

My Journey to Inclusion: Study Visit in Northern Ireland

I work as a teacher in a small two-class kindergarten in a village near Kladno, Czech Republic. In September 2016, two children with a different mother tongue joined our kindergarten, which represented a new challenge for me. To help these pupils to integrate and become a part of the group, I wanted to learn more about inclusion. I signed up for a training Logopedic Assistant, I was looking online for inspiration, reading books on the topic - all while testing new ideas and approaches in practice.

Then a parent of one of my pupils told me about an exchange program for preschool teachers and study visit to Windmill Integrated Primary School in Dungannon, Northern Ireland. Most schools in Northern Ireland are still divided into Protestant and Roman Catholic. The integrated education model advocated by the Windmill Integrated Primary School attempts to bring together children from both backgrounds. The study visit was a part of **INEDU project (Inclusive education model for children with migrant background in pre-primary education)** realized by a non-profit organization EDUcentrum in cooperation with partners from 9 other European countries within the **ERASMUS+ program**. Even though I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to communicate fluently in English, I simply couldn't miss this opportunity. In the end, my curiosity to see inclusion in practice was stronger than my fears, so I decided to give it a go.

The schedule of the study visit was being developed continuously. Three weeks before the departure, I met with other participants. There were 3 of us – a teacher from a preschool in Prague, an EDUcentrum representative, and I, a teacher from a small village kindergarten.

On the first day in Northern Ireland, a Windmill school bus took us to the local community center, *The Junction*, where we met other participants. We were accompanied by a very kind teacher from Windmill, with whom we were in contact before the actual trip and who acted as our guide during the visit. We participated in several short workshops, such as the STEP project, which focused on the need to help people coming from different backgrounds.



The next workshop introduced us to the eTwinning platform which brings together teachers from all over Europe. We then took part in a role-playing workshop, during which we enacted the roles of both children of foreigners and their parents. The short performances illustrated and highlighted the issue of different customs of local and immigrant communities, for example different gestures and their meanings. In the afternoon, the Windmill school director shared his views of inclusion of children with migrant background and our guide shared her experience from the perspective of a teacher at Windmill Integrated Primary School. The final lecture was dedicated to organizational instructions for project managers and we concluded the evening with social dinner.

The next day, our guide took us to the Windmill School, where we were warmly welcomed by the director. We had a chance to explore the premises of the school and observe individual lessons, so we

could see inclusive teaching approach in real context. We visited lessons of first two classes, which correspond roughly to Czech preschool system. In Northern Ireland, primary education begins at the age of 4. The teaching of the youngest children (4-6 years) is conducted in group or individual form, resembling the approach in Czech pre-primary education. Despite the weather, children at Windmill Integrated School spend quite a lot of time outside, they just wear wellingtons and plastic raincoats. In the garden, there are toy blocks or a toy kitchen, various monkey bars, slides, a sandpit, climbing frames made of different materials, where they can play whenever they want. When they are hungry, they simply take what is prepared, usually some biscuits, milk and other drinks. All children know where everything belong and they always tidy up when they are done with playing. They don't simply carry toys from one place to another but they keep the system of specific playing areas. These rules seem to suit everyone and I think it contributes to general satisfaction of children in the school. Well, I'm not sure if the word "rules" here is entirely in place, since it was the children themselves who have decided on this system and they therefore don't perceive them as strictly ordered.



This study visit has been a great contribution to my work. I can now use specific materials and tools supporting the inclusion in pre-primary education, such as pictures of daily needs in the kindergarten, parent questionnaires, and school information brochures. Moreover, I also learnt how to draw inspiration from international cooperation.

I told my pupils about the trip and showed them some photos from the Windmill Integrated Primary School. They took an interest in the different school environment and tried to draw their own kindergarten to show how it looks like in the Czech Republic. They spotted quite well the differences between theirs and foreign preschool. Naturally, they immediately noticed that some pupils in the photos have distinct ethnic characteristics, then they compared surroundings around both schools. There were some things completely new for them – food available outside without any kind of supervision or playing outside even in cloudy weather. They missed some things that are common for them, such as a large garden with grass, traffic playground, football field, carpets they can sit on while indoors. I explained to them that kindergartens are different in each country and that children from other countries might also miss some things in our preschool.

In my opinion, the sooner children meet someone from other culture, the lesser they notice and will notice differences. Basically, it applies to any kind of differences, be it a physical or mental disability, children with glasses or braces. Nowadays children are used to encounter such distinctions and they don't surprise them anymore, as they probably would have 20 years ago.

At the end of every school year, we organize a traditional farewell with those pupils who are going to enter primary school after the summer. For this occasion, we are now rehearsing a musical based on the fairy tale *Lotrando and Zubejda* by Zdeněk Svěrák, which provides an opportunity for children to learn by experience about cultural differences. At one point, children sing: "No matter if you're from Corsica, China or Africa, come play with us, come play with us, let's be friends." Last year, even parents joined and we all sang together.

I think that it's going to take children some time to get used to these changes and challenges. The task of the teacher is to show the pupils how to cope with distinctions, how to "erase" these kinds of differences, how to live in one shared environment in mutual tolerance, similarly to children in the Windmill Integrated School.

Author:

Hana Honková, teacher at Kindergarten Velké Přítočno and project activities author and evaluator for EDUcentrum

Contact:

EDUcentrum, z.ú.

<http://www.educentrum.eu>

<https://www.facebook.com/educentrum2011/>

EDUcentrum is a non-profit organization that strives to support innovative forms and methods of education, employability and entrepreneurship based on cross-sectoral cooperation. Our vision is to create opportunities for further education for all age and social groups and to encourage people to become active agents in their professional and personal life.