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My story of working with Roma children

Casuistry from Velka Ida, Slovakia

My name is Vladimira Fortunova. In 2009 I graduated university in the general education subjects, namely in Slovak language and literature and history. Currently I am working in a community centre in Velka Ida near Kosice where I lead the afternoon school club at the local elementary school. I first encountered the Feuerstein's method in 2014. In 2015 I graduated the FIE Standard I course and afterwards the FIE Basic I course as well. Since then I have been using the method when I work with children at the school club.

How did FIE change me

How the education is set in Slovakia is that it pushes teachers to steadily increasing their qualification. In praxis this takes on shape of participating in various courses, often only for the purpose of obtaining a certificate. I too did become such a 'certificate hoarder' after university. With similar attitude I went to the FIE course since every paper counts. I did know a little about the method and I heard a one or two things from my colleagues. I did not expect much since none of the previous methods I took course in did not click with me. The greater was my surprise.

FIE opened my eyes in multiple ways. The time I spent at the course felt just like therapy, which helped me realize many a thing, understand diverse situations in life and sort my thoughts. My view of the world gained a new dimension. I began to perceive my surroundings more acutely and take heed of them. FIE taught me to listen to and respect other opinions even when I disagree with them.

It improved my orientation in space. When I want to take a turn in car, I first have to tell myself, which hand is right and which is left. It FIE that gave me more self-confidence. I taught me how to not fear the unknown and to overcome come it step by step.

The environment I grew up in did not tolerate mistakes, on the contrary it condemned them. Mistake was equal to failure. I therefore, only did take on actions where failure was not possible, which was quite restricting. This was however, the only view on life available to me and I considered it the right approach. FIE showed me how mistakes are a natural part of life and allow one to move forward. I ceased to put the blame for my own mistakes on others and began to take responsibility for my actions. It is precisely for this realization I feel freer than I used to be.



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The communication with my family and friends took a huge shift. I started to formulate my thoughts more accurately. I no longer wait for them to learn my thoughts and feeling from my expression alone. I assess others less often as I strive to understand them and put myself in their shoes.

The method has had the biggest impact on my professional area. I used to be very directive when working with children. All of them had to work in classes, whether they willed or not. I did not care if they were prepared or not and if they needed something or not. I just had to teach them what I decided by myself and that was it. This resulted in heavy atmosphere in the classroom, children being tired from both the pace of work and me, and myself left frustrated about not being able to teach the children what I had planned to teach them. I did not comprehend how could they not learn the way I taught them since I had been taught the same way and I did learn what I were obliged to. FIE showed me this was not the right path. It showed me how to teach children in a calm and peaceful way.

The method raised all my system of work I grew up in, was accustomed to and believed to be the right one.

How did FIE change the children at the school club.

The afternoon school club is attended by children from socially excluded Roma community. Those children come from very weak social standing. They are growing up in an environment, which does not provide suitable conditions for a healthy child development. They were not brought up and guided by this environment or their parents. Often, they were not even loved. They are doomed to fail even before they have reached school. In most cases they are not able to cope with the educational requirements of elementary school.

In the year 2015/2016 the club was attended by eight children four times a week. In ten months, we went through instruments Organization of Dots and Recognizing Emotions. The intensity and amount of work with an instrument was determined by attendance of the children and their mood. It was around three or four times a week.

In our beginnings the children were confused because the work with FIE method is in many ways different and follows different rules than those taught commonly at school. It posed a great demand on children as they were not given precise instruction on how to proceed. They were not used to think freely, only to mechanically fill out tasks. A huge obstacle was for them to work independently. I do not know and I cannot do it were the most frequent phrases I heard from them. After I encouraged them and they were finally able to draw a square on the board for instance, they were not satisfied with their



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conduct and felt stressed. They required my constant attention and reassurance that what they did was correct. The children were missing imagination and ability to dream. Their severely lacking vocabulary did not allow for them to express properly. After they began to speak, they got stuck in a middle of sentence, and not able to find appropriate word they rather gave up in shame, silently. They could not concentrate on one activity.

In the following school year of 2016/2017 eight new children began to visit us, who had until then only experienced a typical school club and had zero information on what FIE is. We began with Organization of Dots again. As the group grew two times bigger our pace slowed down. We worked the instrument twice a week. That was when we first observed the impact of the method. In comparison to their new classmates who just entered the club, the children who were attending the previous year were much more daring, able to concentrate and were not taken aback by new things. Just as well did they have higher self-confidence, they behaviour and attitude to learning was calmer. It was amazing to watch all the things they had remembered from the year before. During the school year four children left the school club. Two of them were taken away from their parents for them not fulfilling their parental obligations and placed in a children's home, parents of the other two children cancelled without giving reason for it. Their place was taken by three new kids, which expressed interest in our club. Even though these kids were a bit behind their peers, after a few months of working individually they caught to the rest of the class and we all proceeded together from then on.

The last school year 2017/2018 there were eleven children visiting the school club who successfully went through the Identify Emotions instrument.

After three years of working with FIE and completing two instruments the children made a huge step forward:

- The working environment improved significantly, the children are no longer under stress, and they feel relaxed.
- Their self-confidence increased, they believe in themselves when learning, the words like I do not know, I cannot do it are rarely heard in the club.
- Their intrinsic motivation kicked in, they work at the club not because I want them to or because they must. But because they want it.
- They began to think through their steps and about what they are doing.
- They began to ask: Why is like that?
- They started to work on their fear of new things and began to gradually overcome it.
- At various activities they are at ease, they can concentrate for longer periods of time.
- They expanded their vocabulary, they know how to express themselves and how to name things.



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- They can state their opinion, some children can back it up.
- They learned to work with mistakes, they can find it, admit it and remedy it.
- They got rid of competitiveness amongst each other, each child works at his or her own pace and others respect it.
- They learned to ask for help and help others when asked.
- They can name their feelings, they are less aggressive.
- They can assess their own work.
- They are happy about their success, they show emotion.
- Their imagination has woken up.
- They apply their findings in various real-life situations.

The children are progressing daily thanks to the FIE method. This is not proven only by my own observations and experience from the school club, but also by their parents and teachers at school. According to their words the children are more polite and calm compared to their peers, they have larger vocabulary and are more focused during classes. Their school attendance improved as well.

The most important feedback, however, comes from the children themselves. When they fix their big eyes on you and tell you they enjoyed the club. Or when they do not want to leave the club and go home, but they remain seated in the class. When they are telling you about their feelings and impression from what was discussed at the club. That is when you tell yourself you, along with the children, are going in the right direction.

Why is FIE suitable for working with Roma children

The FIE method is thanks to the correct mediated learning gentle towards the children. It respects the level of their ability. It teaches them to be self-reliant. It makes the children feel they are there for a reason and can achieve a lot with them willing. It does not let them fail, it searches for and builds upon their strong skills to promote their self-confidence. It teaches the basic of good behaviour. It teaches them how to work with emotions and react adequately in various key situations. It forms their personality to allow them to not only understand themselves but navigate their lives as well. All of that comes to realization in pleasant atmosphere and without pressure. The correct mediator's approach to such children is with kindness. And in most cases, kindness is something the children had had yet to experience before encountering the method.