

## OVERVIEW OF IMPLEMENTING ISSA- INTERNATIONAL PEDAGOGICAL STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

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### Abstract

The article introduces experiences with implementation of ISSA pedagogical standards of quality in Slovene, which were and are still developing in international network- International Step by Step Association. In Slovenia has the licence for developing and implementation of ISSA pedagogical standards Developmental- Research Center of Pedagogical Initiatives (DRCPI) Step by Step. Standards provides quality guidelines for assure excellence on the field of pedagogical process and also to achieve international ISSA certificate of excellence. First certificates in Slovenia where award in November 2005. In the article will be introduced the importance of pedagogical standards for teachers, principles of schools and kindergartens and also challenges on the level of reading, interpreting and application of standard in the educational process.

**Key words:** child, kindergarten, school teacher, pedagogical standards of excellence, process of certification, International Step by Step Association

### INTRODUCTION

The article will introduce the process and experiences with implementig ISSA pedagogical standards and certification process in Slovenia since 2002. The whole cartification process is based on ISSA pedagogical standards, developed by the International Step by Step Association. International Step by Step Association is a non- governmental membership organization, established (1999) in the Netherlands to foster democratic principles and promote parent and community involvement in early childhood education. ISSA's vision is of an open society where the entire community helps children to reach their full potential and where children are active participants in the learning process. (ISSA, 2002)

ISSA standards were developed by early childhood experts from countries who implement Step by Step program (a comprehensive early childhood education program serving children between the ages of birth and ten years old and their families) and are associated in International Step by Step Association. Standards make an important statement about the values that are used to assess quality in early childhood programs and their teaching staff. (ISSA, 2002)

ISSA pedagigical standards promote core beliefs in:

- child- centered methods, which recognize the individual needs of each child, in the context of whole- child development;

- equal access to educational and care opportunities for all children, which necessitates an emphasis in early childhood program and culturally- appropriate environments and approaches that create welcoming settings for children and families from all members of the community, including children with special needs, minority children, poor children and other disadvantaged groups;
  - teachers' roles as facilitators of children's learning, and their responsibility to create a community of learners in their classrooms;
  - parents as the primary educators of their children, which requires parent involvement in development of goals for their children's education and active family and community participation in the life of the classroom and school;
  - community- level ownership of public education systems;
  - learning environments designed to be physically and psychologically safe, and classrooms characterized by activity centers that promote choice and independence for learners.
- (ISSA, 2002)

Teacher standards address: Individualization, Learning Environment, Family Participation, teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning, Planning and Assessment, Professional Development and Social Inclusion. The Standard's also promote and ensure integration of all domains, holistic approach and understanding of pedagogical process and quality. These standards are intended to be used by teachers, school administrators, program directors, ministry representatives, university professors, families, and community members to improve the quality of programs and teaching for pre- school and primary age children. (ISSA, 2002).

## **1 ISSA CERTIFICATION IN SLOVENIA**

ISSA also developed the process of certification, based on ISSA Standards and trained international certicators that achieve international reliability.

In Slovenia the certification process start to implement in 2002/03. First certificates were awarded in 2005. Implementation of ISSA standards and certification process in Slovenia provides Pedagogical Institute, Developmentaly Research Center of Pedagogical Initiatives- Step by Step.

### **1.1 Observations**

After four years of implementation ISSA standards and some successfully finished certification process in the practice, among the preschool and primary school teachers, we could share some observations:

- standards gave to the teachers and to the principles basic orientation about important elements of quality on the level of process in the classrooms;
- the standards gave opportunity for very focused discussions about specific elements of the process;
- the standards provide opportunity to assess the quality;
- the standards provide opportunity to create individual professional plans for individual teachers;
- the standards provide opportunity to recognize strong and weak points of the whole institutional practice;

- the standards provide opportunity to recognize and to improve understandings of important pedagogical concepts;
- the standards help to build the understanding that improvement of quality is the process which need time, reflections, recognition and very focused attention on specific parts of practice;
- give opportunity for self-evaluation;
- after self-evaluation and with knowledge, based on ISSA standards, teachers could develop their own, but still common understandings of pedagogical concepts that lead and help them to develop new skills and strategies to work with children.

## **2 HOW TO UNDERSTAND ISSA STANDARDS**

ISSA certification process and implementation of ISSA standards widely open the question of individual interpretation and understandings of main pedagogical concepts.

First step in ISSA certification process is self-evaluation. Teacher use the standards to reflect his/ her practice and to find on which standard and/or elements of standards could improve his/ her practice and to recognize their own proficiency on different elements of standards.

What are the benefits of use ISSA standards- for individuals and institutions I did already explain, but we find some observation that focus our (DRCPI- Step by Step in Slovenia) attention especially on understanding and interpreting ISSA standards as important part of implementation those standards in the practice.

### **2.1 Observations:**

- teachers could have difficulties with understandings and implementing some standards;
- teachers could be sure that already implement some standards, even that in reality is not so;
- some teachers could talk and verbalize pedagogical concepts, but they have difficulties and don't know how to write it;
- some teachers could verbalize the practice, but they don't reflect the practice in the way to get new ideas, develop new strategies, based on reflective practice and theoretical background;
- some teachers expect from outside to get ready made instructions.

### **2.2 Professional portfolio in the process of certification:**

Those difficulties with understanding and interpreting ISSA standards reflect also in the process of creating teacher's professional portfolios. Some teacher's comments about creating professional portfolios:

»At the beginning I didn't know what to put in the portfolio. I couldn't decide which material is more or less important.«

»I didn't know where to put and how to structure the portfolio. I didn't know which standard reflect some materials.« /The structure of portfolio was already done by DRCPI-Step by Step.- S.R./

»When I begin to write, I find that I write what does it mean: let's say: individualization. I didn't write about my understandings of individualization.«

»Before I started to create portfolio I was sure that I 'm O.K. on all standards, than I find that I don't have materials and any comments or thoughts about some standards.«

We could assume that at the beginning of implementing ISSA standards and at the beginning of certification process, the process of creating professional portfolio extremely help teachers to clarify their understandings and help them to reflect their practice and also to make formative self-evaluation.

### **3 STANDARDS AND TEACHERS IN BOTH SIDE INTERACTION**

What we have to have in mind and how we could explain those challenges and “difficulties” on the level of interpretation? First, it is important to know that teachers interact with this material- with standards. Their interactions depend at least on their dimension of individuality (Hansen, Kaufmann, Saifer, 1999), their level of proficiency and stage in professional development- (survival, consolidation, renewal, maturity- (Katz, 1972). Different stage of development is also connected with their skills and competences for: reflection, collection of data and interpretation of those data; rethinking and making changes in the practice upon the results of reflections, consultations with other teachers, experts; understanding different points of view of one pedagogical concepts- reasoning, empathy, and multicultural point of view; ability to summarize or analyze; think and work independently.

We have to be also aware, that teachers, as well as children interact with the world and also standards regard to their own gender, culture, interests, experiences, temperaments, self-esteem, multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1995), needs, learning stiles, abilities and if we have in mind that they interact with standards true all this domains, it has to be clear that it is not enough to use just one or two communicative competencies (reading standards and talking about them- teacher or his/ her mentor), but also listening (other teachers, experts, mentors) and writing (notes, reflections, creating portfolios)- to clarify the concepts, to see the same concepts from different point of view, and to make notes as a process of formative self-evaluation and evaluation it self.

It is also true, that we and teachers are never “alone”. When teacher read the standards or want to change something, has always problems with his/ her own subjective theory, which lead their own understandings and behavior. “...the behavior will not change, if the strategy of changing will be focused just on settling new roles of behavior, without putting attention to the structure of individual attitudes and subjective theories, which are behind, but they lead the behavior of individuals- on the level of consciousness or unconsciousness.” ( Razdevšek-Pučko, 1993). We could also conclude again that in the process of reading and interpreting standards, teachers have to use all communicative competences (reading, writing, listening and talking) to revise their attitudes and understandings and their stage of proficiency on different standards.

#### 4 ISSA STANDARDS AS A TOOL TOWARD EXCELENCE

Talking about professional development and ISSA standards as a tool for proficiency and excellence true process of certification is talking about self-evaluation, external evaluation with international certifiers and creating individual, professional plans to improve the practice.

It means that ISSA standards teacher could use just as a tool for self- evaluation, for creating their own professional plan, or as a tool to achieve the certificate of excellence- ISSA certificate. In all those situations it is important to go forward the common understanding of pedagogical concepts, as it is Individualization, Learning Environment, Family Participation, teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning, Planning and Assessment, Professional Development and Social Inclusion to ensure reliability on the international level.

Observations during implementation of ISSA standards in Slovenia show:

- importance to being aware that individual teacher's interaction with ISSA standards-reading, talking, writing and understanding depend on their professional level, dimensions of individuality, subjective theories;
- importance to being aware that self- evaluation is just a first step if we would like to achieve any changes;
- importance to have mentors, colleagues, experts- for discussion, clarification, reflection, to see different perspectives of the same pedagogical concepts and to move on the next step of the professional development (in the context of Vygotsky's theory- zone of proximal development);
- importance to know that the process of changes needs time, different strategies and interactions with different materials, people. Building new knowledge and changing behaviour has to have in mind that the process of change has to go true the circle (or circles) of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

#### CONCLUSION

It is premature to make any specific conclusions after five years of implementation ISSA standards in Slovenia, because the whole process, also on the international level is in the process of changing upon the experiences and needs in the practice and also results of researches, but even that, we could conclude, that implementation and use of ISSA standards in Slovenia among the kindergartens and schools who implement child- centered philosophy and approaches, together with DRCPI- Step by Step:

- help to develop competence of professional autonomy,
- raise the sense of professional responsibility,
- clarify professional expectations toward teachers themselves, toward institutions, and also their profession,
- help teachers to develop new understandings and strategies to empower practice true theory,
- help teacher to develop skills for life- long learning true strategic and self- regulative learning.

And at the end- help teacher to understand the children- their nature, development, needs and especially to understand what is really meaningful (and fair) for the children during the time, they live in the institutions- kindergartens and in the schools- first year of their school life.

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