth into the system of education in the Republic of Slovenia (2007) are the following:

- to develop a national system of conditions, possibilities and opportunities for immigrant children, so that they could reach the standards of knowledge defined in the national Curriculum and syllabi;
- successful inclusion of migrant children into a preschool, school and social environment; later in their life also a successful occupational career;
- to develop competencies for cultural self-presentation and preservation of cultural identity and tolerance towards other national groups;
- to develop communicative competence in the Slovene language beside their native language.

e) Documents concerning preschool education

The objectives (principles, theoretical and conceptual platform for education) for preschool at-risk children are also included in the legislation and documents regulating the system of preschool education.

The *Pre-school Institutions Act* (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia no. 12/1996; Amendments: 44/2000; 78/2003; 72/2005; 25/2008) and the **Organisation and Financing of Education Act** (Official Gazette of the Republic Slovenia no. 12/1996; Amendments: 101/1999; 64/2001; 108/2002; 34/2003; 79/2003; 65/2005; 129/2006; 101/2007; 36/2008) state that an optimal development of the individual should be ensured regardless of the differences in gender, social and cultural origin, religion, nationality, physical and mental structure.

The **White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia** (1995) defines the theoretical platform and principles for preschool education. In the chapter Equal Opportunities and Non-discrimination it is stated that '... equal opportunities for the development of all children should be ensured; all children



have a right to choose various educational paths and programmes (tied to their special position such as minority children ...); all children should be guaranteed the possibility for optimal development while characteristics of their individual differences ... and family environment are considered; ' and ... the impact of different social living conditions of children ... should be reduced...'.

The national *Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions* (1999) also stresses the principle of equal opportunities. In interpreting this principle, the curriculum mentions Roma children and children from the Italian and Hungarian national minorities as well as children with special needs (but does not include other groups of preschool children who do not speak Slovene into the interpretation). It also defines specific goals concerning education on democracy and intercultural education.

The objectives of the Supplement to the Curriculum for Educational work with Roma children (2002) are the following:

- to identify and to foster those cultural elements which are common to both Slovene and Roma culture,
- to reach an agreement with the Roma population on the formation of a minimal programme of intercultural curriculum,
- to introduce Roma assistants in teaching and learning,
- to introduce specific pedagogical approaches to foster communication and partnership relations with the parents of Roma children.

Supplement to the Curriculum for Preschool Institutions in Nationally Mixed Areas (2002) adds to the general goals of the curriculum:

- specific curricular goals for children of the Italian and Hungarian national minority defined in chapters 'society', 'language' and 'art', and
- examples of learning activities, arising from the particularities of living in the national mixed areas.

## II. Access to early childhood education and care

### 2.1. Entitlement and capacity

#### 2.1.1. Entitlement

Entitlement is universal; all children aged one to six or up to compulsory school age are entitled to a place in a preschool institution. In principle, children should attend preschool institutions situated in the local communities they live in, but it is also possible to enrol children into preschool institutions in other local communities (e.g. near the workplace of the parents) if place for the children is available.

#### 2.1.2. Capacity (mainstream provision)

The majority of places for preschool children in Slovenia is provided by public preschool institutions; only 1.7 % of children attend private preschool institutions. Parents have the right to choose a public or private programme. Slovenia has a relatively broad and easily accessible network of preschool institutions. Namely, the law stipulates that the public network should be organized in such a way that it enables parents and children access to and the option of choosing the programme. In case there is no public preschool institution in the place of the child's residence, or in case there are no places available – but children concerned could fill in at least one class-unit – the local community is obliged to initiate the proceedings of ensuring additional free places or to issue a public concession.

Preschool institutions conduct full time programmes, part time programmes, and shorter programmes for children aged three to six or up to elementary school age, conducting 240 to 600 hours of programme per year. The vast majority of preschool children attend full-time programmes; 95.2 % of all children enrolled attended full-time programmes in the school year 2006/07. Preschool institutions

usually work from 11 to 12 hours and are usually open between 5.30 and 6 am and close between 4.30 and 5.30 pm, or at 9 pm if they work in turns. They are open throughout the year (also during summer holidays), except on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays.

The authorities have not yet established an evaluation of accessibility of preschool institutions. No special system has yet been developed for correcting the allocation of places in preschool institutions in order flexibly and promptly to adapt to demographic changes and the needs of families.

## 2.2. Tackling barriers to participation and broadening access

### 2.2.1. Tackling barriers to participation

The network of preschool institutions in Slovenia is characterized by the relatively high accessibility, especially in the age group from year 1 to year 3. The proportion of children who were not granted a place in a preschool institution in school year 2006/07 was 3 percent of children enrolled. The high level of access corresponds to the high level of employment of women in Slovenia.

The potential barriers to accessibility are:

Limited number of places in the local community of residence (e.g. in case there is no place available for the child in a preschool institution in the community of residence.) The parents have a right to choose any preschool institution in any other community. The local community authority of child's residence is obliged to ensure them 'payment subsidy' if needed.

- Limited provision of preschool programmes (e.g. in case parents wish to enrol their child in a programme based on alternative pedagogical concepts such as Steiner's, or Montessori, but there is no such programme available nearby).

In order to tackle these limitations, preschool institutions of different local communities cooperate among themselves when enrolling children. As already mentioned, the local community authorities are obliged to find alternative options, if there is a lack of placements. The State facilitates the enrolment of children by encouraging the establishment of private settings and co-financing of private programmes.

### 2.2.2. Broadening access

#### a) Socially disadvantaged children (children from low-income families)

The indicators of social cohesion according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia show that the most socially deprived are children of unemployed or inactive parents, and children living in single-parent families or families with many children.

In 2004, 12.1 % people in Slovenia lived below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. The highest at-risk-of-poverty rate was among the unemployed (25 %) and single-parent households with at least one dependent child (21 %). In families with three dependent children the rate was slightly above average. The at-risk-of-poverty rate was the lowest among families with two children and among the active population aged 25 to 49 (9 %).

According to the data of local communities, 3 563 children in preschool institutions (5.9 % of all children enrolled) were exempt from payment on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2006; these are children who receive 'financial social assistance' since their parents/family do not provide minimum income per family member. In addition social benefits (child benefit, parental allowance, childbirth grant, benefit for child care, large family allowance, parental compensations) considerably reduce the poverty level. In the households with children living below the at-risk-of-poverty rate social benefits represented 30.8 % of all income. The trend shows that this share is on the increase.

Measures for broadening access of at-risk children to preschool institutions are the following:



- **Subsidised payment.** According to the *Preschool Institution Act* the parents' payment for the preschool institution is determined according to the scale-classifying parents in payment categories with regard to their income per family member and the family property. Parents pay from 10 % to 80 % of the whole programme costs; the rest is covered from the municipal budget.
- **Exemption from payment.** Parents who receive financial social assistance benefits are exempted from payment for a preschool institution place.
- **Consideration of special circumstances.** In special cases, and based on the opinion given by the competent tax authority or social service, the local community authorities can determine the payment of parents by considering not only the income and property of the family, but also other facts and circumstances which reflect the actual social situation of the family.
- **Lower payment for the subsequent child.** Where more than one child from the family is enrolled, parents pay a price lower by one category for older children.

In 2006 slightly less than 50 % of the children were classified in the three lower payments categories. The three higher payment categories contain altogether 14.2 % of the children.

#### b) Roma children

In the 2002 Population Census, 3 246 persons declared themselves as members of the Roma community and 3,834 persons stated the Roma language as their mother tongue. Despite the official data of the Census, the government estimates that there are between 7 000 and 10 000 members of the Roma community living in Slovenia, mainly in the regions of Prekmurje, Dolenjska, Bela Krajina, and Posavje. Preschool Roma children are enrolled in 40 preschool institutions in Slovenia. According to data for the school year 2002/03, 157 Roma children attended preschool programmes, most of them full-time programmes. In some parts of the Pomurje region there is a higher percentage of Roma children enrolled; (also a higher percentage of children integrated in main-stream classes). In the local community of Pušča the Roma preschool institution has been operating for 45 years. By contrast, in the regions of Dolenjska, Bela Krajina and Posavje, Roma children are not enrolled in an adequate proportion.

Three models of integration of Roma children exist in Slovene preschool institutions: the majority of them are integrated in mainstream class-units, a small proportion are attending 'homogeneous Roma class units and special Roma preschool institutions'.

Measures for broadening access of preschool institutions to Roma children include:

- **Favourable standards and criteria, subsidies by the local community authority.** Preschool class units of Roma children are financed from the municipal budget, state budget and parents' payments. The State pays increase in prices due to favourable criteria, e. g., a Roma class unit can be set up when there are only 5 Roma children enrolled. (In mainstream class units these standards are higher).
- **A more favourable child/adult ratio.** In Roma class units conducting at least 3 hours of programme per day the child/adult ratio is 4 to 1 in the first age-group, and 7 to 1 in the second-age group.
- **Reinforcement of the staff.** In class units of the first age group, one preschool teacher assistant is included in the educational programme when there are at least 6 children in the class unit, and another preschool teacher assistant when there are at least 12 children. In class units of the second age group one preschool teacher assistant is included in the educational programme when there are at least 11 children in the class unit, and another preschool teacher assistant when there are at least 21 children.
- **Organised transport.** Preschool Roma children mostly attend preschool institutions in the local community. In case the preschool institution is further away, transport is organised accompanied by a preschool teacher, in some cases also by a higher grade elementary school pupil.

### c) Children of migrants

According to the *Population Census of 2002*, the population declared their ethnic affiliation as follows: Slovenes – 83.1 %, Serbs – 2 %, Croats – 1.8 %, Bosnians – 1.1 %, other and non-declared – 12 %. Most of the immigrants speak Croatian language (2.8 %), followed by Serbo-Croatian (1.8 %), Serbian (1.6 %) and Bosnian (1.6 %). Roma language, Albanian, Macedonian, German, Italian, and Hungarian language are spoken by slightly less than 1 % of the population.

In 2006 there were altogether 53 555 immigrants in Slovenia, 31 097 of them with a permanent residence and 22 458 with a temporary residence. There were 1 825 immigrant children aged up to six, 1 183 of them with a permanent residence and 642 with a temporary residence.

There are no measures designed specially for broadening access to preschool institutions for immigrant children.

### d) Children from the Italian and Hungarian national minority

Nationally mixed areas in the Republic of Slovenia where the Italian national minority has traditionally lived are in the communities of Koper, Izola, and Piran. In the school year 2006/07 a total of 305 children in these communities attended three preschool institutions with the Italian education programme. Nationally mixed areas where the Hungarian national minority has traditionally lived are in five communities in the region Prekmurje: Lendava, Dobrovnik, Hodoš, Šalovci, Moravske Toplice. According to data for the school year 2006/07 a total of 263 children attended bilingual preschool institutions in nationally mixed areas in the region of Pomurje.

The following measures are developed for broadening access to preschool institutions for children in nationally mixed areas:

- **Covering higher costs of the class units.** The state budget provides the funds for the payment of higher costs of those class units of public preschool institutions that conduct their programmes in the Italian language or bilingually – in Slovene and Hungarian, as well as part of the funds for capital investments and equipment in nationally mixed areas.
- **Right to mother tongue in preschool institutions.** The Pre-school Institution Act and the Act on Implementing Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities Regarding Education and Training (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, no. 35/2001) determines that:
  - In the areas populated by Slovene and Italian nationality, Slovene preschool institutions are obliged to 'acquaint' children also with the Italian language, while Italian preschool institutions must 'acquaint' children with the Slovene language.
  - Preschool institutions in the areas populated by the Hungarian national minority must implement the curriculum bilingually, in both, Slovene and Hungarian.

## III. Quality in early childhood education and care

### 3.1. Approaches and objectives in early childhood settings

#### 3.1.1. Structural aspects

Children in preschool institutes are divided into two age-groups:

- the first age-group: children aged one to three,
- the second age-group: children aged three to six or up to the elementary school age.

The full-time programme and the part-time programme are conducted by a **preschool teacher** and a **preschool teacher assistant**. The *Preschool Institution Act* states that there should be no more than 12 children in first age-group class units, and no more than 22 in second age-group class units.

According to the *Annex to the Preschool Institution Act* of 2005 the number of children in the class-unit can exceed no more than 2 children in a class unit. The purpose of the annex is to reduce the number of children refused a place in the preschool institution.

In the *Rules on Criteria and Staff Requirements in Preschool Education*, the standards for age-homogeneous groups, age-heterogeneous groups, combined class units and units with children with special needs are also specified.

According to the *Organisation and Financing of Education Act*, the Minister can define special criteria and standards also in:

- areas (regions) with specific development problems, and
- nationally mixed areas.

### 3.1.2. Learning and development

Slovene public preschool institutions and private preschool institutions with the State concession conduct their programmes according to the *Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions* of 1999. The first part of the document contains the fundamental curricula principles; the second part presents the goals and activity examples concerning the following major curriculum chapters: motion, language, art, society, nature, mathematics. The curriculum is based on the developmental paradigm; a high quality planned, performed and evaluated educational process, based on special consideration of developmental characteristics of each child, is more important than achieving pre-planned goals.

Structural indicators for the quality of preschool institutional education are provided by the legislation; the compliance with them is monitored by the Inspectorate of the Republic of Slovenia for Education and Sport. Quality assessment is under the responsibility of the individual preschool institution; it is usually performed as self-evaluation study. Development of a specific plan ('vision') of an individual preschool institution has been encouraged, with setting the goals and criteria for monitoring quality. Team evaluation of pedagogical work is preferred, carried out in pairs (a preschool teacher and a preschool teacher assistant), in small groups (e.g. all educators of class units of the same age-group or of one preschool institution unit; a group of educators interested in a specific problem) or in the whole group of staff. Self-evaluation thus involves educators, education counsellors, heads, parents and children, as well as representatives of the local community and external advisers.

Ljubica Marjanovič Umek et al. developed a model of quality assurance intended for self-evaluation of preschool institutions at the **structural level** (institutional organisation, facilities, educational materials...), **process level** (planning and carrying out the curriculum) and at the **intermediate level** (team work, partnerships with families, cooperation with other institutions, professional development of educators and satisfaction of the staff). The authors prepared the evaluation model (2002) and the analysis of the self-evaluation results of some of the preschool institutions included in the survey of 2005.

## 3.2. Staff involved in ECEC provision

### 3.2.1. Categories of staff and responsibilities

Educational activities in preschool institutions are performed by **preschool teachers, preschool teacher assistants, education counsellors, organizers of health and hygiene regime**, and in some cases other professionals. **Head teachers** are responsible for the management of the preschool setting and for pedagogical guidance of the staff; larger preschool institutions employ one or more **head teachers' assistants**.

The curriculum is carried out jointly by a preschool teacher and a teacher assistant. A teacher and a teacher assistant are both present at least 6 hours per day in the first age-group class units, and 4 hours per day in second age-group class units. The ratio children/educator is 7.9 children per

preschool teacher or assistant (Statistical Office, 2006/07). In the school year 2005/06, there were 7 116 educators (3 509 preschool teachers and 3 607 preschool teacher assistants) working in 3 375 preschool class units in Slovenia.

### 3.2.2. Staff training and qualifications

Preschool teachers are required to complete the higher education programme (ranging from short degree to a Master's degree). They must possess either a professional degree from the field of preschool education (short-cycle or 1<sup>st</sup> cycle studies) or a corresponding academically oriented degree with additional preschool education specialisation (2<sup>nd</sup> cycle studies). Preschool teacher assistants must have at least an upper secondary technical qualification of a preschool teacher assistant or have completed the 4-year *Gimnazija* (institution offering general upper secondary education to students aged 15 to 19) programme with additional preschool education specialisation.

In the year 2008 approximately half of the preschool teachers in Slovene preschool institutions have upper secondary qualification (specialised in early childhood education); two fifth of the teachers have either a short higher education qualification or a higher education degree (also specialised on early childhood education). Only 0.8 % of teachers do not possess an adequate qualification.

The possibility to acquire a higher education degree (equivalent to a Bachelor's degree) has been offered in the last 12 years. A study programme for preschool teachers is offered at three Slovene Faculties of Education (in Ljubljana, Maribor and Koper). The study programme includes basic general training (subjects: the Slovene language, psychology, pedagogy, specialised pedagogy, sociology, philosophy and health education) and technical training, professional training (subjects: language, motion, nature, society, mathematics, techniques, music and visual art education, puppetry, drama and film education and dance); 8 % of subjects are optional. The curriculum includes 'practice integrated in theoretical subjects' (21 % of the curriculum – approximately one day per week) and 'in-class placements' (180 hours). Both types of practice are performed as practical training (with concrete tasks, e.g. systematic observation, analyses, presentations) offering the students the opportunity to practice their theoretical knowledge in real situations.

Preschool teachers are expected to be lifelong learners. Every year, the Ministry of Education publishes public tenders for programmes for professional training. Participation is not obligatory, but 3 learning days per year are offered to each participant for free. For participating in the in-service programmes preschool teachers are awarded points, which enable them to gain promotion and higher salaries. There are also special in-service programmes designed for training educators (mainly counsellors) for work with diverse children (at-risk children being among them).

### 3.3. Working in partnership with families

#### Measures designed to involve families actively in ECEC provision

According to the *Curriculum for Pre-school institutions*, parents have the right:

- to be involved in planning the curriculum and to participate actively inside institutions,
- to receive written and other forms of information, as well as to exchange information,
- to gradually introduce their child to the preschool institution,
- to discuss issues concerning their child with preschool institution professionals, and
- to choose a preschool programme in public or private settings.

The curriculum principles concerning relations with parents or families are defined as follows: preschool institution should consider the culture, identity, language, world views, values and convictions, customs and habits of the parents, who – on the other hand – should consider the limits of their involvement; parents' decision-making should not interfere with the professional expertise.

**Specific approaches** concerning working with parents are defined only for **Roma parents and children**. *Supplement to the Curriculum for educational work with Roma children (2002)* states the following principles underlying relations with Roma parents or Roma families:

- Establishing quality relations with Roma parents is of special importance for introducing Roma children to preschool institutions. It is imperative that Roma families gain trust in educational institutions, realize the importance of education for their children, apprehend the advantages of bilingualism and biculturalism, and understand the importance of maintaining their cultural identity while integrating in the majority culture.
- Identifying common and specific elements of the two cultures, exchanging beliefs, experiences and skills should be the basis for seeking agreement about what is common and acceptable to all children and parents in a preschool institution.

The Supplement provides the following suggestion for establishing relations with parents of Roma children:

- **Personal relations.** It is important to establish personal relations with the Roma parents or the family prior to the child's entering the preschool institution (home visits by educators, encouraging the parents to visit the preschool institution with their children)
- **Verbal information.** Due to the low literacy level of the majority of Roma parents it is necessary that all the information be presented also verbally, not only in written form.
- Education of Roma parents on health and safety matters is required.

## IV. Funding

Programmes of preschool education are financed from public funds, funds of the founder, parents' payment, donations and other sources. Financing varies according to whether the institution is public or private. Private preschool institutions receive 85 % of the public funds provided per child in a public preschool institution.

The cost of preschool education is covered by parents and by local communities. Funds for salaries, taxes and contribution by employees, material assets, assets for investments and extra maintenance and assets for equipment are provided from the local community budget. The difference between the economic price of the programme and parents' payment is covered from the local community budget. The state budget provides funds for some groups of at-risk children for the payment of higher costs of class units where the Italian or Hungarian language is used, or where the curriculum is bilingual, as well as for the class units for Roma children.

The basis for defining parents' payment is the total cost of the programme, which includes costs of education, childcare and meals. The price is determined by the founder – local community. Parents' payment is determined by the local community according to the scale which classifies parents in different payment categories considering the gross monthly income per family member in comparison with the average gross wage per employee in Slovenia, and the family property. Parents pay maximum 80 % of the price of the programme their child attends (full price), if their gross monthly income per family member exceeds 110 % of the average gross wage per employee in the previous year. If the gross monthly income per family member amounts up to 25 % of the average gross wage, parents pay only 10 % of the price of the programme their child attends.

There are no special measures to attract and retain employees in preschool institutions (there is a constant surplus of candidates for teaching posts in preschool institutions).

## V. Transition to compulsory schooling

### 5.1. Facilitating the transition to compulsory schooling

With the comprehensive reform of the educational system in the late 1990s, the formerly obligatory preschool programme ('little school'), which was performed by preschool institutions in the last year before children entered school, was replaced by the new first year of the nine-year elementary school. Children enter the first year of the elementary school at the age of six. A successful school entry is supported by the continuity of the curricula of both institutions (pre-school and school), by cooperation of staff (preschool teachers and teachers) within the same local area, and by team teaching in the first year of the nine-year elementary school. In the first grade, teachers and pre-school teachers work together in pairs.

### 5.2. Measures designed to support at-risk children

Specific measures for a successful transition to compulsory schooling are specified for Roma children.

#### a) Measures in preschool institutions:

- special approaches to partnership with Roma parents or families,
- individualised implementation of the preschool curriculum according to the *Supplement*,
- conducting intercultural education projects.

#### b) Measures in elementary schools:

- introduction of the Roma assistants, which helps pupils to become acquainted with the Slovene language and functions as some sort of 'bridge' between the institution and the Roma community,
- introduction of lessons in the Roma language at the optional level, as well as lessons in the Slovene language,
- providing various forms of learning assistance,
- performing a flexible differentiation of lessons and level-based education (instead of segregation in homogeneous units),
- providing continual professional training and development for teachers and other educational staff for teaching in the classes with Roma children.

## VI. Statistics

In the year 2007, there were 811 preschool institutions in Slovenia, 24 of them private; 61 359 children were enrolled in preschool institutions, 1 211 of them in private ones. The vast majority (98 %) of the children attended the full-time programme, the remaining 2 % attended either the afternoon programme or the alternating programme.

Between the years 2003 and 2007 enrolment rates increased in all the age-groups (table 1); the total percentage of children included in preschool institutions increased from 60.6 % in the year 2003 to 67.2 % in the year 2007.



**Table 1: Enrolment rate by single years of age, Slovenia, 2003 – 2007**

	1 <sup>st</sup> age period		2 <sup>nd</sup> age period				Gross enrolment rate
	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years*	
2003	25.6	48.1	65.7	77.8	79.2	6.0	<b>60.6</b>
2004	26.5	48.8	66.8	75.9	83.8	4.3	<b>61.4</b>
2005	27.5	49.9	69.5	79.3	83.7	7.3	<b>63.6</b>
2006	28.7	53.1	70.1	81.8	86.3	4.7	<b>64.7</b>
2007	33.0	54.9	74.6	82.9	89.0	4.3	<b>67.2</b>

\* The share of 6-year olds has been decreasing since 2002 due to earlier enrolment in elementary school after the reform of education and the introduction of the 9-year elementary schooling

In the school year 2006/07 the number of children per adult (teacher or assistant teacher) is 8.2. In the first age period there are 6.0 children per adult, in the second-age period there are 9.4 children per adult. Average class size in the school year 2006/07 is 12.2 in the first age period, and 19.8 in the second-age period.

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