

Opportunities, Constraints and Prospects of Inclusive Pre-Primary Education for Children from Marginalized Roma Communities

Abstract

Analysis of the opportunities, constraints and prospects of pre-primary education of children from marginalized Roma communities was, is and will be the subject of many studies and constructive solutions at different levels of responsibility entities. All positive solutions and results in this area are a step closer to the inclusive education in kindergarten. Theoretical considerations, research findings and practical experiences of teachers are used to formulate key actions for successful pre-primary education for children from marginalized Roma communities in the process of inclusive education. Musing on inclusive education of the study was replaced by pragmatic solutions in the form of concrete measures for the reality and for the vision of an inclusive education of children from marginalized Roma communities in kindergartens.

Keywords: *children from marginalized Roma communities, inclusive education, kindergarten, preparatory class, preparatory year, pre-primary education*

Introduction

The development of humanistic and democratic values in society is reviewing the merits of selective approaches in education. Education of all children at ordinary kindergartens is no longer only a subject of professional discussions, but begins to materialize in practice, however without system state support. This may change in future and inclusive education will no longer be an exceptional phe-

nomenon. However, it is a matter of a gradual and long-term process of changes in thinking and opinions that will be applied in practice when adopted by most persons and institutions participating in education, until they finally become a necessary and applicable standard. Ideas, or currently rather ideals and visions of inclusive education are born or, rather, imperfectly penetrate into conventional educational procedures. They still arise from arduousness and volunteering of individuals or groups of persons from the educational, parental as well as lay public. Some inclusion ideas have already penetrated into the legislative framework of education, but most of them still remain in front of school doors, or if having entered them, then only through the “keyhole”.

The aim of the study is to designate current opportunities and constraints of inclusive education for children from marginalized Roma communities and derive prospective measures from them for inclusive education to become common practice in kindergartens.

Opportunities for equality of children in pre-primary education, created in legislation

Collective and equal education of children from marginalized Roma communities is supported by the Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education. It declares children rights which are the indicators of inclusive education values, in particular, equal access to upbringing and education and ban of any forms of discrimination, notably segregation. Children’s religion, world-view, nationality and ethnic and their families are respected values, similarly as the individual approach to a child, respecting the child’s age, possibilities and abilities, interests, talent and health condition. The above act supports kindergarten attendance by free education of children aged 5 prior to the beginning of their compulsory school attendance, for the children to have the opportunity to learn in the official language and their mother tongue in the extent specified in this act.

The rights and principles of upbringing and education in line with the philosophy of inclusive education specified in the Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education are negated by sections of the same act, by the rules for integration (inclusion and adaptation) of children in school education. The procedures for determining children’s special educational needs, categorization of children by disadvantage types, as well as the rules for placement in schools, associated with documentation maintenance, are the evidence of it. Also, education of children with special upbringing and educational needs in separate – specialized classes

does no credit to inclusive education. Administrative labelling of children as those who do not have increased requirements for sources and conditions of education and those who do, is not consistent with the rights of the child to equal access to education. This directly or indirectly indicates the child's dependence on increased funds, extended provision of services, or search for the advantages of positive discrimination. An example of it is the reduced number of children in the class, if a child with special educational needs is placed there. Then the number of children in the class may be reduced by two children at most for every child with special upbringing and educational needs. Also, the maximum number of children with special upbringing and educational needs per class is limited – to two (Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education).

Methods of compensating children for effects of socially disadvantaged environment according to legislation

Legislative documents use the term children from a socially disadvantaged environment. Children from marginalized Roma communities are not distinguished in the Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education, although the adopted indicators of social disadvantage of children in the school system make it obvious that these children belong to the disadvantaged group.

Marginalized Roma communities are understood as socially excluded communities of people who are disadvantaged against other people because of poverty or culture and they live in slums, parts of municipalities or towns, i.e., in an environment disadvantageous for their personal growth and living conditions. Disadvantageous social, language and cultural background produces variability of the child's individual needs and conditions, which the teaching and specialized staff diagnose and take into account in the upbringing and educational or therapeutic process, pedagogical and specialized counselling to children and their parents, legal representatives (Lipnická, M., Rosinský, R., Rusnáková, J. et al., 2013).

The Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education has prevented placing children in separate classes for children with health disabilities in favour of inclusive education, exclusively for the reason that they come from a socially disadvantaged environment.

According to the Decree No. 308/2009 on kindergarten, section 4 (4), children from a socially disadvantaged environment are placed in classes together with other children. If a class consists only of children from a socially disadvantaged environment, there may be no more than 16 children in the class.

Upbringing and education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment is performed using specific methods and forms and according to individual conditions, created by kindergartens. The Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education (Section 107) stipulates the following individual conditions:

- education according to an individual education programme;
- adjustment of upbringing and education organization;
- adjustment of the settings where upbringing and education take place;
- use of specific methods and forms for upbringing and education.

The Ministry of Education may provide founders of kindergartens with funds to improve conditions for upbringing and education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment. It is provided by the number of children from a socially disadvantaged environment as a subsidy for food and school aids.

The subsidy is specified in the Decree No. 649/2008 Coll. of the Ministry of Education to be used for pupils from a socially disadvantaged environment. Section 1 specifies that the subsidy should be used for:

- teacher assistants' salaries, premiums for social insurance and compulsory health insurance;
- equipment of rooms for teaching with didactic technology, teaching aids, compensation aids;
- education in specialised classrooms and other according to special regulations.

Another compensation for a child's social disadvantage is release from payment for the child in the kindergarten, if the child's legal representative presents a document to the kindergarten head teacher that the child is a recipient of a benefit in material need and allowances for the benefit in material need (Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education, Section 28 (7)).

In education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment, co-operation of the pre-primary education teacher and teacher assistant is important. It is defined in more detail in the Methodological Instruction No. 184/2003–095, approved by the Ministry of Education on December 6, 2003 for the introduction of the profession of the teacher assistant in the upbringing and education of children and pupils with special upbringing and educational needs at pre-school facilities, elementary school and special elementary school. A kindergarten may employ a teacher assistant, to overcome language, social and cultural barriers of children.

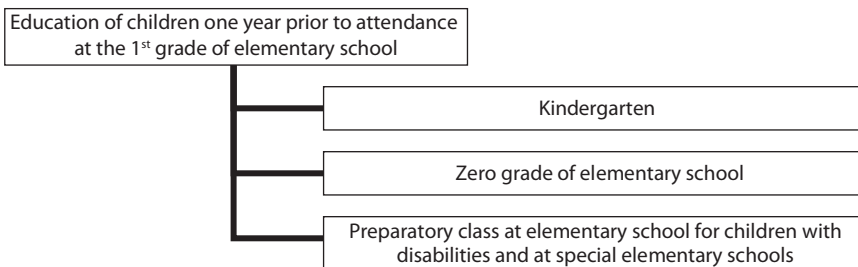
Quite recently, specifics of education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment have been considered in the Act No. 38/2011 amending and supplementing the Act No. 597/2008 Coll. on financing elementary schools, secondary

schools and school facilities as amended by later regulations and on change and supplement of certain acts. The Ministry of Education may provide a subsidy to kindergartens, but also to legal entities and natural persons, also to civic associations and foundations, for activities connected with the upbringing and education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment according to specified rules. Kindergarten founders may apply to the Ministry of Education for financing a development project in specified areas of upbringing and education where also improvement of the upbringing and education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment may be included.

Opportunities for pre-primary education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment

The Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education (Section 19 (3)) states that “*compulsory school attendance begins at the beginning of a school year following after the day when a child reaches the age of six and school competence.*” The above Act contains also provisions changing this rule by the child’s school competence and forms of education. There are three alternatives offered to children aged 5–6 or to children aged 7 with the postponed beginning of compulsory school attendance. They may continue education by a developing or individual programme for upbringing and education at kindergarten. If there are reasons why a child from a socially disadvantaged environment cannot attend kindergarten, then there are two other forms of education offered according to the rules specified in legislation (cf., Chart 1 for more details).

Chart 1. Opportunities for pre-primary education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment



Zero grade of elementary school

The legal representative has the right to decide whether the child with postponed school attendance will attend kindergarten or the zero grade, because once **in the zero grade, the child's school attendance commences.** *"The zero grade of elementary school is intended for children who physically reached the age of 6, but yet not the school competence, come from a socially disadvantaged environment and on account of their social background cannot be expected to cope with the educational programme of the first grade at elementary school. The highest number of pupils in the zero grade is 16. The zero grade may be established if at least 8 pupils are to be taught there, or at least 6 pupils if the elementary school is not fully organized."*(The Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education, Section 19 (6), (8), Section 29 (5)). Education in the zero grade increases the likelihood that the child's development and experience will be stimulated to achieve the level required for successful learning in the 1st grade of elementary school. The child is placed in the zero grade on the basis of a parent's application and decision of the elementary school headmaster, the headmaster thus also deciding on the postponement of the child's school attendance by one school year. A part of the legal representative's application is a recommendation of a GP for children and youth and a recommendation of a relevant facility for pedagogical counselling and prevention.

Preparatory class for pupils with health disabilities at elementary schools and special elementary schools

The Decree No. 322/2008 Coll. of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic on special schools (Section 6 (1)) specifies that elementary schools for children with health disabilities and special elementary schools (A, B, C variant) have a preparatory class. Children are placed there based on diagnostic examinations and their legal representative's consent if their health disabilities prevent them from succeeding at kindergarten or elementary school.

The preparatory class is intended for pupils who turned 6 before September 1, have not achieved school competence and are unlikely to succeed in the first grade of elementary school with the educational programme for pupils with health disabilities. **Passing through the preparatory class is considered completing the first year of compulsory school attendance.** (Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education, Section 97 (3)).

It is not exceptional that children from marginalized Roma communities are diagnosed and taught as children with special upbringing and educational needs on the grounds of their health disability or social disadvantage. According to Porubský (2007) there are various reasons for inclusion in this "segregated" group

of children, namely insufficient command of the language of instruction, delayed personality development due to the unstimulating socio-cultural conditions in which they grow up, but there are also other reasons.

Constraints of inclusive education of children from marginalized Roma communities at kindergartens

The analysis of legislative documentation shows that although our education system subscribes to the basic thoughts of inclusive education, implementation under the legislative rules and regulations is still at the level of special schools, or, in a better case, integration of children with special upbringing and educational needs in ordinary schools.

Inclusive education at kindergartens encounters many obstacles that restrict successful education of children from marginalized Roma communities. Constraints or barriers to development and upbringing of children from marginalized Roma communities have been a subject of many written and presented scholastic and political studies. Most frequently, they agree on those summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Constraints of pre-primary education for children from marginalized Roma communities

State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal access to education is not followed by system solutions supporting the practice of inclusive education; • Partial reforms and measures “made to appear like” the ideas of inclusive education are not conceptual and thus problems accumulate if kindergartens decide on this way in education; • Long-term financial starvation of schools with demands on effective teaching; • Normatives for financing do not assess quality of education at individual kindergartens also by fulfilment of inclusive education indicators; • Centres of special pedagogy that should recommend forms of education for children without bias, fall under head teachers of special schools; • Lack of opportunities for teachers to get free training courses in inclusive education; • Other;
Founders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other than school priorities or unwillingness or inability to create favourable conditions for inclusive education; • Failure to create sufficient capacities for placement of all pre-school children in kindergartens in a certain locality, region; • Low level of pooling, conceptual and mutual assistance of towns and municipalities in providing pre-school education for children in a certain region;

Kindergartens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwillingness to enrol children from marginalized Roma communities, also due to the need to provide for supporting and compensatory measures; • Concerns over problems with children and parents from MRC; • Financial, personnel and material unpreparedness to ensure conditions for optimum education of MRC children; • Formal school educational programmes not covering various educational needs of children; • Parents of children not coming from MRC disapproving of children from MRC and placing their children in other kindergartens if the number of MRC children in the kindergarten increases; • Unavailability of a kindergarten in the place of residence of MRC children; • Other;
Teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term stress of teachers arising from non-existent or insufficient supporting services of teacher assistants and specialists directly in kindergartens; • Teachers should cope with 'spontaneous integration' (let alone inclusion) themselves, thus they are exposed to stress and that is why this form of education does not suit them in certain cases, it is even refused; • Concerns over diseases resulting from bad hygienic conditions as well as neglected health of children; • Teachers not trained for inclusive education; • Negative experience with some MRC people in the common life and resulting restraints concerning the work with MRC children; • Other;
Specialized staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term lack of a required number of special pedagogues and psychologists in kindergartens; • They are concentrated mainly in counselling centres and special schools; • MRC children are diagnosed mostly individually, at counselling centres, without observation in a kindergarten class; • That is the reason why some findings and recommendations of psychologists and special pedagogues have no bearing on actual needs of the educational reality, they do not help teachers much; • Other;
Parents of MRC children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neglecting hygiene, nourishment and health of children that must be dealt with and compensated by appropriate measures in the kindergarten; • Irresponsible approach to stimulation and education of their children, not enrolling the children, irregular attendance at kindergarten by the children; • Problematic co-operation of parents with the kindergarten teaching staff and specialists; • Parents not kept informed about their child's achievements on account of substituted parental care – children are accompanied to/from the kindergarten by older siblings; • Parental rights to require inclusive education for their children not applied, just on the contrary sometimes they require placement of their child in a special school; • Other;

Parents of children not coming from MRC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns over their children if educated with MRC children (e.g. infectious diseases, taking over undesired behaviours and similar); • Prejudice against MRC people based on general life experience; • Negative experience with parents of MRC children; • Concerns that the teacher will neglect their children because of increased care of MRC children; • Other;
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient co-operation of community workers and field social workers with the kindergarten teaching staff and specialists.

The constraints of inclusive education, presented above in Table 1, cause a variety of problems in children, teachers, founders and the public. Partial solutions, e.g., in the form of increased finances or education of teachers will improve only some consequences of these difficulties; however, they will not solve the substance of shortcomings in inclusive education. The Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic should adopt measures for inclusive education at kindergarten to be feasible and standard, not based only on designating what is valuable or what should be done or on the willingness and sacrifice of teachers. All kindergartens should have **equal chances to create conditions for inclusive education of children and appropriate support (legislative, financial, personnel) from the state, with rules for good inclusive education.**

Prospects of inclusive education of children from marginalized Roma communities at kindergartens

Pre-primary education respecting values of inclusion, optimum and effective education for every child is currently rather a prospect although some isolated signs of inclusive education can be identified at schools. Measures for the inclusive education of pre-school children from marginalized Roma communities, proposed in Table 2, should be perceived as such, while the time of their implementation cannot be foreseen. The measures are derived from documents approved by governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as published opinions of several authors listed in the references hereof, and it is natural that due to the complexity of the matter they do not illustrate all necessary solutions.

Table 2. Proposed measures for inclusive education of pre-school children from marginalized Roma communities

	Prospective measures for inclusive education	Current reasons for the prospective measures
At the state level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the availability of kindergartens in the place of children’s residence, establish school districts for kindergartens; • Confer a financial benefit (reward) to good schools with inclusive education also by regional circumstances; • Extend the system of pedagogical counselling to the field of kindergartens; • Education of all children together at kindergartens; • Introduce combined education with individual and group forms in the class and out of the class with a required number of teaching staff and specialists and supporting, compensatory measures in ordinary kindergartens; • Lower number of children in the class with inclusive education also if there are children from a socially disadvantaged environment; • Prepare and approve a state programme of inclusive education for children at kindergartens and related methods for inclusive education there, especially concerning didactic-methodological aspects; • Forms of cooperation between the kindergarten and social, non-governmental and health-care institutions in education and full-day care of children from a socially disadvantaged environment to be defined in legislation; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of kindergartens and kindergarten districts not supported by legislation; • Normative financing per child; • Isolated counselling services outside the field and actual needs of kindergartens; • Segregated education at special kindergartens; • Education of children from a socially disadvantaged environment in separate classes; • Lack of specialists in kindergartens; • Number of children is reduced only if there are children with special upbringing and educational needs; • State educational programme is selective – a separate one prepared for children with no health disabilities and a separate one for children with health disabilities;
At the level of founders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing parental centres at kindergartens for active cooperation with the pedagogues, community and public; • In cooperation with kindergarten head teachers, apply well-considered strategies to persuade MRC parents to enrol their children in kindergarten and take them there regularly; • Create positions for teacher assistants, school special pedagogues and school psychologists in every kindergarten; • Extend the services for children in kindergarten through the graduate practice of teacher faculty students, e.g., by accompanying MRC children to kindergarten; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low percentage of MRC children enrolled in kindergartens; • Low number of specialists and teacher assistants in kindergartens;

	Prospective measures for inclusive education	Current reasons for the prospective measures
At the level of kindergartens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change the school educational programmes to a unique educational offer responding to children's various needs and conditions, develop a school programme for inclusive education; • Provide differentiated and cooperative teaching; • Prepare internal methods for language teaching according to the needs of MRC children; • Involve MRC parents in education and care of children at kindergarten also using good experience in other kindergartens; • Develop a system of actions to facilitate children's adaptation; • Hold events and celebrations in kindergarten, presenting the Roma culture, talent and achievements of MRC people; • Develop and provide for an education plan for the kindergarten teaching staff and specialists, including various subjects of inclusive education; • Ensure good team cooperation of teachers, teacher assistants and specialist directly in kindergarten classes when implementing the educational offer; • Implement compensatory and developing educational programmes with children according to their individual needs in kindergarten ordinary classes using a multidisciplinary approach by more professionals; • Support inclusive education of children by a concept of counselling on upbringing of children and their achievements to parents, legal representatives directly in kindergarten; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formally prepared school educational programmes not adapted to children's various educational needs; • Uncoordinated and insufficient team cooperation in kindergartens, variety of children's educational needs left to teachers only; • Compensatory and developing programmes implemented in counselling centres and specialized classes;
At the level of family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand and control a responsible approach of parents to pre-primary education of MRC children; • Support education of MRC children with courses on child care and upbringing for parents in kindergartens and community centres; • Parents volunteering in kindergarten; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some MRC parents do not enrol their children in kindergarten despite existing compensations for the social disadvantage;

	Prospective measures for inclusive education	Current reasons for the prospective measures
At the level of counselling facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the activity of counselling facilities in the school system as supporting, coordinating counselling services for education of children at ordinary schools; • Specialists should work directly in kindergartens and counselling centres should coordinate their work methodologically, advise and assist in the field; • Counselling facilities should be independent of the special education school system, the concept of their counselling services should primarily focus on inclusive education of every child; • Supervise schools on ensuring equal access to education; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselling centres are often dysfunctional for practice, their specialists do not go to the field of kindergartens; • Frequently, teachers do not receive updated information about children or there are no consultations with teachers at all; • Quite frequently they deal only with diagnostics and there is no room left for intervention; • Financing per client is the reason why the number of clients is appraised rather than the quality of work with a client;
At the level of non-governmental organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate introduction and application of innovative and alternative programmes for compensation of children's social disadvantage also within kindergartens; • Assistance in gaining sources of financial support to ensure innovative and alternative education programmes or individual methods and strategies; • Impart new information and good practices from social work in the field to kindergarten practice; • Assistance in gaining MRC parents for, and involving them in education of children at kindergarten; 	
At the level of regional authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare educational, cultural, sports and other activities for inclusive pre-primary education of MRC children that will support their personality and social development; • Cooperate closely with kindergartens so that the offer extending, enriching children's pre-primary education is adequate and effective with respect to their educational and socio-cultural needs; • Provide information about socio-cultural specifics and activities of residents of the region to schools; 	

	Prospective measures for inclusive education	Current reasons for the prospective measures
At the level of institutions for continuing teacher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free training courses in inclusive education at kindergartens for teachers and head teachers; • Establish positions of inclusive education coordinators in methodological and pedagogical centres; 	
At the level of higher education institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transform objectives and contents of teacher training programmes to inclusive education; • Prepare learning texts for university training of pedagogues for inclusive education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher programmes teaching special pedagogy, not inclusive pedagogy; • Texts shaped for integration of children with a disadvantage or talent, covered in terms of inclusive pedagogy.

The economist and Nobel Prize holder, Heckman (2006; in EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2009) states that good education and care of children in early childhood is one of the few effective ways to improve social and economic prospects for disadvantaged (minority) communities. Based on the cost-benefit analysis of pre-primary education based on justice and availability, Heckman points to the fact that the higher the age at which measures are introduced, the lower the rate of economic return on such investment. That is also why there is an increasingly urgent discussion in the Slovak education on the issue of introducing compulsory school attendance for children one year before their elementary school attendance so that children from marginalized Roma communities do not start their educational journey only upon entering the 1st grades of elementary school, but much earlier, upon their regular attendance at kindergarten.

The joint and equal access to education enables children, parents, teachers and other participating entities to learn about oneself and others, conform to one another in relationships and confrontations with other persons, meet people and learn about their life as it is and not as selected for education by certain parameters to prevent them to bother one another. Children should not learn about the human diversity, ways of human life and culture through educational projects imitated “in the class laboratory”. Daily co-existence and cooperation should teach them about it in a natural way. This should be aimed at by all measures for effective and optimum education at various levels of responsibility in the school system and supporting out-of-school programmes.

Conclusion

It is said that the best school for man is life itself. The variety of children is a natural part of life and the school should copy it. The idea of kindergarten with a functional inclusive education is currently an ideal picture of kindergarten with pro-social behaviour, respect for rights and responsible fulfilment of duties by all participating individuals. At kindergarten of such quality, every child is equally accepted and educated, there is positive cooperation and communication in education free from sorting into “better and worse, rich and poor, healthy and handicapped, ...such and other” in the negative sense. The basis for inclusive education is the uniqueness and self-realization of every child, his/her personality development in the conditions of group culture, experiencing and personal coping with inclusive co-existence and learning from childhood.

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