We Strongly Desire to help, but we cannot do everything Alone
Teacher Ankica Njavro from the primary school “Stolac” attended several training courses on inclusion. At the last training she participated in, organised by the Association Duga, she had an opportunity to hear about the experiences of teachers who had spoken about their work with children with special needs included in mainstream education. She had not learnt a lot about inclusion at university, but she attended several trainings organised by the Pedagogical Institute. Her first experience with children in inclusive education was yet to be gained. She said that she was ready for challenges, but admitted that she was a bit anxious to see how it would all go.

“In the area of the Municipality there are some children with special needs and there are many of them in the other part of the school with the Bosnian curriculum; we get some advice from the teachers working with them but as one of my colleagues said, ‘all of us will once have a child with special needs in a class’. I like to work with children and that is why I selected this profession, so I will be pleased to accept to work in inclusive education. I am only concerned that apart from the trainings and seminars I attended, I did not have the opportunity to hear about a sufficient number of cases in practice”, said a concerned Ankica.
Despite all of her concerns, she hopes that with a great deal of desire and the challenges of inclusion that she will be able to perform her work with children with special needs well. Yet, she wishes that the authorities in the Ministry of Education showed more willingness to assist in order to have inclusion better implemented: “I cannot say that they are doing nothing, but I believe that more needs to be done. A mobile team has been created, but they have not visited our school since the beginning of the school year, even though my colleague Cvija has a girl, Gabrijela, with Down syndrome. She attended many trainings together with me and we talk a lot and exchange information. She has already got some initial experience, but it would be much easier if we had more support: if the mobile team visited us or, under more ideal conditions, if the school or at least the Municipality had a special education teacher who could do some additional work with children and cooperate with us so that we could advance our work too. For example, a blind boy should enrol in the school next year and no-one knows what and how to teach him, although no one objects to his enrolment into the school. We also have a boy in the third grade that moves around with difficulty, he is not stable and he does not cope well with crowds, he is attending a class with thirty-one students. He behaves well during classes and has excellent marks. We asked through the Principal to split the class in order to create more space for him, but the request was refused with the explanation that there should be one more student for the class to split! The school has really done as much as it can, his classroom is next to the door in the basement, but we cannot do more alone. The children’s response to him is excellent, they have accepted him, they look after him as much as they can and they always let him enter the classroom first”.

Ankica says that she is sorry because the work of the system often has to be done by teachers themselves, associations like “Duga” or parents. She remembers a girl who attended her class who stammered: “Fortunately, her parents could afford to send her to a speech therapist in Mostar and it was quickly corrected; if that had not been the case then who knows whether her speech would have worsened additionally. There are so many children who do not have such a serious defect, but during their development some difficulties occur”.

In addition to her discussions with colleagues and seminars Ankica gains experience by volunteering at a day care called “Bethlehem” in Čapljina, which is attended by young people aged 18 to 30.
“Some of them have finished mainstream schools, but most of them attended special schools and some have serious mental impairment. They go there to socialise. There I can see some young people who would have been better if more work had been done with them, if they had gone through mainstream education. For example, there is a boy who could have had a better job if he had gone though a better therapy, if he had attended mainstream school and socialised with his peers. He spent days at home, he was taken to special school every day and after school he was again alone at home. He does not know any of his peers and spends days in his room watching television. But he has capacities and potential; for example, he can list all of the winners of the Dora Festival who represented Croatia at the Eurovision Song Contest over the period 1998 and 2010”.

The girl Gabrijela was enrolled into the first grade of the ninth year of education in the class of Anikica’s friend Cvija Goluža, which has given her an opportunity to study and socialise with her peers.

“Since she started school Gabrijela has made significant progress, she has socialised and does not want to be taken out of any activity. At the beginning she used to run away from the classroom, she would suddenly run out into the hallway and had aggressive outbursts, but now she wants to be equal to other children in everything they do and she is accepted by the children”, said her teacher, Cvija, who told us that she is teaching her according to an adapted curriculum. She says that each day she sees progress and Gabrijela is getting better in classes, but she is not completely sure she does everything right.

“Recently I attended a seminar organised by Duga. Special Education Teacher Vasilija was there and she really impressed me, just like a teacher from Tuzla who presented a lot of her experiences from school during one of the previous training courses. The advice and experiences I learned about help me a lot, but every child is different. Some things cannot be learnt, but we have to adjust and identify a way that will yield the best results. The training courses have helped me a lot, but I think that we need more such events, we need more contact with other teachers working on inclusion and to share our experiences...
and proposals. Ankica and I are doing our best to be as informed as possible and we are eager to learn more, but apart from the examples that I mentioned we rarely have an opportunity to learn more” said Cvija. She told us about her experiences and added that she would like to have more support within the education system.

“For example, as of September last year I have been teaching a girl with Down syndrome in my class, but the mobile team has not come to visit us yet. I addressed the issue with the Principal who helped as much as she could and she responded to my request: a school pedagogue will do some additional work with Gabrijela twice a week. Gabrijela is a wonderful girl, I like to teach her and I believe that with additional engagement better progress can be achieved with her”.

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Ankica and Cvija said that they will continue their professional development in the future as well as the sensitisation of the community in which they work, including teachers, parents and the authorities, whom they would like to see more involved in the introduction of inclusion into schools. Cvija hopes that they will be able to successfully lead Gabrijela to higher classes, while Ankica anxiously and eagerly waits for the next generation of pupils, with some children with special needs amongst them.