

## VRTEC V SREDIŠČU

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**Povzetek:** Vrtec je za lokalno skupnost izjemnega pomena in tega dejstva se v našem vrtcu dobro zavedamo. Vsakodnevno smo namreč v stiku s preko tisoč otroki in njihovimi družinami. Če seštejemo te številke, ugotovimo, da lahko imamo s pravim pristopom velik vpliv za veliko število ljudi. Sodelovanje z družinami vsako leto nadgrajujemo. V vrtcu je zaposlen kader, ki se zaveda odgovornosti (do sebe in do drugih). Z različnimi srečanji, vsi zaposleni sodelujejo pri razvoju vrtca. Vključevanje družin pomaga pri dopolnjevanju programa vrtca, pri izoblikovanju vrednot, načrtovanju dejavnosti, katerih glavni cilj je vedno skupno dobro. Vrtec se vključuje v projekte, ki sovpadajo k zastavljenim vrednotam in podpirajo zastavljene cilje. Zavedamo se, da potrebno imeti zaposlene, ki živijo te vrednote, saj jih le tako lahko avtentično posredujejo naprej bodisi otrokom bodisi staršem. Stremimo k zadovoljnim zaposlenim, ker bodo tako bolj kreativni, dajali bodo pobude in čutili se bodo vredne za delo, ki ga opravljajo. Ko imajo otroci ob sebi takšne ljudi, imajo omogočeno spodbudno učno okolje, iz katerega se lahko naučijo kar največ, predvsem pa gradijo na dobri samopodobi. Želja vsakega starša je zadovoljen otrok, otrok, ki napreduje, ki je vedoželjen itd. Različne ankete in vprašalniki so nam potrdili zaupanje, ki ga starši čutijo do našega vrtca. To pa je primerno okolje, v katerem se lahko učimo in vplivamo ter sodelujemo drug z drugim. In le takšno sodelovanje lahko deluje za skupno dobro za trajnostni razvoj celotne skupnosti.

**Ključne besede:** vrtec, skupnost, vzajemno sodelovanje, odgovornost, zaupanje, vrednote

## KINDERGARTEN AT CENTRE STAGE

**Abstract:** Kindergarten is an essential and fundamental part of local community. We are well aware of that, as we are in contact with over a thousand children and their family members on a daily basis. If we sum up the numbers, it can be stated that with a proper approach we can have a huge impact on a great number of people. Cooperation with families is upgraded every year. Our employees are consciously aware of their responsibilities towards others and themselves. This is why all the employees cooperate in the kindergarten progress and growth through various expert meetings. Inclusion of families helps us refine the kindergarten programme, form basic values and plan activities whose main objective is always common good. The kindergarten takes part in projects that go well with its declared values and support our specific objectives. We are aware that the key to authentic communication of these values and goals to children and their parents are the employees, who live (not only declare) those values. We strive for satisfied employees because that is the only way to activate their creativity, proactivity and their sense of self worth. When children spend time with people like that, they are able to learn more and build their self-confidence more efficiently due to a very encouraging and stimulating learning environment. After all, every parent's wish is a happy, progressing and curious child. The conducted survey confirmed parents' trust in our kindergarten. So, in this stimulating environment we are able to learn, influence and cooperate

with each other. And only that kind of cooperation can work for the greater and common good, for the sustainable development of the entire community.

**Keywords:** kindergarten, community, mutual cooperation, responsibility, trust, values, Slovenska Bistrica

### **Kindergarten as a Centre of Activity**

How do we have to work to make kindergarten the centre of activity? After reaching a certain level of trust and cooperation, how to continuously upgrade without asking too much or losing trust? Why is it important that a kindergarten becomes the centre of activity, what qualities can it offer to the local community?

### **Kindergarten's Path to Becoming an Important Stakeholder in the Local Community**

Kindergarten Otona Župančiča, Slovenska Bistrica will be turning 70 in three years. If this has been a period in human life, we could say that it has already reached its mature age. However, the kindergarten stays vital with the influx of new generations of children, parents and employees. Kindergarten changes like a human, it becomes wiser and more and more present in the surrounding environment. Luckily, the local communities make it younger by building new kindergartens.

Since 2002, the number of children, enrolled in our kindergarten, increased for 31 % or for 408 children. Due to 1308 enrolled children we are one of the largest preschools in Slovenia. In the first couple of months this year, this number has further increased. However, we are certainly a kindergarten with the most locations. Currently, we work on 29 locations and are trying to reduce this number by building new buildings.

We are present in four municipalities – Slovenska Bistrica, Oplotnica, Poljčane and Makole. None of the newly formed municipalities decided to break the kindergarten up. In the past, this was only done by the municipality of Slovenska Bistrica, who joined the kindergarten units in Leskovec, Črešnjevce, Laporje and Šmartno with local primary schools.

Table 1: Movement of enrolled children:

School year	Nr. of children from the first age group	Percentage of enrolled children from the first age group	Nr. of children from the second age group and combined classes	Total number of enrolled children	Average per class	Total number of classes
2002/2003	193	21.4	707	900	17.6	51
2014/2015	366	28	942	1308	17.4	75

The kindergarten Slovenska Bistrica is embedded in the environment. We are trying to accommodate the needs of the environment as much as we can. Individual kindergarten units are different in organisation, as some work in a rural and others in an urban environment. This influences the number of children, opening times and cooperation with stakeholders.

We are lucky that the kindergarten Slovenska Bistrica has been breaking fresh ground in the past. In the seventies, the kindergarten was a pioneer in preschool education. A decade before all other Slovenian kindergartens, it organised a special one year preschool programme for children, who were about to start primary school in one year. In late seventies and early eighties, they organised a similar programme for one year younger children.

In the past years, the kindergarten Slovenska Bistrica has proven with its good practice that it is the right decision for a public institution to invest into each individual stakeholder (children, parents and employees). The results are becoming more and more visible. The kindergarten's visibility proves its openness for the local and broader Slovenian environment. We take well-thought steps to gain international funding, which also contributes to a better quality of our work with children and their development.

Each year, we renew our certification of quality SIQ - Quality for Future Education (Kakovost za prihodnost vzgoje in izobraževanja), which is an external confirmation that we are constantly developing further.

The kindergarten has won several prizes and acclaim across Slovenia and abroad, due to international cooperation. The kindergarten's employees are aware of the value of their work and mission, and conduct it with passion and responsibility.

Important recognitions:

- International ISSA certification – STEP by STEP;
- The sportiest kindergarten in Slovenia - Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport
- SIQ – Quality for future education (Kakovost za prihodnost),
- Best implementer of the sports programme ZLATI SONČEK,
- Gold medal at the international art competition for children in Gaziantep etc.

The prizes and recognitions are a reflection of our kindergarten's quality work. The more we develop, the greater are our expectations for ourselves. And as history shows, perseverance can help you achieve a lot. Therefore, our kindergarten is constantly striving for more. We are aware of our influence on the environment and find it necessary to constantly improve the cooperation with the community and bring it to a higher level in order to influence more and more stakeholders.

### **Constant upgrading of our work**

The staff of kindergarten Slovenska Bistrica is aware of the importance of a **holistic kindergarten management**. New findings in this field call for an interdependence of all stakeholders, which are present in kindergarten. Therefore it is important that all of them are included in life-long learning. We can work successfully only when all of us know, what we are striving for in the kindergarten. **We promote the development of every individual on a professional and personal level.** We are aware of personal integrity and the fact that a development in one field has a decisive impact on other fields.

We choose our staff with a lot of consideration and want to participate in their education. Students already come to us in their first year of high school, when they are 14 or 15 years old. Our relationship with them is very important as each of them could become our future co-worker.

We enable our employees to continue the process of life-long learning and offer them support for their professional and personal development. The development of individuals not only improves the work in kindergarten, but also has a positive effect on the life of their families. Communication improves, knowledge on ecological topics can be applied in every-day life, the quality of leisure time improves and the independence from consumerism strengthens.

After Slovenia had joined the EU, a number of various financial transfers became available. Our kindergarten applies for funding:

- The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD): Europe investing in rural areas funded two large projects: Vrečkica (Bag) and Živa dediščina (Living heritage).
- With the funding of the European Social Fund and programmes of life-long learning we have been educating the entire staff in the field of developing the competence of learning (learning to learn) and cooperation with parents or the empowerment of families for years. From 2013 to 2014, we have been part of the project for the increase in social and cultural capital in local communities with the goal of developing equal opportunities and promoting social inclusion – SKK.

We receive additional funding for our activities from other sources, with the help of parents, local community, companies... Good and positive solutions always find support ...

**The Vrečkica (Bag) project** was introduced in Holland and Belgium and on the Gornja Radgona fair as a best practice example. The project dealt with the problem of plastic bags and included children, parents, all employees and a broader local community. In cooperation with the local puppet theatre Koruzno zrno, our kindergarten teachers prepared a puppet show on the topic of the story Mesečeve sanje (Moon's dreams). The co-author of the story, which was also financed in this project, is our teacher Mojca Pešak). The puppet show was performed for all children from our kindergarten and their parents. After each show, children decorated their own fabric bag. Later on, our kindergarten also participated in the contest, organised by the local utility company Komunala Slovenska Bistrica, which was looking for the best "eco title" for a fabric bag. Our title "Earth is calling for help!" won. Many bags were printed and we could use them for our project. Since then six years have passed and the progress in our community is visible. The media helped by informing the public about the problem and today we can still see people shopping with the bags that were decorated by our children. In all projects, we try to continue with the activities also after the project has officially ended. Every now and then we perform the puppet show Mesečeve sanje for the citizens, which is a great reminder that we have to treat nature carefully. Our kindergarten also made progress. Before the project, we found it easiest to carry fruit, etc. to

distant units in plastic bags. The project raise awareness about this issue and the kitchen staff changed their transport system. Plastic bags have been almost completely abolished.

Preschool children transfer our findings into their families. For example, our kindergarten initiated separate waste disposal. Afterwards, many parents told us that their children informed them on how to separate waste.

In order to raise awareness on healthy food, we offer all our employees and parents educations, workshops and visits to ecologic gardens. Knowledge and experience, which mentors gain with the help of the Institute for sustainable development School eco gardens and the society of eco civil initiative Ekoci, are transferred directly into their work with children and onto their colleagues.

A planned learning environment, which includes personal experience, relaxed play, laughter and fun, offers children and their parents a possibility to learn in all fields: nature, society, language, maths, art and movement.

After setting up a bread oven in the playground of the Sonček kindergarten unit, many renowned guests have congratulated us for a well-thought construction of the oven and its contribution to the open learning environment.

The oven represents a learning area, where children play and at the same time gather experience and knowledge in bread baking and fruit drying, keep traditions alive and get in touch with the elements of fire, water and earth. This is also a place, where they socialize and expand their circle of friendship. The most tasteful bread is the one that comes fresh from the oven and was knead by children's gentle hands.

The event Kindergarten sings and dances, a relay race of seeds, which had thousand visitors, focused on the exchange of seeds and food tasting, where local producers were given the opportunity to present their products.

The activities of our kindergarten as a coordinator of the Relay race of seeds in Slovenian kindergartens were introduced at the round table debate at the fair Altermed in Celje and at the international 15<sup>th</sup> Alpe Adria bio symposium Bio goes to school in April 2014, at the Biotechnical Faculty, University of Maribor and at the 2<sup>nd</sup> international conference Integral green economy for a better world in November 2014 at the Biotechnical centre Naklo.

**The sensitisation program** as a model of education consists of various contents and is implemented for educational professionals and citizens in the scope of different projects that aim at activating personal potentials of citizens and at including the landscape potentials in the forms of sustainable development.

During the four-year cooperation (2011 - 2015) at courses of sensitisation and during the project Živa dediščina (Living Heritage), we developed methods for holistic teaching through the heritage. At the same time, we **included parents, grandparents and other citizens** into kindergarten's activities. Thereby, the kindergarten contributed to the well-being of the community and was able to enrich its basic tasks with knowledge and traditions of the older generations.

In the scope of training, we developed an **open learning environment**. Teaching and education were transferred into preschool environment, where we could find learning challenges.

In the sensitisation courses, kindergarten teachers were introduced to new methods of work, which include feeling, researching and creativity. They were exercising how to expand their perception, how to train their attention as a tool for research and empathy and how to deeply experience the environment and our heritage. New findings helped them approach teaching and heritage creatively. Each year, at the end of the training, they formed their method and expressed also their individual potentials. The exercises and results were published and presented at annual European heritage days.

The sensitisation course does not offer methods, which you could copy. Instead it represents a programme of personal transformation and growth. During the training, kindergarten teachers first discovered a holographic view on the world, the environment, their capabilities, and their professional role. They learned how to recognise and use the knowledge, hidden in the heritage. By being aware of his/her potentials and the potentials of the environment, the kindergarten teacher can offer children a more profound and holistic approach.

The sensitisation programme promotes holistic development of teachers and children. In four seasons of the sensitisation training in Slovenska Bistrica, kindergarten teachers formed more than 80 topics for children, which

discuss the heritage of the environment by using sensitisation exercises. The kindergarten and the environment were introduced to a new paradigm of the discussed heritage and landscape, which creatively includes heritage content into life. We set the base for sustainable development, which is based on equal cooperation of all residents. Children, teachers and others involved could experience a deep connection with the nature and the home environment. Together we have formed approaches that include the knowledge of heritage into development in a creative and innovative way, which is also responsible to society and landscape.

More and more parents are aware of the importance of including their preschool child into kindergarten. What is more, we were able to create conditions for the inclusion of younger children, where there were none before. When organising work in kindergarten, we consider the needs of the parents. The working hours of our kindergarten units are different and adapted to the needs of each environment. The kindergartens in small and distant communities open one hour earlier than in urban environments, so that parents can come to work on time. We are open also, if only one child is present. The parents contact us, if the child is sick or absent for any other reason. This prevents young families with small children from moving away and from driving their children with them into the valley. Instead, the child is included in the kindergarten in his/her hometown. Therefore children develop an emotional bond with the landscape and get to know their peers, while we ensure their enrolment into a small village primary school. Experience has shown that parents will not enrol their child in the local primary school, if the child did not attend local kindergarten.

Maybe, the environment is not aware of kindergarten's contribution to keeping the countryside populated. We are trying to show this by cooperating with the local community at festivals and events, where the preschool is always present. Unit managers are in constant contact with societies and other relevant actors of living in the countryside.

Parents are prepared to cooperate when their children are still young. However, as their child grows older, they lose interest in gaining new knowledge. Kindergarten organises workshops for parents, which take place in their child's kindergarten unit. We offer them a variety of contents, which help them develop into efficient and responsible parents.

Generations of children get to know each other through kindergarten and parents are given the opportunity of networking, which our kindergarten fondly supports. In our opinion, each family has something to offer to others, but we are also all vulnerable and even the strongest family can face an obstacle. Networking often helps people overcome various situations, which they are confronted with.

Our ecological focus leads us to the topic of raising awareness against excessive consumerism. Even families with enough financial means take part in the exchange of clothes and other things.

From September 2013 until December 2014, we were part of the project for an increase of social and cultural capital in local communities for developing equal opportunities and promoting social inclusion (**Dvig socialnega in kulturnega kapitala v lokalnih skupnostih za razvoj enakih možnosti in spodbujanje socialne vključenosti – SKK**). We participated in the project together with the high school SŠ Slovenska Bistrica and primary schools OŠ Pohorskega odreda and 2. OŠ Slovenska Bistrica. The name of the project was SI OK (are you ok): s – solidarity, i – innovation, o – responsibility, k – creativity. These were also our leading principles during the project. We designed the action plan ourselves, according to what we believed, was missing in our city and what we could offer it. During that time, we intensely and productively cooperated with the local community and among each other. The main aim of the project was to connect people and local communities.

The SKK project additionally confirmed that we are a socially responsible community. Social responsibility also led us to the **project, prepared by the Jože Trontelj Institute for Ethics and Values**. After receiving an invitation for cooperation from the institute, we reviewed their programme and recognised the principles, values and actions that we find important and according to which our kindergarten works. "The institute's intention was to expand and deepen awareness on the role of ethics, values and bioethics in forming a common future in all important areas of social activities, especially in education." Our staff (educational and technical) is aware of the fact that we have a great influence on children and consequently also on their parents and broader community. In the scope of the Ethics and Values project, we first implemented the module Knowledge and Wisdom, which is guided by truth, responsibility, mental openness, love for learning and knowledge, soundness, moderation and perspective. The guidelines were provided by the institute, yet we would like to highlight responsibility - responsibility to oneself, fellow humans and society. The work in our kindergarten is done very responsibly, since the leaders enable it. When we are entrusted with an assignment, we implement it with responsibility. There is no constant control, only trust. Trust that the assignments will be done responsibly. And if you are

aware that you are responsible for your actions, you will do your job responsibly and will not look for excuses elsewhere. This module also enabled us to dive deep into “local knowledge”. We looked for people who carry a fortune inside themselves and can teach us many things. One of the important conclusions was that everyone can contribute to society. In this way children learned about their value and the value of their parents.

Responsibility was also part of our project on self-evaluation, which we introduced two years ago with the help of the National school for leadership in education. We started setting new goals in a way that includes every employee in kindergarten. Since all of us contributed to the set goals, we now have a responsibility to achieve them. No one told us what needs to be done; instead, we set them together. Our leaders support this kind of organisation. The employees thereby receive a confirmation that their voice is important and that they can actually participate in kindergarten’s development. Educational workers are divided into 10 groups. Their leaders meet regularly to discuss topics, chosen at group meetings, and prepare common suggestions, about which the leaders later inform their groups. Educational professionals are therefore more connected and feel more responsible.

The next module in the institute's project was the Concern for Others and focused on the values of mutual respect, family happiness, gender equality, generational harmony, partnership, solidarity, and care for children, elders and people with special needs. The concern for others basically covers the work of the kindergarten. All the above mentioned values are already present at our kindergarten. We accept children and their families unconditionally. In our opinion, by accepting someone you show great respect for that person. We take the needs of children and their parents very seriously. The same goes for the needs of our employees. We constantly cooperate with parents, elders and people with special needs, which has been our practice for many years.

Next was the module Life, nature, health, which stresses the following values: respect for life, respect for nature and the environment, health, bioethical values. This module strengthened our activities in the field of sensitisation. We learned that our actions in this field are already very deep. The relationship to nature, life and health was already on a high level. We learn to perceive ourselves, the nature and other people on a higher level. During this module, adults learned a lot from children, who reminded us of everything that we often forget or do not take time for it. Nature through the eyes of a child has a greater value than through the eyes of most adults. Children still know how to feel the nature. Therefore, our kindergarten is returning back to nature with the help of sensitisation and is making sure that children keep this connection between humans and nature.

The next modules in the Ethics and values project will be: Culture; Work, creativity; Tradition; Universalism; Fairness; Integrity and Humanity. Although we already respect all the values in our kindergarten, we were happy to accept the institute’s invitation, as their work will help us find a deeper sense in our activities.

### **How we influence others**

With the enrolment of children into kindergarten, we also receive their parents. We offer them various types of cooperation and support for their parenting. This has to be taken into consideration when we organise the life in kindergarten and provide training for kindergarten’s educators. Only with cooperation can we create good conditions for children that will support their development of skills, knowledge and help them build their personality. With the help of projects and common activities we can change the responsibility towards the environment and re-evaluate values.

Together we are **raising awareness and educating ourselves for sustainable development**. The easiest time to reach parents is when they have small children. During the preschool period they are the most involved and open to change. Locally produced food, which we buy in the kindergarten, has many layers of influence. The producers get a regular customer, the money, paid for it by the local community and parents, stays with us; therefore one can decide what to plant or sow.

### **Results of our work**

The size of the kindergarten has a decisive impact on the dynamics of the development and the transfer of good practices from one unit to another. For us, all children are equally important. Therefore we provide the same new toys and materials for all our classes. What is more, we are also aware of the importance of workshops for parents at all locations. Parents should not have the feeling that they are less important, if they live in the countryside.

After losing a whole generation of children – the transfer of 6-year-olds into primary school – we have reorganised shorter programmes into preschools. This helped us solve the problem of firing employees and closing kindergartens in the most vulnerable environment – mountain villages, and strengthened the kindergarten

internally. Kindergarten teachers, who worked in these remote villages, played the most important role in this process. They went from door to door, trying to convince parents, how important kindergarten enrolment is. Today, these teachers represent the kindergarten in these villages. The unit in Kebeļ, Prihova, Tinje and Spodnja Polskava, which used to have only seven children, today has two to four classes. We are indirectly raising employment in the area.

Several years ago, we used to choose only seminars, related to working with children. Today, we are more aware of the need for contents that support personal development. Each employee presents an important link in the realisation of our vision's goals.

We use as much quality local food as possible. Our kindergarten invited producers to sow and plant for our needs. Today, each playground has a garden or a bed, which is children's responsibility. In this way we help them develop a responsible attitude to seeds and nature. Children gather seeds, plant vegetables, monitor their growth, pick the fruits, gather recipes and prepare different dishes, while learning how to take care for themselves and who can help them with that.

In constant pursuit of opportunities for cooperation with the environment and the herewith connected responsibility, our kindergarten decided to establish a centre that will work for the greater and common good.