

Inclusive Education of Roma Students from Socially Disadvantaged Background as a Determinant of Their Social Inclusion in the Slovak Republic

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Abstract—The aim of the paper is to analyze a longstanding problem in Slovakia – the effective education of Roma students coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Although it is a relatively small country, there are over 630 communities in the Slovak Republic. The efficiency of the projects was verified by interviews with participants; questionnaires; and direct observations. Evaluation reports which summarized and evaluated the outcomes of the projects only confirmed their success. Slovakia realizes that appropriate social inclusion of marginalized citizens coming from the Roma ethnic group can only be achieved through education based on equality of all students and acceptance of diversity.

Keywords—Inclusive education, marginalized communities, Roma student, equality in education, socially disadvantaged backgrounds, social inclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

SLOVAKIA is often criticized for negative attitudes towards members of the Roma ethnic group which reaches approximately 10% of the total Slovak population. There is a numerous ethnic group of Roma people (approx. 400 000) in Slovakia and most of them live in marginalized communities – settlements [1]. It should be noted here that a view of an outsider can be distorted, especially if accidental or short-term. There is not a single law, regulation or notice in force in Slovakia which would discriminate against any nationality or ethnic group, including the Roma people.

Villages and towns with higher density of Roma people have classrooms at schools attended only by Roma students, and there also are some schools attended by Roma students only. One of the reasons is the fact that these students do not receive appropriate preparation in their communities before they start attending school due to the lack of positive educational incentives and stimuli which would develop their personalities in an appropriate and complex manner. Therefore, classrooms attended only by Roma students are created for some time to bridge the educational deficit from the family and to facilitate school inclusion. What is more, special education schools (for students with intellectual disabilities) are attended by many more Roma students for various reasons (educational and social neglect; yet-unmastered language; sensory deficits which are very often connected with some degree of intellectual disability) than

should be necessary. Although Slovakia is trying to improve education of the socially disadvantaged Roma students, we are still under the scrutiny of international organizations, e.g. UN Committee for Human Rights or Amnesty International which claim that the Roma students continue to be segregated and hold unequal position in the national school system. Therefore, the government of the Slovak Republic endeavours to create conditions for their inclusive education through various steps, strategies, laws and acts which guarantee them the right to education without discrimination. The most effective tools within promotion of inclusive education of the socially disadvantaged Roma students in Slovak schools also include projects co-supported by the European Union: MRK1 (Marginalized Roma Communities) – supporting inclusion and full-day education system at primary schools; MRK2 (Marginalized Roma Communities) – supporting inclusive pre-school education of Roma children, and PRINED (Project of Inclusive Education) – creating supportive teams of professionals (school psychologist, special education teacher, remedial education teacher, social education teacher, and teacher assistant) for effective implementation of inclusive education of the socially disadvantaged Roma students.

Of course, a part of the population feels certain animosity, but this animosity does not stem from the animosity against the Roma people as such. It is caused by the fact that a substantial part of the Roma ethnic group does not abide by the values of the mainstream society. A marginalized part of the Roma people is marginalized voluntarily, and not by the mainstream society. They live a traditional way of life in settlements, and have problems with personal hygiene, health, accommodation, education, and employment. There is a higher crime rate and more social pathological phenomena in these settlements, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual abuse, incest, prostitution. Contact with the majority society is then quite frequently accompanied by conflicts. On the other hand, the majority of Roma try to live a good life. Those who have integrated into the society usually have better education, higher employment rate, positive values, and no problems with the majority society.

Our goal in this paper is to deal with all areas of the life of Roma coming from the socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SDB), and particularly with education as the most important part of the preparation for social inclusion.

Roma people living in a socially disadvantaged background (marginalized) have, in most cases, not completed the compulsory education or reached lower education which is

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insufficient for the appropriate social inclusion. They focus predominantly on the satisfaction of psychological, primary needs. Their need for knowledge and education (i.e. the secondary needs), the need for self-actualization (growth) is less developed. [2]

If we managed to light the fire for learning in them and fire the intrinsic motivation, the problems with their education would most probably cease. Therefore, the success of education activities in relation to Roma children and students coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is one of the neuralgic points of the Slovak school system. The originally homogenous part of population with specific traditions, culture and way of life has changed to a heterogeneous ethnic group encompassing intellectuals, businessmen as well as socially weak groups. Slovakia (as well as the other East European countries) is reproached by the European Union for discrimination and segregation in the area of education of Roma children and students, and is more and more often recommended to go for *inclusive education* in relation to this group. The importance of inclusive education is found not only in understanding, accepting, and tolerance of the Romany otherness from the non-Roma pupils' views, but also in the searching for something common, what connects them, not divide the representatives of the Roma and non-Roma population in Slovakia within the cultural customs, traditions, and the way of life typical for both social groups. [3] However, the problem is not as black-and-white as it could seem. The parents of these students themselves often act "segregationally" when they do not teach their children Slovak, proper hygiene routines, or social skills, if their fine motor skills are insufficient, etc. Here, the role of family which schools usually count on is nearly non-existent. The school then searches for methods to eliminate this drawback as efficiently as possible and these efforts – taking on the form of temporary compensatory measures (zeroth grades, teacher assistant, specialized classes, full-day education system) – may look like discrimination or segregation. Another thing is that in the area of education they are forced to do something they do not want to do, making the results of such an activity commensurate with their efforts. The need for education is not dominant in these children. This is also why the compensatory program of schools is not successful in making these students equal during the compulsory school attendance, this even more if neither the children nor their relatives try to change it. If this handicap is present during the entire compulsory school attendance, the ability of these students to be successful in the acceptance procedure into high schools is very limited (and the truth is that they themselves are not very interested in the continuation of their education), which later also influences their success in the labour market. However, to make the picture complete, we have to add that several elementary school principals have not understood the purpose and meaning of the temporary compensatory measures, and particularly the "temporary" part meaning that the Roma students should undergo the compensatory program only until they are able catch up with their peers. [4]

The overwhelming majority of the public and a part of professionals have a distorted view of inclusive education believing that inclusive education is only reduced to the common education of healthy students and students with disorders, students of various nationalities, cultures or religion. The fact that it is predominantly about establishment of such conditions at schools allowing every single child without exception to feel good at school, be willing to attend it and consider the school to be "their" school is not so much presented. There are schools in Slovakia which are attended by Roma students only, but this is the case of the so-called *residential segregation*, which can be observed in the areas occupied predominantly by the Roma people. Inclusive conditions have to be created for them as well.

We are fully for the inclusive education of socially disadvantaged Roma students because it takes place in natural conditions copying natural social structures, interpersonal interaction is more natural, they are better prepared for their future lives, their aspirations and social competencies can be better supported. [5] If we want to gain the full integration and the inclusion, either social or educational, we cannot start later than in a preschool age. [6]

Even though the Slovak school legislation is not segregationist in relation to national minorities and ethnic minorities, we have been failing to create inclusive environment at schools for these students on a long-term basis. In order to change it, Slovakia has implemented inclusive education projects for socially disadvantaged Roma students co-funded by the European Union (the author of this paper was a member of the team which prepared the theoretical background of these projects and the chief inclusion expert in the PRINED project):

Since 1 October 2011, the Methodology and Pedagogy Centre of the Slovak Republic has implemented the national project MRK I "Educating the Pedagogical Employees Towards Inclusion of Marginalized Roma Communities" which is co-funded from the European Social Fund within the Operational Programme Education and was designed for 200 elementary schools (ES) which educate at least 20% of Roma students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project lasted 40 months and ended on 31 October 2015. Its goal was to educate teachers, pedagogical assistants, coaches, and professional employees, and create space for their continued professional growth and education. In addition to the educational activities, the project also supported implementation of the full-day education system and provided technical support to all elementary schools which joined the project.

Education of pedagogical and professional employees took place based on the analysis of education needs. Expert groups consisting of pedagogues with long experience in terms of work with students from MRK created 12 continuous education programmes and at least 40 teaching sources published in the Roma language as well. To ensure a more continuous support and long-lasting sustainability of the national project, a distance education platform was developed

and implemented for the purposes of the continuous education programmes.

The full-day education system (FDES) also brought the opportunity to complete the elementary education within a specific education program for students who failed to complete the elementary school (ES). Three public education programs were implemented within FDES in which parents of students from MRK were engaged.

Each participating elementary school received 2 interactive systems, one 10,000 EUR valued didactic package of their own choice from the catalogue, prepared based on analysis of the needs of elementary schools, and a training material and supplies package valued at EUR 1,000. [7]

The philosophy of the MRK II project titled "Inclusive Education Model within Pre-primary Education of the School System" (from 1 September 2013 to 30 November 2015) was to achieve the integration into kindergartens (KG) of as many children from the marginalized Roma communities as possible and, educating their parents, to make them more prepared for their entrance to the primary education. Therefore, the strategic objective of the project was the education of pedagogical and professional employees taking part in the pre-primary preparation of children to improve their professional competencies and thus help increase the chances of the children from the marginalized Roma communities of their social inclusion.

Two continuous education programs and 4 related teaching sources were developed based on the results of the analysis of educational needs of pedagogical and professional employees.

Each of the 110 kindergartens received 1 interactive system, a didactic package, and outdoor equipment for schoolyards. [8].

The possibility to change the school system towards inclusive education was verified at an elementary school within the national project PRINED (April 2014 – November 2015). An inclusive school accommodates to individual educational needs of students with the aim to eliminate possible causes of lagging behind in the educational process as much as possible and enables these students to be educated within mainstream education. Applying inclusion in the rearing and education of Roma students coming from disadvantaged background, this project has significantly reduced the risk of their unjustified placement at schools for students with intellectual disability. Applying the inclusion principles on a long-term basis will give the students the chance to complete elementary education, continue at a high school, and become employable.

The project was implemented at 50 kindergartens and 100 elementary schools which hired 354 new professional employees (special pedagogues, social pedagogues, speech therapists, school psychologists and therapeutic pedagogues) and 250 teacher assistants who functioned as an inclusion support team at these schools. They identified possible causes of insufficient education results and behaviour issues in the relevant school environment and, cooperating with the core teachers, they were looking for the methods to eliminate those causes.

A *full-day education program (FDEP)* has proved to be an efficient tool in the application of inclusive principles at an elementary school. The afternoon electives to develop creative and manual skills were extended to also include preparation for classes and created space for tutoring and interventions by the inclusion support team with the focus on removing the causes of worse school results of Roma students.

To support the activities within the national project PRINED, each kindergarten and elementary school was supplied didactic material containing hygienic and socialisation supplies, sports equipment, supplies for arts classes, didactic games and toys. Elementary schools were also provided with garden tools, kitchen tools and workshop equipment. [9]

II. RESULTS

A. Evaluation of MRK I Project

After completion of the national project MRK I – "Educating the Pedagogical Employees Towards Inclusion of Marginalized Roma Communities" in 2015, the analysis of the results of the final evaluation checklist has revealed that the following changes have taken place in the opinion of the teachers who took part in the project:

In the area of cooperation with the families of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the most significant improvement was observed (or nearly 50% of respondents observed this change) for the following indicators:

- *increased interest in individual contact with the teacher on the part of Roma parents;*
- *increased interest of parents of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (FDEP) in the activities organised by the school (for parents of their students);*
- *increased interest of Roma parents in contact with the teacher's assistant;*
- *approximately one third of respondents noted:*
- *parents of students from SDB are more interested in what is going on at school;*
- *teachers have been noticing better care for the child (from SDB attending FDEP) by the family;*
- *parents are more interested in the school results of their child;*
- *increased interest of parents of students from SDB (FDEP) in teacher-parent conferences;*
- *as regards school success of students from SDB, approximately 75% of teachers state that:*
- *they have noticed a lower number of students repeating a grade;*
- *they have noticed improved school results of students from SDB who attend FDEP;*
- *in the area of school attendance and behaviour, approximately three quarters of students:*
- *have noticed a decrease in absenteeism and truancy, and improved behaviour of students from SDB attending FDEP.*

Principals of the schools which administered the final checklist have observed and confirmed in nearly all cases the

establishment of a new module for the development of work ethics and skills in students, with the most frequent average number of classes in a week plan of 1 to 4. [7]

B. Evaluation of MRK II Project

The results after completion of the projects show that pre-primary education could, in a long-term horizon, help Roma children coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds attain higher levels of education, eliminate their placement in classes and schools for children and students with intellectual disability, and make them educationally and socially prepared on their way to their future occupation. The priority here is to establish multiple inclusive educational tools starting with the sufficient capacity of kindergartens for all 3+ years old children without exception, continuing to their personal, professional, material and technical, and financial support, up to the elimination of barriers on the part of the mainstream as well as minority society. "Specialised research works show that children coming from stimulus-poor environments who attended a pre-school facility had to face much fewer issues in their further education, had better chances to complete elementary school and then continue at a high school. Furthermore, they were less likely to be placed in the special education system owing to insufficient cognitive skills." The truth is that the percentage of Roma children attending kindergartens is much lower than the percentage of non-Roma children. Induction of Roma children in Slovakia is very poor compared to the neighbouring countries (approx. 19.2% of Roma children aged 3 to 6 years). [8]

C. Evaluation of PRINED Project

The national project PRINED received very positive feedback from principals, teachers, professional employees, and members of the main inclusion expert team. The results of evaluation prove improvement in attendance, behaviour, and school results of the students attending schools which took part in the project.

The principals of elementary schools:

- highly praised the efficiency of the full-day education and rearing program as one of the inclusion tools. The full-day education and rearing program, as set up in the PRINED project, has supported the complex rearing work and preparation for school, allowing for a reduction in the possible negative influence of the family and wider social background on the student;
- presence of the inclusion team at school and its share in the improvement of cooperation with the family, individualisation of the approach to students, prophylactic influence in relation to social-pathological phenomena, improvement of school attendance, creation of a positive climate;
- very positively assessed the work of professional employees and their influence on the extension of professional skills of teachers;
- said that the school would need to hire a full-time special pedagogue first of all, and that it would be necessary to hire several professional employees;

- in their opinion, positives of the PRINED project: more efficient cooperation with parents, better climate at school, better school attendance, material and technical support of school education, improved preparation for school and school results, better behaviour of students;
- they pointed out inadequate administrative requirements, delays in delivery times (e.g. didactic package), no reward for the work, insufficient time granted to the project, unclear prospects of the project.

Main Inclusion Experts (a group of 10 experts who provided methodological support to elementary schools during project implementation) assessed the PRINED project as:

- particularly positive about the project was the recruitment of professional employees which allowed the schools to provide professional service to students and their parents. Experts gave positive evaluation to team cooperation at schools and bore fruit in the form of better results and attendance of students as well as the climate at school and/or prevention of social and pathological phenomena;
- drawbacks were noticed predominantly in the project management area (insufficient coordination and communication of tasks and rules);
- the PRINED project creates an opportunity of a system change at the level of school policy (including the legislative framework) as well as at the level of schools and school facilities (creation of new work positions for professional employees, improved diagnostics).

Teachers and professional employees consider the following as a success attained during implementation of the PRINED project:

- students' progress: improvement of their education results, behaviour and communication skills, increased self-confidence and motivation of students;
- extension in, and improvement of, school services for students and parents: increased complex care for students, improvement in after-school and interest courses, presence of professional employees at school and interventions by them;
- improvement of social relations and climate at school.

Preparedness of schools for inclusive education:

- schools which took part in the PRINED project are not sufficiently prepared for inclusive education yet;
- minimum preconditions and preparedness for inclusion relate mainly to practical implementation: real practical individualisation of education and evaluation of students, and requiring students as well as teachers to be self-reliant is troublesome;
- kindergartens showed better results than elementary schools;
- inclusion team creates positive conditions for inclusive education within schools;
- the existence of inclusion teams and teacher assistance had a positive effect on the school culture, and particularly on the communication, cooperation and sharing of information within as well as outside the school.

Evaluation of the work of professional employees:

- a majority of students met professional employees with the goal to improve their school results. They appreciated the ability of professional employees to explain the topic and prepare them for school, their approach, and the fact that they had fun with them and could also have a talk with them;
 - in addition to preparation for school, professional employees also provide consultancy services, and particularly face to face, in the solution of conduct problems, relationship issues in a class, in the family and friendships, and help them resolve their troubles or select a high school;
 - students appreciated the cooperation and said it was excellent and they would recommend the cooperation with a professional employee to their friends;
 - teachers assessed the cooperation with professional employees very positively, although at the beginning they had to get used to the new situation at school and the related change of conditions;
 - in the teachers' opinion, the advantage of professional employees for students lies predominantly in their individual approach. They appreciated direct intervention especially with students from socially disadvantaged background and with learning and conduct disorders, and the professional advice teachers received from the professional employees;
 - the activity of professional employees in relation to the families of students also received positive evaluation;
 - teachers appreciate improved school results and attendance of students, and the building of self-confidence and motivation of students;
 - establishment of a relationship built on trust and assistance given to students with homework was viewed by teachers as a contribution as well.
- Screening test and stimulation program:
- children of the selected kindergartens reached generally better results on a statistically significant basis in the final screening test than in the initial screening test;
 - a statistically significant difference between the results of boys and girls was not observed;
 - improvement of the final screening test results of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds was statistically higher than the improvement of the results of intact children;
 - individual development of children who underwent the stimulation program was statistically more significant than the individual development of children who did not undergo the program;
 - intensive work with children from socially disadvantaged background under a targeted stimulation program yielded positive results particularly in individual development of children between the initial and final screening tests.
- Recommendations:
- It is necessary to secure continuity of project activities, particularly the support of inclusion by hiring professional employees at schools;
 - continue in building inclusive teams at elementary schools as well as kindergartens;
 - improve the diagnostic process in children and students through improvement of the existing manuals, stimulation program and methods developed under the PRINED project;
 - use professional employees to conduct screening tests at kindergartens and employ individual stimulation of children based on test results;
 - continue in the financial and methodological support of the full-day education and rearing system at schools. Interest courses, children's school clubs, preparation for classes, and provision of didactic packages to schools are suitable tools to improve motivation of students and their parents and they bring about positive results in the students' school results;
 - in the area of closer cooperation between the school and the family, financially support the creation of work positions for professional employees at schools;
 - prepare and implement the continuous education programs, which would further develop teachers' skills in real individualisation of education, and particularly in the area of assessment individualisation and would help remove the misunderstanding of several basic principles of inclusion;
 - create and verify the methodology for the work of school psychologists, special pedagogues, and social pedagogues;
 - support networking of schools and advisory centres with the aim to develop cooperation and share experience not only within projects but also within every-day school routine;
 - implement supervision for professional employees;
 - promote the roles and powers of individual professions (school psychologist, special pedagogue, social pedagogue) in pedagogical circuits as well as in relation to other institutions and between parents of students. [9]

III. DISCUSSION

The following basic knowledge was gained from the findings of the evaluation of the projects titled "Educating the Pedagogical Employees Towards Inclusion of Marginalized Roma Communities" (MRK); "Inclusive Education Model within Pre-primary Education of the School System" (MRK2); and "Project of Inclusive Education" (PRINED):

- professional employees are not an integral part of the education and rearing work organisation at elementary schools;
- professional employees of elementary schools do not conduct diagnostic and advisory activity at kindergartens;
- informal education of children and their parents involving pedagogical and professional employees as a tool preventing unauthorised placement of children and students in the special education school system was proven to be absent;
- scope of free time activities with preparation for classes was found to be limited;

- the percentage of placement of children from MRK within the special education school system without identification of the causes of falling behind continues to be high;
- direct complex diagnostic and advisory activity at kindergartens is absent;
- the number of teacher assistants at elementary schools and kindergartens was confirmed to be low;
- cooperation continues to be insufficient and the complex evaluation between the components of formal (elementary school, kindergarten, pedagogical, psychological advisory and prevention centres) and informal education is missing.

Consistent implementation of the inclusive model of education should work as a warranty for the elimination of any forms of segregation at the participating schools in Slovakia.

Therefore, the Slovak education system needs a complex reform which would be based particularly on:

- [1] Significant increase in the induction rate of children aged 3+ years from MRK at kindergartens – significant investment into pre-primary rearing of children and education of children from MRK along with support of the child care program in early childhood;
- [2] Elaboration and implementation of desegregation standards in education (along with the indicators and subsequent monitoring of segregation), which should respect the principle of social interaction between Roma and non-Roma children with the highest quality of education possible and attainment of learning results, with the exception of the Roma national school system and locations where the Roma population represents a majority population (under the condition of complying with the principle of the highest possible quality in education and attainment of learning results); [10]
- [3] Elaboration of specific school inclusion models for various situations and target groups with the ambition to develop a general model of an inclusive school (the internal as well as external assessment of school quality would also include the so-called school inclusion index as one of the motivation tools to implement the inclusive education programs). The process of creating an inclusive education setting should primarily take into consideration the peculiarities of students coming from the marginalized Roma communities, individuals with health disabilities, members of minorities, aliens and migrants. [11]

IV. CONCLUSION

If the Slovak Republic wishes to improve the approach to high-quality education including education and care in early childhood as well as elementary, high-school and university education with special emphasis on the elimination of segregation at schools, prevent early school leaving, and ensure successful transition from school to employment, it has to implement more projects and such policies which would eliminate differences in the level of educational attainment of the Roma and other populations. Therefore, the following projects have been submitted for approval:

A. School Open to All National Project

The objective of this project is to secure equal access to high-quality education and improve the results and competences of children and students through the support of inclusive education and the improvement of professional skills of pedagogical and professional employees.

The project focuses on the following areas:

- Within kindergartens (KGs), on the implementation of the inclusive education model by way of pedagogical and professional employees, teacher assistants and tutors at KGs; implementation of the acceleration stimulation program for pre-school age children who are outside the school system; support to significant improvement in communication and cooperation with parents of the children from SDB (MRK); implementation of the newly established model of informal education – induction of children at the pre-school age who have not attended KG for various reasons; and development of the acceleration stimulation program focused on the attainment of school maturity in cooperation with parents of children (tutors). Further focus of the project at KGs is related to the activity of teacher assistants and professional employees from catchment areas in screening tests as a prevention of incorrect placement into special education classes; and instructions for KG pedagogical employees in the implementation of the inclusive model of education in the KG setting and in informal education.
- In the elementary school (ES) settings, on the implementation of the full-day education and rearing system focusing on the preparation of students for classes, implementation of the inclusive education model within ES by way of pedagogical and professional employees, support of teams at ES to support implementation of the inclusive model of education consisting of pedagogical employees (including teacher assistants), professional employees (school psychologist, special pedagogue, social pedagogue and a psychologist of the Pedagogical, Psychological Advisory and Prevention Centre), promotion of a significant improvement of communication and cooperation with parents of children and students from SDB (MRK), improvement of the knowledge about the needs of their children in connection with the educational objectives at the ES by way of social pedagogues, education of entire teams of pedagogical and professional employees within ES focused on inclusive education and their cooperation.

The setup of common teams to support implementation of the inclusive model of education consisting of pedagogical employees (including teacher assistants), professional employees (school psychologist, special pedagogue, social pedagogue, and the psychologist of the Pedagogical, Psychological Advisory and Prevention Centre), functions as an integrating element of the project between KGs and ES.

B. Take Away National Project

The objective of this project is to support integration of the members of the marginalised Roma communities in a complex

manner in 150 towns of Slovakia by way of a series of intervention in the areas of pre-primary education, field social services, and the resolution of legal relations to the plots and dwellings in Roma settlements. In towns with the least developed Roma settlements, the project should improve the induction of Roma children, which has a key influence on the success of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in further education. The kindergartens in the participating towns would implement tools and create conditions reflecting the needs of children from a different cultural and socially disadvantaged background. Tried tools would be applied (teacher assistants, inclusive teams) as well as pilot-tested innovative social and pedagogical approaches which react to the specific needs of these children.

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