The teacher from Sveti Nikole and his student with autism: I would lie if I say that it is easy, but it is a great privilege - I learn from him

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Prepared by: Vesna Ivanovska-Ilievska / vesna.ivanovska@fakulteti.mk

Proofreader: Ivana Kuzmanoska

On the 37th day since the beginning of the school year, we were honored to hear accurate and understandable words. Then for the first time he revealed to us that he recognized the colors. We found out that he used nouns and articles in his speech, said Ile Mihajlovski, a teacher at the "Kiril i Metodij" primary school.

When he met Maksim five years ago, teacher Ile took over a new generation of first-graders. With his seven years, Maksim was one year older than the other 19 children, who today are not only his classmates, but also friends and provide him great support in everyday life. The medical certificate recommended for Maksim to be enrolled inclusively in the first grade, with an individual approach in teaching and instruction.

This is the story of the teacher Ile Mihajlovski from the primary school "Kiril i Metodij" in Sveti Nikole and Maksim, a student with autism. The name Maksim is a pseudonym, randomly chosen. Through Mihajlovski's experience, we recount their five-year-old story, the challenges they faced, the battles they were fighting together. Not only the two of them, but the whole class.

Friends – greatest support in everyday life

- We met five years ago. He was seven years old then, because the previous year he was not enrolled in the first grade. The choice to be enrolled in the first grade was mine. The medical document proposed for him to be enrolled inclusively. For persons with an autistic spectrum of behavior there is no measure. Every case is different. Maksim had limited speech, introvert, absent in the communication, lack of coordination of the body, hands and feet, problems in h, his speech only included nouns, he had unusual responses to sensory stimuli, stereotypical and repetitive motor skills - Mihajlovski goes back to the beginning, when he first met Maksim.

Teacher Ile Mihajlovski with students

The first days he was completely into his own world, without a visible need for social interaction and communication neither with the teacher nor with friends. When he felt the need to speak, he uttered incomprehensible concepts and words, learned phrases and unconnected words, which were far from an attempt to communicate.

- On the 37th day since the beginning of the school year, we were honored to hear accurate and understandable words. Then for the first time he revealed to us that he recognized the colors. We found out that he used nouns and articles in his speech, said Mihajlovski.

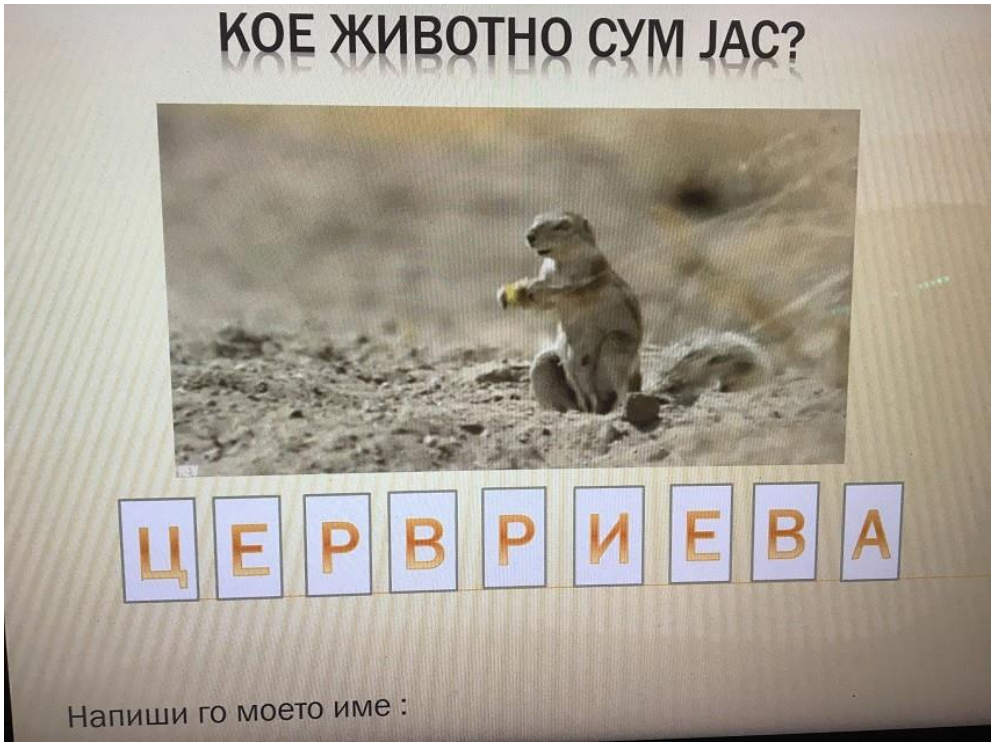
A process that has its own beginning, but there is no end

In the first three years, Maksim attended the classes without an educational assistant. Few times they tried one of his parents to accompany him during the class, but it turned out to be a useless model. Simply, his attention was more focused on the parent than to the teaching. In the last two years, Maksim has own personal assistant who mostly helps him to meet his personal needs during the classes and recess, and partly to complete the classwork.

My work was primarily to learn from Maksim: teacher Ile Mihajlovski

Teacher Ile explained that the choice to accept Maxim in the new grade was not accidental.

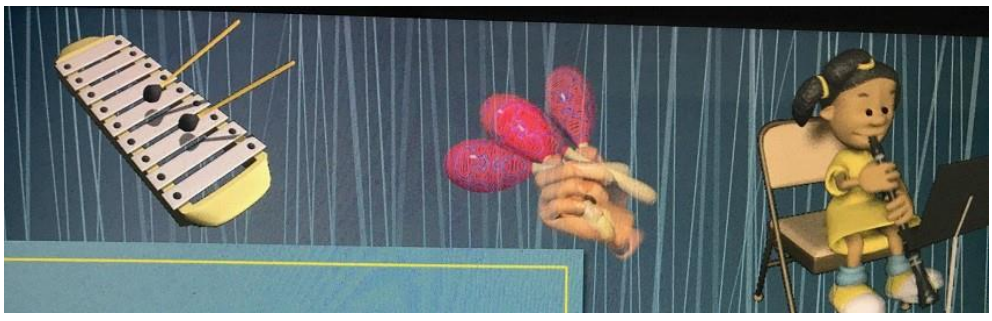
- As a teacher, I work for the first time with a student with an autistic spectrum of behavior. But over the years I have attended several European and Balkan trainings on the topic of inclusion and working with children with special needs. From 1999 to 2006, I ran the first day center that worked with children with special needs in Sveti Nikole. The experience I gained and the training abroad were fundamental in accepting the challenge to have him in my class and to work with him - the teacher said.



Learning material

The working day, teaching, mastering the teaching material with Maksim were completely different from teaching the other children.

- The work primarily meant to learn from him. To find out about his interests, motivation, what attracted or turned away his attention. To discover his abilities and opportunities, weaknesses and strengths. The more I learned from him about him, I could more easily adapt my way of work with him. This is a long process, at times difficult and unpredictable because there are always more questions than answers. A process that has its own beginning, but there is no end. Each day Maksim reveals a part of him that I was not aware of before - explained Mihajlovski.



Learning process

Although he talks about his experience with ease, not for a single moment should we understand inclusion as a simple way of teaching. The process does not cover only the teacher and the child with a disability, but also the other children, the parents, the school staff.

- I would lie if I say it's easy. An autistic spectrum of behavior implies a range of difficulties that I encounter every day. It's very difficult to explain to six-year-olds what is autism and why their friend behaves differently. Eliminating the ability of children to copy their autistic classmate's behavior is a big responsibility and burden. Not only the classmates, but also their parents, should accept him as an equal member of the class. This is the second difficult step at the beginning of the work. However, I am pleased that the school I work in has more successful stories about inclusive education - teacher Ile told us.

Inclusive education has its limits that need to be respected

In the first three years, while he was not accompanied by a teaching assistant, it was necessary to accommodate, modify and balance literally every lesson - to meet Maksim's personal, physiological needs. Both the lessons and the recess. To react properly and effectively when panic attacks or crying episodes or tantrums occur. To be constantly ready for a new moment you do not expect – in class, during breaks, while taking a walk, during a visit, in a theater, at a show, at a cinema ...

- It's simple, every day is like going to work with all alarms switched on, so you can react adequately, effectively and above all calmly in front of all students - explained the teacher.

Maksim recognizes 2D and 3D shapes

Today, Maksim is in the fifth grade. In the second grade he managed to learn the Cyrillic alphabet (reading and writing), to recognize numbers. In the third grade he mastered the Latin script (reading and writing), recognizing 2D and 3D forms, some of the material in the science, social study and skills.

- In terms of socialization, in the classroom he is completely relaxed and on his own. He takes initiative in the interaction with other children. He can recognize some of the students by name, he independently approaches all students to make contact with them - teacher Ile said.

Maksim can now read and write

Maksim will finalize the fifth grade this year, during which he had contact only with his class teacher and three subject teachers. His classmates from September will face a new challenge - subject teaching, with more teachers. Is Maksim ready for this? According to Mihajlovski, at this point, he will be hardly able to follow the classes in the higher grades.

- I have been with him for five years and I know exactly what and how much he has achieved. Maxim is still not ready to follow the classes in the higher grades. The curriculum is very extensive, has many teaching subjects with difficult content. Inclusive education has its own boundaries that need to be respected so that education can have the effect. There is no positive effect on the student with an autistic spectrum of behavior if he is only transferred from one class to another. Content adaptation has its own limits, as well. Advancement in the higher grades mostly depends on the autistic spectrum itself, whether the student can progress to a higher grade. Successful inclusive education during primary education, and further, requires serious changes in curriculum, subjects, number of class hours. For the progress in the higher grades, it is necessary to have adapted textbooks, trained subject teachers for inclusive education, a large selection of didactically adapted materials and content, adequate classrooms, sensory rooms. Unless all of this is provided, inclusive education can be harmful for the student, and not helpful, Mihajlovski concluded.