BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

THE ROLE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY IN SOCIETY

Bratislava, 2025

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Date and Place: Bratislava, June 13, 2025

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Degree Awarded: Bachelor (Bc.)

Bratislava, 2025 **Nikola Krajčíková**

Declaration of Originality: I hereby declare that this bachelor's thesis is my own work and has not been published, in whole or in part, elsewhere. All referenced literature and sources are properly cited. Grammarly was used for grammar correction, and ChatGPT assisted with stylistic refinement in the final part of the thesis, as well as with the translation of interviews from Slovak to English.

Bratislava, February 15, 2025

Signature: _____

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the role of inclusive education in fostering mutual understanding and empathy, with a focus on Slovakia. Educational environments where children learn together, regardless of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, or individual abilities, play a crucial role in shaping family values and encouraging more open attitudes toward diversity. The central argument of this thesis is that inclusive education not only bridges different social groups but also strengthens democratic stability and helps mitigate social fragmentation by fostering understanding and empathy.

This study, based on qualitative research methods—including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with policymakers and their receivers—examines how inclusive education contributes to the formation of cross-cutting identities. Unlike mere mutual understanding, cross-cutting identities goes a step further, becoming an integral part of an individual's personal identity and value system. This thesis demonstrates that cross-cutting identity plays a key role in overcoming societal divisions.

Abstrakt

Autor bakalárskej práce: Nikola Krajčíková

Názov práce: Úloha inkluzívneho vzdelávania pri posilňovaní vzájomného porozumenia a empatie v spoločnosti

Názov vysokej školy: Bratislavská medzinárodná škola liberálnych štúdií

Vedúca práce: Prof. PhDr. Iveta Radičová, Ph.D.

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Kľúčové slová: Inkluzívne Vzdelávanie, Vzájomné Porozumenie, Sociálna Kohézia, Empatia, Rovnosť vo Vzdelávaní

Táto práca skúma úlohu inkluzívneho vzdelávania pri podpore vzájomného porozumenia a empatie, so zameraním na Slovensko. Vzdelávacie prostredie, v ktorom sa deti učia spoločne bez ohľadu na ich socio-ekonomické či etnické zázemie alebo individuálne schopnosti, zohráva kľúčovú úlohu pri formovaní hodnôt rodín a podporuje otvorenejšie postoje voči inakosti. Hlavným argumentom tejto práce je, že inkluzívne vzdelávanie nielen spája rôzne spoločenské skupiny, ale zároveň posilňuje demokratickú stabilitu a pomáha zmierňovať sociálnu fragmentáciu tým, že rozvíja porozumenie a empatiu.

Výskum je založený na kvalitatívnych výskumných metódach – vrátane zúčastneného pozorovania a semi-štruktúrovaných rozhovorov s tvorcami vzdelávacích politík a ich prijímateľmi – skúma, ako inkluzívne vzdelávanie prispieva k formovaniu prierezových identít. Na rozdiel od vzájomného porozumenia, prierezové identity prenikajú hlbšie, stávajú sa neoddeliteľnou súčasťou osobnej identity a hodnotového systému jednotlivca. Táto práca ukazuje, že práve prierezová identita je to, čo zohráva kľúčovú úlohu pri prekonávaní spoločenských rozdielení.

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Introduction

Each of us is unique. We bring various qualities to our communities, yet some traits are systemically disadvantaged, while others are perceived as advantages. Although society changes and evolves, our brains may still instinctively view the unknown as a threat. The concept of neuroplasticity, however, teaches us that we have the capacity to adapt, and that these instinctual reactions, though natural, are often unnecessary. Still, fear is a powefull tool, especially when things feel uncertain. In times of crisis—even if these crises are manufactured—people often turn to authoritarian leaders. As Ziblatt and Levitsky discuss in How Democracies Die (2018, p. 77-78), such leaders thrive on this fear. We saw this tactic in Donald Trump's rise to power, driven by a campaign rooted in fear (Gold, 2024). Slovakia has seen a similar trend with Robert Fico, who often frames the country as being under attack—by progressivism, liberalism (Politická scéna, 2024, 9:29), refugees (TV Noviny, 2023, 0:47), and LGBTQ+ people, who he says are destroying the traditional family (Fico, 2023, 0:43). This rhetoric only deepens the divisions within the country, and it appears that it is not the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals that threatens families, but rather emotionally charged discussions fueled by fearmongering from political parties. Even the use of fear and hostility toward "otherness" as a tool of power resulted in the tragic murder of Matúš and Juraj, two LGBTQI+ individuals. While political rhetoric was not the sole cause, these and similar tragedies are the result of a complex mix of factors, including the divisive content amplified by social media algorithms.

It is not only polarization that endangers democracy—radicalization presents an even greater threat. Political scientist Soňa Szomolányi argues that the focus on polarization often distracts from the real issue, allowing those driving radicalization to continue unchallenged (Szomolányi, 2023). Data from the V-Dem project shows that Slovakia, since 2006, has followed the same trend of rising polarization as Hungary and Poland, even with a short break between 2010 and 2012.

While every society has its divisions—ethnic, religious, and social—countries like Switzerland or the Netherlands have managed to keep stable democracies by bridging these divides through effective institutional arrangements. Arend Lijphart's theory of consociational democracy reflects this approach. Szomolányi points out that the current coalition government led by Robert Fico does the opposite of consociational democracy, making divisions worse instead of uniting them.

The goal of this thesis is not to provide direct solutions for preventing radicalization, but to explore it as a process shaped by the environment and social influences. By understanding radicalization as a way individuals adopt certain beliefs and behaviors through their interactions, the solution lies in fostering inclusive environments that encourage positive social connections and promote diverse perspectives. This thesis looks at the wider societal impact of inclusivity, particularly how inclusive education policies influence the values of families. Inclusive education settings provide a space where these dynamics unfold, shaping attitudes not only among those who actively seek such environments but also among families who enroll for practical reasons. While some families may choose inclusive kindergarten for practical reasons, rather than a commitment to inclusivity, this exposure can offer an opportunity to explore how such environments influence families that may not otherwise prioritize diversity.

For Slovakia, a country driven by fear of "otherness," it’s important to fully embrace the idea that everyone is different and to approach this diversity with respect and curiosity.

Theoretical Framework

This research focuses on exploring the significance of inclusive education for a democratic society, examining its impact on family value systems and attitudes toward diversity. The theoretical framework is based on paradigms that recognize equity and inclusivity as fundamental principles, and therefore support the idea of equality of chances and facilities for all individuals in the society irrespective of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics. This chapter looks at the key sociological theories that are used in the analysis of these dynamics which includes Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid society", the theory of overlapping group memberships and the social capital theory by Robert Putnam.

Zygmunt Bauman's "Liquid Society"

Zygmunt Bauman's (2005) concept of the "liquid society" provides a framework for understanding contemporary societal dynamics. This view helps to explain the present social processes in the society and how people and communities act and react to change and uncertainty. According to Bauman, the contemporary society is characterized by change, uncertainty and the weakening of traditional structures, where "liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty" (Bauman, 2005, p. 2). This is because in the fluid social world people must be versatile to be able to manage change. However, along with the erosion of the stability and the increase of individualism, challenges have emerged including "sense of alienation and decline in strong ties" (Bauman, 2005, p. 20).

The formal institutions created in the past century are failing to meet the demands of today's society. For instance, the education system no longer provides equal opportunities and the gap in inequality continues to widen. Communication between different socio-economic groups and communities with different perspectives is limited, further exacerbating social divides. To address these challenges, the system must evolve, focusing on adaptability and fostering meaningful connections across diverse social and economic backgrounds.

Equally significant, if not more so, is the informal dimension of education, which includes the family environment and socio-economic influences. While formal education strives to address structural inequalities, the family and broader socio-economic context directly impact the opportunities available to individuals, thereby shaping their values. Education will only effectively reflect the needs of contemporary society if it recognizes the relationship between formal and informal educational influences.

Overlapping Group Membership

A key concept in understanding political stability is the idea of overlapping group memberships, conceived by the theorists Arthur F. Bentley and David B. Truman. This theory is linked to Seymour Martin Lipset's notion of "crosscutting cleavages" , which explores how overlapping social and political affiliations affect political attitudes. This means that people from different backgrounds with different interests can encounter psychological cross-pressures. These cross-pressures, according to Bentley and Truman, help to moderate extreme views and foster more balanced, compromising positions (Lijphart, 1969, p. 208). The theory of overlapping memberships holds significant implications for political stability and social cohesion. On the other hand, societies with fewer overlapping memberships and sharp divisions are more likely to experience political polarization, which makes it difficult for groups to work together and undercuts stability (Lijphart, 1969, p. 209).

Putnam's Social Capital Theory

Another theoretical contribution related to this work is Robert Putnam's research on social capital. In his book Bowling Alone (2000) and the more recent documentary Join or Die (2023), Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is the strong ties that exist within homogeneous groups which help to support people in a familiar environment. On the other hand, bridging social capital is the weaker ties that connect people across groups, thus creating wider networks and fostering inclusiveness between different social classes, which we may not necessarily consider "safe" because it involves unfamililiar environments.

Putnam's research reveals a rather worrying trend – the erosion of bridging social capital in today's society. He argues that people are now more isolated, spend less time interacting with their neighbours in the community, and more time doing things on their own such as watching television. Overtime, television has been replaced by social media, where algorithms design "rabbit holes" that confirm our beliefs and isolate us from the opposite viewpoint (The New York Times, n.d.). Putnam argues that this shift has resulted in increased social fragmentation, decreased trust, and heightened political polarization. This way, people remain in their "rabbit holes", and become more radical in their views, which leads to a society that is not likely to be united and more likely to be politically divided.

In an interview by The New York Times, Putnam argued that people's interactions in the U.S. have changed over the years (Garcia-Navarro, 2024). He notes that between the early 1900s and 1960s, Americans were more connected than they are today, they were more involved in community activities, had higher levels of trust and more opportunities to interact with people. However, since the 1960s, these connections have been slowly lost and the reason for this includes political polarization, economic inequality and the loss of common values.

Bridging Social Capital and the Role of Schools

In the context of education, the importance of bridging social capital cannot be overstated. Schools should serve as primary spaces where children from different backgrounds come into contact with one another. These encounters provide opportunities for both children and their families to develop *cross-cutting identities,* which are important in forming a more integrated and cohesive society. Therefore, inclusivity in education is not only about equiting the opportunity to resources, but also about providing space in which students, and their families too, can meet diversity and develop the skills needed to live in a complex world.

Research Question and Hypothesis

RQ: Why is inclusivity in education important in a democratic society and how does it affect family values and attitudes towards diversity especially in relation to societal divisions, mutual understanding and empathy?

Hypothesis

Inclusive education fosters the development of mutual understanding, empathy, and cross-cutting identities among families by facilitating meaningful engagement with diverse social, economic, and cultural groups. Cross-cutting identities refer to connections that go beyond mere understanding. These identities becomes part of individual's values and worldview, shaping their perspectives on a deeper level. This process contributes to reducing social inequalities, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting democratic stability. By bringing together students from different backgrounds in shared educational environments, inclusive education enhances collective values of diversity and equity, which not only improve individual life satisfaction but also positively impact the broader social context.

I. Diversity and Inclusion

The idea of diversity is crucial to inclusive education, where every child is accepted regardless of their perceived strengths or weaknesses. This includes children who may be considered gifted, those who may be below average in some areas, and those with intellectual, physical or learning disabilities. It also includes children from different family structures, such as those with two fathers, one mother, or any other caregivers. Diversity includes children from different social economic background, from affluent families and from less privileged families. In an inclusive setting, education is highly personalized and aimed at meeting the specific needs of each child. It avoids labelling people based on their weaknesses or abilities and provides a flexible environment in which children can engage in various activities that align with their current needs.

a. Definitions and Evolution of Inclusion

The idea of inclusion in education has changed a lot; it appeared as a response to the problems of race, poverty and the exclusion of persons with disabilities from education and social life (Križo, 2020). Today, inclusion is about creating a learning environment for each child as opposed to making the child fit in a certain system. Inclusion is defined by UNICEF (2014) as a systematic effort to remove barriers that prevent children from fully engaging in education regardless of their characteristics. According to UNICEF, the root of exclusion is not in the children themselves but in a system that is often unable to address their needs (UNICEF, 2014, p. 19).

This model is in contrast with traditional approaches that sort children with different needs into specialized schools. Inclusion on the other hand envisions a *school for all* where every child is integrated into a single educational system (Janoško, 2011, p. 99). However, inclusion alone is not the ultimate goal. In an interview with Symington-Maar & Hincová (2024), Viera Hlincová, a social innovator and psychologist, devoted to inclusion, stated that just giving minorities a seat at the table is no longer enough. Even when they are given a voice is not enough; the next step must be to make sure that their voice is really heard and taken seriously.

b. Inclusion in Education

The Salamanca Declaration was adopted in 1994 at the World Conference on Special Education in Salamanca, Spain, and was an important milestone in the recognition of inclusive education for all children with disabilities. This declaration assured that every child should be given quality education which should include their needs and should involve them in the mainstream education system. Ainscow and César (2006) consider this to be the most significant international document ever published in the field of special education. However, the Declaration also emphasises on early intervention, prevention, and collaboration between families, schools and communities to promote inclusive education

In the context of Slovakia, inclusion in education is supported by national legislation, specifically Section 2 of the Education Act that aligns with international standards such as the UN General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education. This framework focuses on equality of opportunity and the recognition of individual educational needs for active engagement in school activities of all children. The aim of inclusion is to guarantee that every child, regardless of his or her physical, intellectual, social, linguistic, or other characteristics, has access to equal educational opportunities (Salamanca Statement, p.6).

c. Inclusion as a Human Right

Inclusion in education is not just a pedagogical practice, it is a fundamental human right that requires systemic reform. Education is universally recognized as a basic human right, essential for both individual dignity and societal progress. This right is protected under international frameworks such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which states that “No person shall be denied the right to education” (ECHR, Article 2). This principle is further supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which Slovakia signed in 2010. Slovakia has made a binding pledge to ensure that all students including those with special needs are integrated in general education (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic n.d. Art. 24) This international commitment demands that Slovakia must continuously reform its education system to incorporate children with special needs and to ensure that no child is denied the opportunity to participate in mainstream education. As Rioux (2002) points out, inclusion should not be seen as a privilege or something that a child has to earn but as a right that acknowledges every child’s potential.

II. Education as a Benefit

The importance of inclusive education extends far beyond individual students, it affects society as a whole. Quality education has many positive social and economic results, and leads to a more equitable environment for all. According to the OECD (2006, p. 13) argues that education is a key driver of GDP growth, reduces the costs of healthcare and social expenditures, and enhances social cohesion. Furthermore, UNICEF (2014, p. 9) stresses that inclusive education is important for poverty reduction, providing better chances for disadvantaged children and ensuring every child should have access to quality learning.

a. Education as a Benefit for the Individual

Education is closely related to higher earnings. Research by the OECD (2024) shows that people with higher levels of education are likely to have secure jobs, career progression, and higher incomes throughout their working life. In contrast, those who leave school with low skills tend to earn less, have lower initial earnings, and are at higher risk of unemployment. This lack of education leads to more dependence on welfare systems, which in turn worsen economic inequality (Mezzanotte, 2022, p. 14).

In addition to financial benefits, education is linked with better physical and mental health. Research shows that people with higher levels of education are less likely to be affected by various health complications, including chronic diseases and mental health issues (Mezzanotte, 2022, p. 15). This is due to better health literacy, better access to health care, and healthier lifestyle choices. Educated individuals are also more likely to engage in preventive healthcare behaviors and make informed decisions about their well-being. Also, they deal better with stress and thus have a better quality of life (Easterbrooke et al., 2015).

Education also plays a crucial role in an individual's psychological well-being and overall happiness. A number of studies have linked education with life satisfaction and reported that happier people are more educated (Chen, 2011). According to Layard (2005), meaningful social connections—whether through family, friendships, or community participation—are essential for happiness, and education can help foster these relationships.

The World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024) further supports this, revealing that higher levels of democracy, which often correlate with higher levels of education, are linked to greater happiness. As Mezzanotte (2022, p. 15) pointed out, educated citizens are more likely to participate in democratic processes which leads to stronger social support and better quality of life. Factors like GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy all positively affected by education, contribute to happiness.

Educated individuals are not only more likely to secure stable employment but are also more inclined to make healthier choices, pursue meaningful careers, and find a sense of purpose—all essential elements of life satisfaction.

b. Education as a Benefit for Society

The benefits for individuals are closely linked to the benefits for the entire country. Providing individuals with more education, knowledge, and skills— accumulating human capital—which makes the people more efficient and employable and, in turn, raises the income of the country and supports economic growth.

A population of educated individuals has a direct impact on health care costs, social cohesion, and civic participation. According to the OECD report of 2010, educated individuals are more likely to participate in activities like voting and volunteering that help in enhancing social capital and encourage people to be more involved in the welfare of others.

This type of investment in education also has significant economic returns to governments. Educated individuals are more productive and employable, which not only benefits them but also boosts the economic development of the country (OECD, 2010). Higher levels of human capital – knowledge, skills and abilities – are associated with higher levels of national productivity and sustainable economic growth. The OECD (2024) stresses that these benefits are also reflected in reduced social assistance requirements as educated individuals are less likely to rely on welfare programs.

There is one area where the return on investment is particularly significant and that is *early childhood education*. Crawford and Outhwaite (2023) found in their research that high quality early education is particularly important for disadvantaged children in the long run. Early education enhances academic achievement, enhances social mobility and reduces poverty rates.

By investing in early childhood education, society helps children be prepared for future success and equips them with the skills and confidence they need to thrive in future educational settings and beyond. Such investments are not only good for individuals but also good for a more equitable and prosperous society.

III. The Impact of Exclusion or Why Inclusion is Especially Needed in Slovakia

The problems of exclusion and segregation in the education system in Slovakia profoundly affect opportunities for marginalized children, especially those from Romani community. Slovakia's segregation of Romani students is a clear example of inequalities and clearly shows that there is a need for an inclusive education system to address these inequalities.

a. Educational Segregation and Its Consequences

Educational assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), consistently demonstrate the relationship between socioeconomic status and student performance. The PISA 2022 report noted that disadvantaged students can achieve high academic results if they get support (OECD, 2024) but such support is lacking in Slovakia, especially for the marginalized communities. Instead of promoting inclusion, Slovak primary schools are highly segregated based on socio-economic backgrounds. Segregation in Slovakia is the worst in the entire EU (ranked 62nd out of 63 OECD countries in PISA 2018).

Many Romani students are labelled as having a "mild mental disability," which, in addition to segregated education, limits their opportunities to complete basic education and continue their studies in secondary school (Amnesty International, 2017; Hall et al., 2019, p. 96). While the barriers hindering Romani children's access to education may have their own specificities, they are similarly faced by many other marginalized groups, making this issue one that affects a diverse range of students within the Slovak education system.

b. Historical Context of Romani Segregation in Slovakia

The segregation of Romani students has been going on in Slovakia for many years with lasting and pervasive consequences. However, this practice is against the laws of Slovakia and other international laws. More than 25% of Romani children are still being educated in segregated or special education settings (Hall et et al., 2019, p. 96). In a analysis done by the Slovaks educational initiative To Dá Rozum, this issue has been an issue for more than a decade and has attracted the attention of Slovak and international NGOs, international organizations, and Slovak institutions, including the State School Inspectorate, the Public Defender of Rights, and the Methodological and Pedagogical Centre.

c. Socioeconomic Implications of Educational Segregation

The segregation of Romani children in education is not only a violation of human rights but also a socio-economic issue with lasting repercussions. Research, including PISA and other international studies, highlights the effect of a school's socioeconomic and ethnic composition on the educational achievement of disadvantaged students. Schools that are attended by marginalized groups usually have lower academic achievement and are often under-resourced (OECD, 2018). As a result, Romani children in segregated schools are more likely to be trapped in poverty and low social mobility (SME, 2021).

By placing students from disadvantaged backgrounds into separate schools, Slovakia's education system denies them access to a quality learning environment that is vital for skill development and personal growth. Inclusive education systems aim to minimize the impact of the socioeconomic context on success; however, the practices of Slovakia do not only prevent equal opportunities, but also reinforce stereotypes that sustain systemic discrimination in Slovaks society (SME, 2021).

d. Legal and Human Rights Frameworks

Slovakia's approach to segregating Romani children has also drawn attention from the European Commission, which launched an infringement proceeding in 2015 against Slovakia for the systemic discrimination and segregation of Roma children in education. This made Slovakia the first EU member state to face legal action for educational segregation (Amnesty International, 2017).

As a signatory to international conventions like the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Slovakia is legally required to take positive measures against segregation and to ensure equal educational rights for all children (OHCHR, 1965). However, the current educational practices of Slovakia reveal a significant gap between these commitments and their implementation.

IV. Why Education Matters for Democracy

The role of education in democracy has been well documented and researched extensively. Education is a key in the fostering of democratic values and promoting active citizenship; it shapes individuals' worldviews, making them more "socially liberal, politically engaged, and inclined toward civic participation" (Paterson, 2016, p.4) It also teaches students about democratic principles like "free elections, civil rights, and gender equality, thus inculcating in them the spirit of social responsibility as well as tolerance to diversity" (UNESCO, 2017, p.1). This tolerance of out-groups and commitment to democratic processes is necessary for creating inclusive, participatory societies.

Political science research has long established education as a driver of democratic engagement. According to Almond and Verba (1989), educated citizens are likely to participate in democratic processes like voting and civic organizations due to their understanding of democratic principles and belief in the role of themselves and other citizens as active contributors to society.

The history of democratic reforms in education has been to reduce class inequalities and provide equal opportunities for all social classes. In Europe, the reforms were meant to democratize education systems and take away elitism by establishing a more equitable learning environment for children from different social classes (Österman & Robinson, 2021).

a. The Role of Education in Promoting Tolerance and Civic Engagement

A key feature of inclusive education is its role in fostering tolerance, which is vital for democratic society. More educated individuals are generally more tolerant of diversity, an essential component of a democratic state. Education socializes individuals to respect cultural differences, increasing their willingness to "embrace out-groups and view diversity as a strength rather than a threat "(UNESCO, 2017, p.1).

Methodological Framework

Acknowledging Value Bias

This study is not value-neutral. While I strive to approach the topic of inclusion from multiple angles and maintain objectivity, I acknowledge that my personal values and perspectives inevitably shape the research process. However, I am committed to minimizing any potential biases that may arise from these personal perspectives. To address this, I make a conscious effort to set aside my opinions when interacting with participants, ensuring that their viewpoints are given space to emerge without undue influence. I approach each conversation with genuine curiosity, asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing, and seeking clarification to ensure that I truly understand the perspectives being shared. This approach is essential not only for the accuracy of the data but also for respecting the voices of the participants, allowing their experiences and opinions to be fully heard and appreciated.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design that combines participant observation and semi-structured interviews to provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences of families and educators engaged in inclusive education. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of inclusion, a narrative approach was employed, particularly in the analysis of interviews.

Data Collection Process

Observation

For this research, I observed two educational institutions: Rozmanita kindergarten in Bratislava and Alma Primary School in Zvolen.

Rozmanita Kindergarten

Situated in Bratislava's Nová Cvernovka, Rozmanita aspires to create an inclusive education model accessible to all children, regardless of their background or abilities. Its vision promotes a flexible system connecting schools with communities, fostering growth across all life stages. While the broader project addresses systemic change in schools, my focus was specifically on the kindergarten.

At Rozmanita, I observed a typical day in full: from morning arrivals and circle time ("elipse") to meals, playtime, and community events. These moments offered insights into the school's inclusive practices and interactions within its diverse environment.

Alma Primary School

Located in Zvolen, Alma Primary School has been managed by the NGO Živica since the 2024/2025 academic year. Tuition-free, Alma aims to remove financial barriers to education. At the time of observation, Živica had managed the school for six months. Alma has a fascinating history: originally an elite sports school in the 1970s, it later became a Roma-only institution. This segregation persisted until Živica's intervention.

It is noteworthy that Alma stands in front of another school historically attended by white children with a minimal number of Romani students. Respondents call the school the "mirror school," and this term will be used throughout this thesis. Živica is working to desegregate and transform Alma into a model of differentiated education. My observations included interviews with parents and impromptu conversations with staff and students.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with parents, as recipients of inclusive education policies, and policy creators. These included:

Juraj Hipš: Representative of the founder (Živica) and program director, responsible for the strategic development of the school, and a member of the school leadership team.

Anežka Janolová: The leader of Rozmanita kindergarten, where children are selected through a lottery system to ensure diversity. The kindergarten operates on a sliding-scale tuition model, where financial contributions are based on each family's ability to pay, making it accessible to all.

Anna (name changed for privacy): A parent who chose Rozmanita for practical reasons rather than a direct commitment to inclusivity. Anna is a single mother, unemployed to meet her child's needs, and around 50 years old.

Zuzana: A mother with a child enrolled in Alma. She also trains teachers at the Komenský Institute, an initiative under Živica's umbrella.

Adam (name changed for privacy): A parent who was part of the founding team of Alma School and currently has children enrolled there. Adam himself attended the school as a child when it operated as a sports-focused institution. He is approximately 45 years old and comes from an upper middle class background.

Albert (name changed for privacy): A Romani parent from a lower economic background, also 45 years old. Like Adam, Albert attended Alma School during the period when it functioned as a sports-focused institution.

Independent Variables

Inclusive Education: This refers to creating educational settings that bring together children from diverse backgrounds, regardless of physical, intellectual, social, linguistic, or other characteristics. The degree to which educational programs embrace inclusivity, such as through lottery systems for diverse student selection, or sliding-scale tuition fees for families, serves as a key independent variable in this study.

Dependent Variables

Mutual Understanding and Empathy: This variable stems from the understanding that for a person to be truly empathetic, they must both be exposed to diversity and understand it. Simply being exposed to differences is not enough; it can sometimes reinforce prejudices. However, understanding the perspective of others—recognizing them as part of the same community, each with their own rightful place—can foster empathy. This variable assesses how inclusive education influences the family's ability to understand and engage with perspectives different from their own, ultimately contributing to the development of empathy.

Cross-Cutting Identity: This concept examines how families and individuals can build meaningful relationships that foster mutual understanding and unity while overcoming cultural, social, or political barriers. This idea aligns with Robert Putnam’s theory of bridging social capital, which highlights the importance of relationships in connecting people from different groups and promoting inclusiveness and social cohesion. However, it goes beyond mere understanding—cross-cutting takes it a step further by becoming an integral part of an individual's identity and value system.

Methodology

Participant Observation

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how Rozmanita Kindergarten and Alma Primary School operate, particularly in terms of inclusivity, I utilized the method of participant observation. This approach allowed me to immerse myself in the daily life of both institutions—engaging directly with the environment, observing the dynamics, and interacting with staff, students, and parents in their natural settings.

My familiarity with Rozmanita stems from my previous role as a volunteer for two academic years, which gave me firsthand insight into the institution's routines and culture. In contrast, I had limited prior knowledge of Alma, which meant my observations there were more exploratory. Understanding that my past experiences, especially with Rozmanita, might influence how I perceived and interpreted events, I made a conscious effort to set aside any biases. I aimed to approach the research with an open mind, striving to maintain objectivity and provide an authentic view of both institutions.

Rozmanita

Morning Routine and Parent Interactions

I began my observation early in the morning, watching children arrive with their parents or caregivers. Some children entered confidently, said goodbye to their parents, and immediately joined their friends in play. Others were less enthusiastic, others visibly upset, crying as they parted from their parents.

Parents actively interacted with each other, discussing practical topics like cafes with play areas or local doctors, while scheduling playdates at playgrounds. While some parents were very social and eager to connect, others seemed more introverted and kept their interactions brief. Interestingly, most parents knew not only their child’s classmates by name but also specific details about their preferences and habits. For instance, one father, knowing that the child was currently fascinated by dinosaurs, asked, “Do you know what the Christmas dinosaur looks like? It’s green and glowing.”

One moment that stood out was when a boy with autism grabbed my hand and asked me to help him wave goodbye to his father. After waving, he wanted to play with an excavator, but we had to join the group for the "ellipse" – a circle time activity that marks the beginning of each day.

The Ellipse

The ellipse is a key part of Rozmanita's daily routine, where children gather in a circle to share feelings and discuss experiences. Anežka, the leader of Rozmanita kindergarten, mentioned its significance in our conversation. She explained, "Inclusion for us means every child can develop at their own pace and according to their needs. This is the foundation we strive for, not only in preschool but also in school. We start the day with *the ellipse*, an essential time for learning cooperation and listening. It's also about understanding that everyone is different and contributes in their own way."

Anna, a mother, described how the ellipse has helped her child and highlighted her collaboration with teachers. "I sometimes feel like we're not making progress, but the teachers praise her development. They tell me she can now sit for five more minutes during *the ellipse*. At first, she wouldn't sit or listen, just ran around the classroom. I also appreciate consultations with the teachers. They show me where she's improved, then include my child in the discussion to praise her in front of me. She grows internally and sees herself as capable. She doesn't believe she's stupid, even though there are times when I lose my patience and call her stupid. Then I feel guilty for possibly giving her a complex. Teachers advised me to express my frustration differently, saying I should acknowledge my feelings, wait for her apology, and only then give consequences."

During my observation, *the ellipse* included children with diverse backgrounds and needs: a boy with autism, a Ukrainian boy learning Slovak, a girl of color who primarily spoke English, a child who was adopted, and a quieter girl among more outgoing children. The teacher used a puppet to encourage them to share feelings by pointing to sticky notes with smiley faces representing emotions. She also asked if they wanted to hug or high-five the puppet. Most children chose to hug the puppet, smiling as they did so.

Tracking Progress and Skill Development

Rozmanita places a strong emphasis on tracking each child's progress. Teachers conduct *semi-annual screenings* to assess various skills, including social and practical abilities. During my visit, I spoke with a teacher who was reviewing one child's progress. When I asked about empathy, she explained how children develop this skill differently: "Some children can be empathetic, while others are are overwhelmed by themselves. They start learning it around the age of six, when they begin to notice if someone is upset and ask why they're crying. Some children, however, might just say, 'Why is she shouting? It bothers me...'"

The daily activities at Rozmanita are designed to support diverse learning needs. After the ellipse, children practiced a poem for an upcoming community event. Initially, the group spoke over one another, but the teacher guided them to listen and align their voices. Later, they attended a music class to rehearse songs.

Mealtime and Social Learning

Children are encouraged to try all foods, serve themselves, and clean up after meals. If a child spills something, they are shown how to clean it with a designated cloth. Afterward, the children played outdoors. I noticed that teachers often joined the children in their activities. When emotional support was needed, such as asking another child to share a swing, children would ask the teacher for help.

Anežka, the leader of kindergarten, explained: "There was a girl who was often overstimulated, for example, she would scream and wet herself. The other children noticed this and were even afraid of her, but they realized they could manipulate her. They told her to run away from the yard or the boys would throw her down and hold her on the ground, thinking it was funny to both the boys and her. From our perspective, this wasn't funny, but she didn't realize it. We all sat down, discussed the situations that happened, and decided to involve more people in these moments so we could catch the issues right from the start. The children involved in such behavior were immediately addressed, and we contacted the parents. The root cause was likely exhaustion, which led to insufficient attention for all the children. To prevent this, we now ensure a longer break every two months."

Anna, a mother, shared: "What's important is that this school has zero tolerance for violence. My child also faces aggression elsewhere, but here, it's explained to them, and parents are involved. They inform me if my child harms another, and she must make amends."

The next day, I attended a community event at Rozmanita where children sold handmade items and performed songs for a Christmas market. The event created a strong sense of community, but language barriers were evident, especially among parents. Anežka, the leader of the kindergarten, explained that children can play together without speaking Slovak, but parents face difficulties due to language and time constraints. She also mentioned the challenge of integrating the Vietnamese community, with some parents using Google Translate or a Slovak speaker to communicate.

Anna, a mother, shared her thoughts on community events: "There are community activities, but my child struggles in large groups. I'm conservative and over fifty, and I don't feel like I have much in common with the younger parents. They organize barbecues to bring parents together, but I don't participate. I feel the kids enjoy it more without us. No one says anything, but I've noticed my child misbehaving—spilling things, causing disruptions, and taking things from others."

Parent Perspectives on Inclusion

Anna shared her thoughts on Rozmanita's approach. Her child required extra attention due to emotional and behavioral challenges, and she appreciated how the kindergarten supported her family. "I can't imagine life without Rozmanita," she said. "They provide special education, speech, ABA (note: therapy for children with autism and other developmental disabilities) and play therapy at no extra cost, which I couldn't afford otherwise."

Anna also reflected on the inclusive philosophy of the school. "They treat children with respect and set limits in a "democratic" way. At first, I wasn't sure about their approach, but now I see how much my child has grown. They've helped her build friendships, even though she struggles with social interactions."

Despite what she refers to as her conservative views on some topics, Anna expressed gratitude for the open-mindedness of Rozmanita's staff: "Even though I don't agree with everything, like the rainbow flags they display, they respect my perspective and don't push their views on my child."

Final Reflection on Inclusion at Rozmanita

Reflecting on my time at Rozmanita, I gained a deeper understanding of how an inclusive environment can influence both children and their families. In my conversation with a mother, Anna, I discovered how her views on the LGBTI+ community have evolved. Initially, I thought her stance might be negative, especially as she had expressed frustration about the rainbow and Ukrainian flags displayed at Nová Cvernovka. However, Anna shared that her perspective on diversity has changed over time: "I'm finding my way to diversity through this school and kindergarten. At first, I was clearly against it, but today I'm willing to accept that there are people with different orientations. They don't have an easy life in this country. I understand this especially through Anička (note: founder of Rozmanita), who has a different orientation."

I believe this is also the reason why the LGBTI+ community has become a symbol of diversity for Anna. From the very beginning of our conversation, she used it as an example. Since Rozmanita has ambitions to expand and is a model system meant to be replicated, it will be interesting to observe how others perceive this concept of "diversity" when it is transplanted into different environments.

Looking at my entire observation and interviews through the lens of the defined variables, I can say that I observed how both concepts—empathy and cross-cutting identity—were actively developed and applied. Empathy is a clear focus at Rozmanita, particularly in how children are encouraged to understand and relate to the needs of others. It is not just about understanding differences but also how to manage conflicts and recognize that others may have needs that sometimes clash with their own. As a teacher explained, young children are initially overwhelmed by their own emotions and needs, but with time, they start to grasp that others may also have different needs.

This idea of empathy is actively promoted during the "ellipse" sessions, where children share their feelings and discuss how others might feel in various situations. Similarly, during free play, teachers often step in with questions like, "How would you feel if this happened to you? What

would you need?" These moments guide children toward a deeper understanding of others' emotions and perspectives.

On a parental level, I observe empathy that naturally connects to cross-cutting identity. This process begins with parents engaging in diverse experiences at events throughout the year, such as the Christmas market, barbeques or the summer community festival, where they actively participate in the preparations. As they come to understand that differences are not a threat, they start forming meaningful connections. They arrange playdates for their children, visit the kindergarten to read stories, and spend more time with other families. The focus is on creating shared positive experiences and fostering open discussions about diversity.

Alma

Upon arriving at the institution, I had my first interview with Juraj Hipš, accompanied by a school employee who later turned out to be a social worker. Juraj is representative of the founder (Živica) and program director, responsible for the strategic development of the school, and a member of the school leadership team. During the conversation, the social worker was addressing a student's absence from the previous day, reportedly due to illness. However, the student was present that day and excited to participate in an ice-skating activity. As I engaged with Juraj and other parents, I quickly learned that absenteeism is a recurring issue, particularly among the marginalized Roma community (MRK).

Juraj Hipš

Juraj shared insights into the school's ongoing battle against segregation. He referenced statistical analyses from the Educational Analysis Center (Centrum vzdelávacích analýz, 2024), which revealed that out of approximately 2,000 schools, 460 are at risk of segregation. For over a decade, the school had been segregated, with children from marginalized communities attending one school while predominantly non-Romani students attended the "mirror school". This segregation led to a phenomenon known as "white flight." Juraj explained, "Originally, the school had 400 students, but when we took it over, there were only 190. In the last year before our involvement, only 14 children enrolled here, while the mirror school faced overcrowding. We were given the opportunity to take over the school and lead a desegregation process. A turning point occurred when the city restructured the school districts, ensuring children from Pustý Hrad

began attending other schools where they had never been admitted before. However, this initiative faced significant public opposition."

Juraj also cited an analysis of schools in Zvolen, which highlighted high levels of societal racism. He noted, "Around 19% of people stated they would place their children in classrooms with a maximum of two Romani students, while 60% believed Romani children should be educated in separate classes due to perceived intellectual inferiority." He stressed that while inclusion is crucial, it must be supported by solutions to housing issues and proper training for teachers to prevent marginalized students from being overlooked.

At one point during the interview, four students knocked on the door, asking for permission to attend a hockey game during class time. "During lessons?" Juraj asked, to which the students replied, "All the other schools are going, and we're not." Juraj responded, "It's a great idea, and I'm happy to support it, but this is a bit last-minute. If you had come a week earlier, we could have discussed it during the teachers' meeting and made proper arrangements." He used this situation to illustrate the school's focus on teaching better planning skills. Juraj emphasized that planning is particularly important for families living in generational poverty, where immediate survival often takes precedence over long-term goals. He explained that for many of these families, the 13-year horizon—the time it takes for a child to complete primary and secondary education to secure a stable job—feels abstract and less relevant compared to the pressing challenges of daily life.

Juraj highlighted the importance of differentiated education as a cornerstone of the school's approach, emphasizing that not all children can be treated identically. "School is not a factory that produces uniform results," he stated. Building relationships with students through activities like sports, excursions, and shared experiences helps establish trust, which is essential before focusing on academic progress.

Parental engagement emerged as another key factor in improving attendance and fostering a supportive school environment. Juraj underscored the importance of helping parents view the school as "an ally rather than an adversary". This sense of community is further strengthened through collaborative efforts like volunteering or participating in events such as Christmas Party. Juraj as well as other parents I interviewed expressed surprise at the extent of Romani family

involvement in these initiatives, noting that this shift reflects growing trust and inclusion within the school community.

Zuzana

Zuzana, a mother with a child enrolled in Alma and a teacher trainer at the Komenský Institute, an initiative under Živica, shared her experience with a candle-making workshop. This event brought together Romani and non-Romani children, along with their parents, to engage in a shared activity. “We’re still in the early stages, where people are feeling things out, realizing that nothing bad has happened—no one has taken anything from them or treated them harshly,” she explained.

She continued with a personal story: “I have an older daughter who is half Indian, with a skin tone similar to that of a Romani girl, so I’ve experienced this dynamic from that perspective. We spent a long time deciding on the right school for our son. Choosing this school wasn’t automatic at all. His class is one of the most challenging here. I wondered whether it would provide a sufficiently stimulating environment for him.”

When asked if she was considering transferring her son to a different school, Zuzana said, “I ask myself every single day if we should keep him here. Some teachers even suggest we should move him. But his class teacher says he’s happy there. From what my son tells me, he seems happy too. I think this uncertainty is more about me—I feel like he might learn a lot more academically elsewhere. But I’m pleased that he’s happy here and that he’s learning things he wouldn’t learn in other places. Those academic subjects? We can teach him those ourselves. What matters to me is that he’s learning a lot more empathy than he could anywhere else.”

Adam

Adam, a parent who was part of Alma School’s founding team and currently has children enrolled there, also attended the school as a child during its time as a sports-focused institution. He now works in local government. Our conversation begins with Adam reflecting on the challenging process of transferring the school under the administration of Živica. He shares a chronological account, explaining that his personal connection to the school was a key factor in choosing it for his children. “For me, it was an obvious choice because I attended the school myself. Despite its structural issues, there were excellent teachers here.” Adam illustrates his perspective by

referencing an article he recently read by Miroslav Beblavý. The article emphasizes the potential of Romani communities and highlights the counterproductive measures some towns take, such as Gelnica purchasing properties to prevent Romani families from living there. Adam reflects, “This is the exact opposite of what we need.”

He acknowledges the pervasive and strong prejudices on both sides. “People say Romani people don’t have work habits, but where are they supposed to develop them? How to design effective desegregation processes is a question no one seems to know the answer to. However, I support the idea of mandatory pre-primary education. Every year, together with the head of the education department, I visit kindergartens. We talk to staff about their successes and challenges. Since the introduction of mandatory preschool, there’s been a noticeable increase in Romani children attending. Although they were present before, this mandate made the system functional and is changing the paradigm. Principals tell us these children are highly adaptable—they haven’t yet been ‘corrupted’ by consumerism and materialism.”

Adam identifies two key challenges: ineffective communication with parents and the environment children return to after school, which often pulls them back. “When we work with them, the results are quickly visible and even extend to their families. People from the majority realize that Romani are people of flesh and blood, just like them, and their prejudices fade. On the other hand, there are those who remain hostile, unwilling to give it a chance, or have been discouraged by a negative experience.”

He also discusses the school’s impact on attendance and discipline. “Alma has a noticeable influence on Romani families. Suddenly, there’s someone enforcing strict, clear, and precise rules with discipline. Some Romani parents test the system, saying things like, “My child has a stomachache today, so they won’t go to school.” But the question is, are they really sick? During home visits, I’ve seen children perfectly healthy, sitting with a tablet, because the parent simply didn’t feel like taking them to school. The new administrator enforces these rules rigorously and universally—not based on ethnicity, but for everyone.”

When asked about fostering mutual understanding and empathy, Adam explains that it’s still too early to measure the long-term impact. “I think it will be visible in about five years or when the students graduate. Today’s first-graders won’t be concerned in ninth grade about whether someone is Romani or not. They’ll use entirely different criteria to evaluate people—moral criteria, hopefully not social or economic ones. I believe we’re moving in the right direction. As I

often say, it's a collaborative effort that requires commitment from both groups. Both sides must remain equally committed to this work."

Albert

Albert, a Romani parent from a lower economic background and a former student of Alma School during its time as a sports-focused institution (likely attending the school at the same time as Adam), begins by comparing the mirror school to Alma. He recounts an anecdote: "There's a mother with two children—one attends this school, and the other goes to the mirror school. The one at the other school comes home unhappy every day; they're just waiting for the chance to transfer here." He further reflects "The hatred is awful. I have a nephew who's very talented—he tries hard, is a great football player, and has even started playing hockey. He really wants to make friends with non-Romani kids, but they don't want to be friends with him. He comes home to my sister crying. The problem, I think, also lies with the teachers because one told him to just leave the others alone and stop provoking them."

When asked about community events, Albert expressed surprise at how many Romani families participated, admitting he didn't expect such high involvement. When asked what the school could do to engage families who didn't participate, he hesitated and said, "I can't think of anything more urgent or important—these families just don't want to. I don't understand how anything could be more important than supporting your child."

Albert then shared a personal memory: "My father was very strict with us, but he always said we didn't have to bring home perfect grade. If we couldn't grasp it, that was fine, but we had to be good people." Interestingly, this sentiment was echoed by Anna, a mother from Rozmanita, who ended our conversation with a similar thought: "Even if my child never learns to read or write, I just hope they learn to distinguish right from wrong and grow up to be a good person."

Final Reflection on Inclusion at Alma

Both institutions carry unique characteristics shaped by their respective environments. Alma in Zvolen is primarily focused on the integration of the Romani community, which presents its own set of challenges and priorities for inclusive education.

An interesting moment for me was when both Adam and Albert mentioned the years they attended school. That's when I realized that, even though they might not have attended the same class, they were at least in similar grades. Their life trajectories, leading to vastly different socio-economic statuses, are undoubtedly shaped by multiple factors. However, their stories highlight a key issue: for those coming from a disadvantaged background of generational poverty, it is highly unlikely they will escape it. The gap between these two former students of the same school is enormous. As mentioned in the introduction, the formal education system has lost its capacity to equalize opportunities, and the gap in inequality continues to widen. The fact that Adam and Albert even crossed paths at the same institution is unusual, as the entire story of Alma and the "mirror school" demonstrates.

The lack of interaction between different socio-economic groups within an educational environment that consciously embraces inclusion as a value is problematic on several levels:

i. Impact on life outcomes: It directly influences students' future success, the schools they attend, and ultimately their career prospects and earnings. These factors shape overall life satisfaction, mental and physical health. Unemployed or chronically ill individuals, aside from the emotional toll this takes, place a significant burden on a country's economy—not only do they strain social systems, but they also fail to contribute to them. Moreover, there appears to be a correlation between the quality of democracy, individual satisfaction, and education levels. Less educated, dissatisfied individuals are more prone to extremist rhetoric.

ii. Human rights implications: Slovakia is the first EU member state to face legal action for educational segregation, despite being a signatory of international conventions such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Slovakia is legally obligated to take active measures against segregation.

iii. Contextual considerations: One's success, education, inclusive policies, or even this thesis cannot be viewed in isolation. Writing this paper, I acknowledge my value system, which I consciously set aside in the empirical portion to maintain objectivity. However, as I draw conclusions, it is through my perspective and values that I do so. I must therefore emphasize an essential point: no one chooses the circumstances of their birth or the advantages or disadvantages they face. Some are fortunate not to experience toxic stress, a key consequence of generational poverty, which hinders children's ability to focus, learn, and process, as their brains are constantly signaling danger. Others have the privilege of meeting their basic needs, enabling them to engage in intellectual work, build friendships, or pursue fulfilling activities. For those who are less fortunate, I see it as our moral obligation, as those with privilege, to support disadvantaged groups in the ways they need most.

A significant challenge in assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives is the short timeframe since the institution came under the leadership of the "Živica" foundation—only six months at the time of my visit. Nevertheless, early signs of positive change are evident. One key factor fostering inclusion is the community events organized by the institution. As Robert Putnam's work emphasizes, creating spaces for such gatherings is essential for forming bridging social capital.

Zuzana shared her experience leading a workshop at the Christmas Party, where families came together to make candles—an activity that exemplifies this approach. These events provide opportunities for connection beyond the classroom. As Zuzana notes, people gradually realize that there is no threat, that diversity does not mean danger. This marks the beginning of building a *cross-cutting identity*.

It will be fascinating to observe the long-term outcomes, particularly once the current first graders complete their primary education. By that point, the data will likely be more robust, providing valuable insights into the evolution of the integration process. Additionally, it will be crucial to contextualize these findings within the broader urban environment, examining how integration strategies develop in different districts, particularly those predominantly inhabited by Romani families.

Conclusion

"Inclusion is not a static goal but a dynamic process," says Anežka, the leader of Rozmanita kindergarten. This work demonstrates that this process must be contextualized within cultural, societal, and institutional frameworks. Through this research, Rozmanita Kindergarten and Alma Primary School have served as compelling examples of how inclusive education operates in practice, each addressing unique challenges shaped by their histories, communities, and environments.

One of the key findings of this research is the critical role that parental engagement plays in supporting inclusion. Across both institutions, respondents pointed to the boundary of inclusion being defined by the level of interest and involvement parents show—whether in addressing behavioral issues (Anežka), fostering communication (Adam), or participating in community-building efforts (Albert). This emphasizes that inclusion is not solely the responsibility of schools but a collaborative effort between institutions and families.

The study also reveals how exposure to diversity and shared formative experiences can foster *empathy* and *mutual understanding*. As highlighted by several participants, the realization that "nothing bad happens" when encountering difference can be a transformative step toward building bridges. These moments of connection, when supported by activities centered on shared goals rather than differences, can foster what Putnam describes as bridging social capital. These encounters provide opportunities for both children and their families to develop *cross-cutting identities*. This is not only vital for the success of inclusive education but also for broader societal cohesion. Lastly, the emphasis both institutions place on clear, consistently applied rules and boundaries is noteworthy. These structures create a sense of safety, predictability, and mutual respect that form the foundation for successful inclusion.

In conclusion, we find ourselves returning to the beginning—defining what education means and what schools as educational institutions are meant to serve. It is no longer merely about memorizing easily searchable facts. As Bauman describes, the world is changing, and we live in a state of constant change, uncertainty, and the weakening of traditional structures. Yet, adapting to this fluid reality is possible, and need not be distressingg, when supported by an environment that acknowledges and reflects these shifts. As respondents suggest, maybe we will stop judging people by their economic status or skin color and instead value them for their character.

Rozmanita and Alma are not only working toward this goal but are also succeeding in achieving it.

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