

Hana Feels Good at School: An Example of Good Teaching Practice in Integrating a Girl with Sotos Syndrome into Primary School

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Abstract

A girl with Sotos Syndrome was about to enter first grade of Primary School. The girl has already been obtaining individual help of a special pedagogue in kindergarten and as parents suggested, she also accompanied their girl to the first grade. Cooperation with Miskolin Kindergarten brought a lot of useful information, which enabled a better preparation for teaching at school. We established an expert team to plan and perform the individualized programme. The girl has successfully finished first and second grade of primary school according to same programme as other pupils. On the basis of gained results we could make a great contribution to a better teaching practice.

Keywords: Sotos Syndrome, children with special needs, team work, basketball, parents as partners

Expectations, excitement and fear. All those feelings prevailed on 1st September when Hana first crossed the school doorstep. We can say today that our decision to accept a girl with the diagnosis of Sotos Syndrome to our school was correct.

HOW IT ALL STARTED (Marta Kocjančič, kindergarten special pedagogue)

The initiative for the project was taken by Hana's parents, who saw a great advantage in the continuation of the special pedagogic work from kindergarten to school, not only in the individual help to their child but also to teachers at school and to themselves. In kindergarten, Hana's mother often asked questions, such as: "Why can't somebody familiar accompany Hana to school, somebody she trusts and willingly accepts help from. I would be satisfied in this way too. Why are they going to ask me the same questions in school again?"

When planning the project we faced new approaches and organisational solutions that were not common practice in kindergarten or school. The project was based on our assumption that a planned integration can be successful only if good cooperation of the child's parents and educational institutions (management, teachers, and school counsellors) is assured. Such integration has more quality; the goals are based on the child, who is well known by some pedagogues. They cooperate well with the parents and share the positive experiences they have gained with teachers and other expert workers. When planning this project we were all united in our wish to enable Hana's good inclusion into a new environment – the school.

Our research question was: How does the integration of a child with special needs to primary school progress if the child is accompanied to school by a familiar person?

The final goal of the project is to influence the quality of work with children with special needs integrated into regular primary schools.

Our key finding, gathered so far, is that the inclusion of a child with special needs into school is more successful if:

- it is carefully planned,
- it is initiated by parents,
- special pedagogues and teachers are prepared for teamwork,
- all conditions for the inclusion as a win-win situation are formed,
- the support and help from the school and kindergarten management is present.

We would never have been able to put the project “With Hana to School” into practice, had we not had the support of the kindergarten and school management. We cannot bring changes into practice without professional and material sources. Carefully planned team work and a well planned and adjusted programme (individualized programme) for the child play a crucial role.

All materials and teaching aids for Hana do not differ from others’; they are only based on different levels – adjusted. The teachers’ role is to find the way for Hana to reach the planned goals. We must support partnership with parents; their high level of motivation in the process also represents stimulation for our work. Teachers must not forget about life-long specialized training – education for teachers and pedagogues. Our most effective education is “good teaching practice” – an exchange of experiences and teaching related conversations.

Accompanying any child from kindergarten to school by a special pedagogue can have a great advantage, and even more if it is a child with special needs in questions because the special pedagogue can offer him or her even more help and support.

In the two years when I was accompanying Hana at school it proved that it was not only Hana who used my help but also her classmates, teachers and school counsellors. The information about the child is immediate; teachers are in this way prevented from generalizing, forming opinions and prejudices based on the lack of knowledge about the child's past. Teachers are thus unburdened of fears, they can share »professional responsibility«. Firsthand work of the special pedagogue in the class carries a great advantage in the exchange and unifying teaching – the teacher carries out the methodical procedure so the child can hear his or her explanation in the classroom together with the classmates. When problems arise, the special pedagogue helps the child, so that she or he can follow the lesson and acquire the subject by using special pedagogical methods and aids.

TEACHER’S EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING A GIRL WITH SOTOS SYNDROME **(Tatjana Lazar, Hana’s teacher)**

In January before Hana entered school I was informed by the school psychologist I would be teaching a girl with Sotos Syndrome the next school year. I accepted the information with all responsibility and positive attitude. Hana was directed according to the Law of Guidance of Children with Special Needs already before entering school. The child’s parents wanted her to go to regular primary school. We made a connection to the kindergarten special pedagogue. The parents, kindergarten and school representatives had the first meeting then. Good cooperation with Miškolin Kindergarten brought a lot of useful information, which enabled a better preparation for teaching in the first grade. The psychologist formed a class with a reduced number of pupils (16 pupils). The school headmistress appointed members of the

expert team, which consisted of the special pedagogue from kindergarten, the kindergarten headmistress, the school headmistress, the girl's teacher and the second teacher in the first grade, the school psychologist, the school pedagogue, the child's parents, a counsellor from National Education Institute and a counsellor from Mobile Special Pedagogues Service. In cooperation with National Education Institute we entered an innovation project called With Hana to School.

I first met Hana in May, three months before she started the first grade, when I visited her in kindergarten together with the second teacher. She shook my hand and told me her name then. She was a happy and kind girl. There were two teachers present in the classroom in the first grade, which enabled individual assistance while whole class activities proceeded. We planned and executed the lessons together. Since the very beginning Hana has never stood out from the rest of the group. At the beginning of the school year Hana's classmates were told that she would receive help of a special pedagogue and later on none of these pupils asked any further questions about Hana. The special pedagogue helps the girl five hours a week. This represents a great advantage for Hana as well as for me because she was accompanied by a familiar person from kindergarten. The special pedagogue Marta assisted Hana already in kindergarten. She had observed the girl's development and progress already for years. In the beginning, when I was still getting to know Hana, I wanted her to work in the same way as other pupils. I raised a question: Why writing an individualized programme for Hana? I wanted to get to know her better first. I believe children with special needs have the right to be equal to others; at least we have to try first.

The integration of children with special needs into regular school represents a challenge to every one involved in education. This is also challenging for pupils. Children with special needs' classmates learn greater tolerance, they have lesser problems with socialization, and they are ready to help someone in need. They develop a better understanding for someone who is different and thus grow up into all round personalities. They will, no doubt, be able to have a healthy relationship with people who are different. Hana included into the group very well. Her classmates invite her to join the play and they play together. They are very happy of her progress and always ready to help. We played various social games all year, which helped the pupils improve their social relations.

In the first two grades a lot of attention was paid to the acquisition of primary literacy – to correct writing of numbers and letters. Hana was practicing graphomotrics by writing on a large-size notepaper. She wrote into polenta (maize), on the plastic foil, she shaped numbers out of plasticine. She used thicker pencils and coloured pencils. She used various didactic games to acquire sounds, syllables and words. In the first two grades she tried to learn correct writing and reading. For this purpose she used a toy – the class bunny and reading exercise sheets, which she also coloured by herself. Hana is very good at the area of speaking, dramatisation. She is delighted to show what she can sing and other skills she has gained. She is curious and likes to cooperate. She takes part in extra curricular activities.

The special pedagogue from kindergarten helped Hana in the first and second grade. In the third grade Hana is being helped by the special pedagogue Natalija five hours a week. Occasionally they have the lesson outside the class. Most help is needed in Maths. In mathematical operations, such as addition, subtraction and multiplication she helps herself by the so called »Maths Caterpillar«, play cubes, by a number scale and a number square.

I am aware of the fact that Hana has special adjustments but I am glad to be able to tell that Hana has successfully finished first and second grade of primary school according to the same programme as other pupils. We have reached our goal here.

Hana is in the third grade now. In my opinion the most important thing about her is that she likes coming to school, is in a good mood, always smiling and willing to learn new things. She has got a strong will to work.

The cooperation in our team is very good. Parents are equal members in the educational process. We can be successful only together and this proved in our work. I am strongly convinced that schools will become even better if they are ready to accept all children, including children with special needs.

BASKETBALL IS MUCH MORE THAN A BASKET AND A BALL (Natalija Panič, school special pedagogue)

As written before Hana takes part in many extra curricular activities and basketball is just one of them. Beside that I am Hana's individual teacher I am also school girl's basketball team coach. In a few sentences I would like to present you how practicing basketball benefits Hana's general development.

If I point out only a few characteristics of Sotos Syndrome, that would be: reduced muscle mass and low muscle tone, problems with all motor activities, balance, agility and flexibility, poor impulse control, rapid mood swings and sudden periods of uncontrolled childish anger. Children diagnosed with Sotos Syndrome are easily frustrated and unable to concentrate on any activity for a long time. They are very often insensitive to pain and hypersensitive to sound. Because of all the problems they are facing their self-esteem is often very low.

I believe gym is the place where miracles can be made. Let me introduce you only a few factors in Hana's development for which I believe were accelerated because of exercising:

- Our inclusion of Hana is real. If she can be a member of the school basketball team that means "real school involvement".
- Being in a group sport gives her a chance to feel personal success through the group success.
- She can find herself in competitive situations where she can percept and accept her abilities and frontiers.
- The result of being a member of a sport group where you are accepted is better self-image.
- Being a basketball player is, without doubt, a unique experience for Hana.
- Every exercise always brings at least light improvement of physical activity. Exercising increases her muscle mass, enables a higher level of body coordination and balance and offers her improved orientation in space.
- Being in constant touch with a ball develops her hand skills and encourages self-helping abilities.

We all benefit from this cooperation. Having Hana in our basketball team enables realizing, sensing and accepting diversity; it develops tolerance to Hana's weaker points and enables concern, assistance and empathy.

As for Hana, for me as a coach and for all the players this is a wonderful unique experience. I find it very useful that by having Hana in the team others and also she alone can foresee the

outcome of a certain activity considering the participating. I believe this is one of the most important realizations a child can learn and also very important life wisdom.

THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS (Marija Klančičar, Hana's mother)

I was supposed to present Hana in a few sentences. What she was like when she was little, then in kindergarten, and how we came to the point where we are now.

Hana was a perfect baby, we were very excited about her. The first months were beautiful but carelessness did not last long. After a few months there came a period, which we do not like to remember, despite the time distance. One health problem was followed by another: an allergy, inconvenient neurological status, kidney problems, numerous children diseases, developmental problems and fever cramps as the worst of all. And long days and weeks spent in hospitals. Doctors could not come up with a clear answer, the diagnosis of Sotos Syndrome was more or less set by coincidence.

Our feelings were diverse. Fear prevailed in that period. Nobody could explain it to us what was going on and what was still to come. The diagnosis was badly known, we got most information on the internet. Knowledge makes you accept the situation easier. And you are easier accepted by others. We found out that there were numerous ways to help the child: special therapy, a logoped, moto pedagogics and psychomotorics, physiotherapy and work therapy. There were periods when we neglected everything else, even Hana's older brother.

At the age of three Hana entered kindergarten. We were very worried about the outcome, but we were pleasantly surprised. Hana became really lively, she quickly included into the group and took part in different activities with great pleasure. The inclusion was so successful because of the positive attitude of her kindergarten teacher and a devoted special pedagogue who helped Hana three hours a week. Hana's curiosity and kindness made a great contribution to the success as well. In that period health problems were diminished, they occurred more rarely and in a milder way, some of them were taken care of or were no longer present.

Then school came. It is not enough to be just curious, kind and hardworking there. You must also show results. We wished Hana had someone who would understand her. We got answers because we asked questions. Because we were lucky and often came upon the right people, people who do their work with love we often received the answer: We will make efforts to find the best way for the child. I feel like an equal member of the team. And Hana is accepted like an equal child with the same possibilities as others. The whole team puts as much effort into her well being as into her knowledge.

What will come next? I do not know that. I believe that Hana is getting the best of it now. And this is the only thing that matters right now.

CONCLUSION

We are delighted of the fact that Hana likes coming to school. Besides her joy and progress we are also very proud of our team prepared presentations. We made a presentation of the project to teacher groups, State Association of Special and Rehabilitation Pedagogues and to our co-workers at school. The participants' response reassured us that we were on the right

way and that our team meetings reach their purpose. We assist Hana and successfully share our experiences with a growing group of experts.