

BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

“VARESO” –

Roma Children in Slovak Elementary Schools

Melinda Vincze

Bratislava, 14th February, 2025

BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

VARE\$O¹

Bachelor's thesis

Study program: Liberal Arts

Study Field: 6718 Political Science

Thesis Advisor: JUDr. Sylvia Tiryaki, PhD.

Degree of qualification: Bachelor of Arts (abbrev. "BA")

Date of submission of the bachelor thesis: February 14, 2025

Date of defense: August, 2025

Melinda Vincze

Bratislava, 2025

1 – Vareso translates into "something" in Romani

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this bachelor's thesis is my own work and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. Since I am not a native speaker, I used AI powered tools to correct my grammar. All used literature and other sources are attributed and cited in references.

In Bratislava, February 14, 2025

Melinda Vincze

Autor bakalárskej práce: Melinda Vincze

Názov práce: Varešo: Rómske deti v slovenských základných školách

Názov vysokej školy: Bratislavská medzinárodná škola liberálnych štúdií

Vedúca práce: JUDr. Sylvia Tiryaki, PhD.

Predseda komisie pre obhajoby bakalárskych prác: prof. František Novosád, CSc.

Členstvo komisie pre obhajoby bakalárskych prác: doc. Samuel Abrahám, PhD., prof.

František Novosád, CSc., Dagmar Kusá, PhD., univ.doc.; prof. Silvia Miháliková, prof.

PhDr. Iveta Radičová, PhD.

Dátum a miesto: Bratislava, 13. jún 2025

Rozsah práce: 33 strán, 59 398 znakov.

Stupeň kvalifikácie: Bakalár (Bc.)

Abstrakt

Táto bakalárska práca skúma úlohu slovenskej vlády a mimovládnych organizácií (MVO) pri podpore vzdelávania znevýhodnených detí pochádzajúcich z generačnej chudoby, so zameraním na rómske deti. Napriek rôznym iniciatívam rómske deti naďalej čelia výraznej diskriminácii v slovenskom vzdelávacom systéme, čo často vedie k segregácii a obmedzeným budúcim príležitostiam. Táto práca analyzuje existujúce vládne programy zamerané na boj proti diskriminácii a podporu vzdelávacej a sociálnej inklúzie, pričom hodnotí ich účinnosť v praxi.

Okrem štátnych opatrení sa práca zameriava aj na kľúčovú úlohu MVO, ako je Cesta Von, ktoré preukázali úspešnosť pri zlepšovaní vzdelávacích výsledkov a sociálnej integrácie rómskych detí už od raného veku. Porovnaním iniciatív vedených MVO s programami financovanými z európskych a národných zdrojov výskum poukazuje na to, že programy MVO často dosahujú efektívnejšie výsledky v marginalizovaných komunitách, a to aj napriek obmedzeným finančným zdrojom.

Hodnotením štátom podporovaných a MVO-riadených stratégií táto práca poskytuje komplexný pohľad na to, ako rôzne prístupy prispievajú k sociálnej inklúzii a k prekonaniu cyklu chudoby medzi rómskymi deťmi. Zistenia tejto štúdie môžu prispieť k diskusii o reforme vzdelávacej politiky, vplyve rôznych zdrojov financovania a úlohe občianskej spoločnosti pri riešení systémových nerovností na Slovensku.

Title: Varešo

Author: Melinda Vincze

University: Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

Thesis Advisor: JUDr. Sylvia Tiryaki, PhD

Date of Submission: February 14, 2025

Date of Defense: August, 2025

Chair of the Defense Committee: prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc.

Committee Members: Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc., doc. Samuel

Abrahám, PhD., prof. Silvia Miháliková, Mgr. Dagmar Kusá, PhD.,

Place, year: Bratislava, 2025

Page and word count: 33 pages, 59, 398 characters

Level of qualification: Bachelor of Arts (BA.)

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the Slovak government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in supporting the education of underprivileged children from generational poverty, with a focus on Roma children. Despite various initiatives, Roma children continue to face significant discrimination within the Slovak education system, often leading to segregation and limited future opportunities. This research analyses existing government programs aimed at combating discrimination and fostering educational and social inclusion, evaluating their effectiveness in practice.

In addition to state-led efforts, the thesis explores the critical role of NGOs, such as Cesta Von, which have demonstrated success in improving the educational outcomes and social integration of Roma children from an early age. By comparing NGO-led initiatives with those funded by the EU and national sources, the study highlights how NGO programs often achieve more effective results in marginalized communities despite limited financial resources.

By assessing both state-supported and NGO-driven strategies, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how different approaches contribute to social inclusion and breaking the cycle of poverty among Roma children. The findings aim to contribute to discussions on education policy reform, the impact of funding sources, and the role of civil society in addressing systemic inequalities in Slovakia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Sylvia Tiryaki, for her guidance throughout the writing process. I am especially thankful to my interviewees, Pavel Hrica, co-founder and director of NGO Cesta Von, and Ábel Ravasz, Plenipotentiary for Roma Minorities (2016–2020), for generously dedicating their time to answer my questions and provide valuable insights for my research.

Lastly, I am grateful for my family and cousin for encouraging me and supporting me throughout my studies, and I am deeply grateful to my partner for his unwavering support and encouragement throughout my writing journey.

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Introduction

“The student had completed nine years of compulsory education and successfully achieved lower-secondary education” – this sentence is written on the last report card a student is receiving after graduating from the 9th grade of “základná škola”, school of primary and lower secondary education. In Slovakia, the compulsory education is 10 years long, therefore students need to complete one year of higher secondary education to accomplish that, ideally.

However, that is not the case for many students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children from Roma minorities with poor background often receive their last report cards only after finishing 6th or 7th grade, claiming that “the student had finished their compulsory studies”, because they had already completed the 10 years in school by falling grades, leading to an early dropout, without a chance to pursue higher secondary education. They are officially done with the school system, their opportunities limited for finding “good jobs”, establishing a better life. What is going to happen to them? Well, something. *Vareso*.

The article 28 and 29 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which is binding under the Slovak law from 1993, states that children have the right to primary education without any discrimination and should be encouraged to complete secondary and higher education, looking out for their individual needs, fostering their interests and talents. However, in Slovakia, many children from Roma minority are not granted those rights.

Roma children, who are coming from poverty, face multiple disadvantages from the start of their education. If they are “lucky enough” to attend a regular primary school instead of a special one, they often face segregation from the start, being placed into Roma-only classes. This separation not only isolate them from the children from the majority but also results in them not getting the same quality education than their ethnic Slovak peers. Even more concerning, if they are “not lucky enough”, they are placed into special schools or classes, meant for children with mental disabilities without legitimate justification, which stands in the way of their true potential and development, and unfairly narrows down their opportunities from an early age.

Generational poverty and other socioeconomic factors also play a significant role in limiting Roma children’s opportunities of receiving an education. Harsh living conditions, often in remote settlements, which are lacking the eve the essential resources like clean water and

electricity, not to mention internet connection make extremely difficult for children to attend school regularly or being prepared for classes. Due to financial struggles, families are not able to provide school supplies or fit clothes for their kids, often having difficulties to make ends meet.

Another obstacle which is yet to be overcome is the language barrier. Although the Article 34 of the Slovak Constitution guarantees the right to education in minority languages, there is yet no school in Slovakia operating fully in Romani language, like the Hungarian minority schools – there are 8 private schools in total in Slovakia which are offering some subjects in Roma language, that is all. (There is an ongoing state project to change that, an elementary school, which would offer almost all the classes in Romani).

Yet, many Roma children are using Romani language at home within their families, knowing a little or no Slovak language, thus they often meet Slovak first time in their lives when they start their first year in school. That is also one of the main reasons why Roma children are placed into special schools, being labelled as mentally slower, just because they don't speak Slovak. The language problem is causing them to not understand fully the lessons, making participation and doing homework harder. Schools rarely have either financial or personal resources to provide any kind of language support, which means leaving those children further behind their peers.

This problem is also partly caused by their limited access to early childhood education, which already puts these children at disadvantage before even starting primary school. Without preschool experience, they not only lack the language skills but also social and basic motoric skills, what is crucial for adjusting the school setting and the institution. Parental support is also often limited, because many Roma parents themselves lack high-level language skills or formal education, finding it challenging to assist their children when they would need it.

Lastly, Roma children very often face prejudices from their educators. Biases and low expectation from teachers are a big problem, who instead of encouraging and supporting, are already expecting less from their Roma students just based on stereotypes or individual negative experiences, undermining their students' confidence and engagement. Social exclusion and negative attitudes, sometimes even bullying both from non-Roma peers and teachers add to the hostile environment. Those problems are many times overlooked, so the Roma children eventually get used to the unequal treatment, which makes them feel more alienated, and they will be less motivated to continue their studies.

To address these challenges, Slovak government ministries and NGOs are actively working on initiatives and programs, that shall improve Roma children's educational opportunities and at the end, lead them to a better life, a way out of the generational poverty.

However, the issues of segregation, discrimination, generational poverty, then limited access to early childhood education, and the lack of opportunity for studying in their mother tongue are significant obstacles to achieve meaningful progress.

In my bachelor's thesis, I will explore how the government and NGOs are addressing these challenges, focusing on the programs for early childhood development and education in one's native language. To get a broader picture, I will examine those problems through the Capability Approach and other behavioral theories, which researches the phenomena of toxic stress and the importance of early child development.

My hypothesis is that access to quality early childhood education and the ability to study in their mother tongue are critical factors in ensuring Roma children's success, without which long-term improvements are unlikely to be achieved.

The research will examine the state's efforts, including legislative initiatives and proposals, policy measures, investments, and the use of EU Structural Funds with EU recommendations. On the NGO side, I will analyse their programs, community-led actions, regional initiatives, and fieldwork, with a focus on how they address gaps in the state's approach.

The research question is: **How effectively are the government's and NGO's initiatives addressing the educational challenges faced by Roma children from disadvantaged backgrounds?**

Additionally, **how effectively do government and NGO initiatives address the challenges of early childhood education and mother-tongue instruction for Roma children from disadvantaged backgrounds?**

By evaluating both the successes and shortcomings of these initiatives, this thesis aims to provide recommendations on how resources can be more effectively allocated to ensure better educational opportunities for Roma children in Slovakia.

1. Roma People in Slovakia

The Roma represents the second-largest minority in Slovakia, yet their socioeconomic status remains uncertain. According to the 2021 census, approximately 67,179 individuals identified as Roma as their primary nationality, with 40,286 people selecting it as their second nationality, bringing the total count to about 107,465 individuals self-identifying as Roma. However, these figures are likely underreported due to the stigma associated with Roma identity and assimilationist pressures (Rosinský, 2019). The Atlas of Roma Communities (2019) estimates a more realistic number of 440,000 Roma individuals living in Slovakia, with a substantial proportion being children.

While not all Roma live in poverty and segregated settlements, a significant part of this minority group experiences economic hardship, with generational poverty and social exclusion. These socioeconomic challenges particularly affect Roma children, impacting their educational opportunities and integration into mainstream society (Farkas, 2014).

1.1 Educational Hardships Faced by Roma Children

Roma children in Slovakia face numerous barriers to education, beginning with low enrolment rates in preschool, which makes them less ready for primary education. According to Miškolci et al. (2017), Roma children's attendance in kindergartens is significantly lower than that of their peers, often due to financial problems, lack of awareness among parents, systemic discrimination, and the lack of kindergartens near their living area. Without the foundational skills acquired in preschool, many Roma children are going unprepared for primary education, falling behind right from the start of the first grade. Čokyna (2019) observes that some Roma children encounter basic school materials, such as pencils, for the first time during admission testing to primary school. This unpreparedness then often leads to segregation in education systems.

A recurring issue is the unreasonable placement of Roma children into special schools. Officially, these schools are intended for children with mental or physical disabilities. However, studies reveal that many Roma children are placed in these institutions based on biased assessments or language barriers, rather than genuine need (Gazovičová, 2015).

Segregation also happens in mainstream schools, where they are placed in separate classes, those often equipped with lesser or worse-quality tools, than what the children from majority tend to have in their classes. Studies show that Roma-only classes have worse results in tests than mixed, or majority-only classes, which is also connected with the teachers' efforts and expectations being lower in those classes (Messing, 2017).

Amnesty International in 2018 did a case study about the segregation in schools and found out some schools used so-called container classrooms for Roma-only classes, or classrooms with worse conditions and worse teaching equipment. Also, Roma children are sometimes not allowed into some facilities – like the canteen, cloakroom or library at the same time as others. Being separated also fosters segregation between Roma and non-Roma children, which only causes a bigger gap between the cultures (Amnesty International, 2018).

These examples clearly show the discrimination Roma children face from early ages, getting in general worse treatment than others, making them feel less valuable and less important, which is another hardship they need to face growing up.

1.2 Generational Poverty and Toxic Stress

Generational poverty significantly shapes the educational experiences of Roma children. Many Roma families live in conditions that lack basic amenities (like water, heating and electricity), making it difficult for children to focus on education. Čokyna (2019) highlights the stark contrast between what non-Roma children take for granted—such as access to school supplies, food and sweets, place to study, be it a room they entirely or partly owe or at least a very own study desk—and the systemic disadvantages faced by Roma children, who often completely lack all of those things.

Growing up in poverty has another element, which has a huge impact on the development and educational outcomes of children. This is the toxic stress, which is “a chronic exposure to adversity without the presence of protective factors such as a stable and supportive caregiver” (Čokyna, 2019, p.65, own translation). He further explains that the toxic stress arises when children are subjected to continuous or repeated situations of neglect, violence, discrimination, or instability—conditions that are unfortunately prevalent in many Roma communities. Unlike ordinary stress, which can be a normal and even beneficial response to challenges, toxic stress disrupts the body's ability to return to baseline, which is very dangerous in early years. It

overwhelms the stress-response system, leading to long-term changes in brain architecture, hormonal balance, and emotional regulation.

The concept of toxic stress was developed by Jack Shonkoff at the Harvard Center on the Developing Child (Shonkoff et al., 2012). They describe toxic stress as a physiological state that, when prolonged, impairs the development of key areas in the brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. These areas are crucial for executive functioning, memory, and emotional regulation—those are the skills that are essential for academic success and personal well-being. Shonkoff emphasizes the role of supportive relationships in mitigating toxic stress, underlining the importance of stable, nurturing environments to lessen its effects and help to overcome.

Čokyna (2019) further describes how this chronic stress manifests in Roma children's lives. They often experience instead a sense of security, which shall be crucial for a healthy child development, senses of insecurity, from unstable housing conditions, trough unpredictable financial resources, and a lack of consistent parental support—not due to neglect, but often because parents themselves are overwhelmed because of poverty. This cycle of stress impacts the kids' ability to concentrate, regulate emotions, and form trusting relationships, all of which are critical for learning and social integration. Because their concentration ability is worse, they have problems to listen even to simple tasks, memorising, and then trying to perform it, they often cannot concentrate even for a shorter period of time, thus they tend to have difficulties with tasks and problems which require more time to solve. Also, they can find it hard to work in groups and for responding to bad news or unsuccess.

Lack of trust is also an element of the toxic stress, which shall be addressed by schools as well. However, schools often fail to provide stable or inclusive environments where these children feel valued and supported. Instead, they are frequently placed in segregated classrooms, further worsening their self-esteem and reinforcing feelings of rejection. Additionally, Roma children face discrimination almost daily, which also impacts their stress levels. These children frequently encounter prejudice from peers, even teachers, and institutions, reinforcing a sense of alienation, lack of self-worth, and marginalization.

These experiences not only make the toxic stress worse, but also diminish their trust in educational institutions, leading to higher dropout rates and limited future opportunities.

Furthermore, sociologist Michael Marmot's (2005) work of health framework aligns closely with the realities faced by Roma children. Marmot argues that inequities in the conditions in

which people are born, grow, live, work, and age lead to disparities in health outcomes. For Roma children, the factors like generational poverty, environmental instability, and social exclusion creates disadvantages from the start. This framework also supports the fact how external stressors, such as inadequate nutrition, exposure to environmental toxins, and lack of access to healthcare, compound the physiological and psychological effects of toxic stress.

Discrimination only adds to these difficulties. A 2012 opinion poll revealed that nearly half of Slovaks perceive Roma behavior as problematic, associating the community with crime, pollution, and violence (Maháček, 2013). Such societal prejudices influence educational policies and practices, perpetuating segregation and limiting Roma children's future opportunities.

1.3 The Capability Approach for Education and Child Development

The Capability Approach, developed initially by Amartya Sen and then expanded in detail by Martha Nussbaum, provides a fresh framework for assessing human well-being and social structures. It shifts the focus of traditional welfare economics, which often prioritizes income, wealth, and utility, toward a broader understanding of human flourishing. By emphasizing functionings and capabilities, it serves as a valuable tool for analysing the educational challenges faced by Roma children in Slovakia and for evaluating potential solutions.

At the core of this framework is Sen's (1999) distinction between functionings and capabilities. Functionings refer to various states and activities that individuals value, such as being educated, maintaining good health, or engaging in social interactions. Capabilities, on the other hand, represent the actual opportunities and freedoms that allow individuals to achieve these functionings. For example, the capability to receive an education extends beyond school availability; it also depends on social and personal factors that enable a child to attend school and succeed academically.

Nussbaum (2011) expands this concept by identifying essential human capabilities, including bodily health, practical reasoning, and social affiliation. Education is a fundamental capability because it fosters cognitive development, strengthens individual agency, and empowers people to pursue meaningful life goals. However, Roma children often face systemic barriers that

restrict their access to educational opportunities, thereby limiting both their immediate well-being and their future prospects.

Early childhood development plays a crucial role in shaping capabilities. Research by Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) highlights the significance of the early years in cognitive, emotional, and social development, which in turn influences long-term educational and health outcomes. Interventions at this stage, such as access to quality preschool education, have been shown to improve academic performance and reduce disparities. For marginalized communities like the Roma, these early investments are essential for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and equipping children with the necessary skills for success. Conversely, the lack of early childhood programs exacerbates existing inequalities, leaving children at a significant disadvantage when they enter primary school.

The experiences of Roma children in Slovakia illustrate how structural and systemic inequalities hinder capability development. Many Roma families live in marginalized communities with inadequate housing, limited healthcare access, and poor infrastructure. These conditions severely restrict children's capabilities, making it difficult for them to attend school regularly and perform well academically. For example, children from segregated settlements often lack access to basic necessities such as electricity and clean water, which makes studying effectively nearly impossible (Friedman et al., 2015).

Language barriers further compound these challenges. Many Roma children grow up speaking Romani at home and encounter Slovak for the first time when they enter school (Radičová, 2001). This linguistic gap places them at a significant disadvantage, as they must simultaneously learn a new language and grasp the academic curriculum (Gazovičová, 2015). Without targeted interventions—such as bilingual education, Romani language schools, or the assistance of Romani-speaking teaching aides—these children struggle to keep up with their peers. This early setback often leads to a cycle of underachievement and early school dropout, further reinforcing educational inequalities.

Sen (1999) argues that poverty is not merely a lack of income but also a deprivation of fundamental capabilities. For Roma children, poverty manifests in multiple ways, including inadequate nutrition, food insecurity, poor health, and social stigma. For instance, children who come to school hungry often struggle to concentrate and perform well academically. The interconnectedness of education, health, and nutrition is crucial in understanding the impact of capability deprivation.

Furthermore, the low preschool attendance rates among Roma children present a significant challenge. Early childhood education plays a critical role in cognitive and social development, yet many Roma children miss out due to financial constraints, lack of available spaces, or the absence of nearby kindergartens (Čokyna, 2019). As a result, they start primary school without essential foundational skills, making it difficult for them to catch up with their peers.

Nussbaum (2011) highlights the role of societal support in enabling individuals to realize their potential. In the case of Roma children, this means addressing both material deprivation and systemic discrimination. For example, teacher training programs that emphasize cultural sensitivity can help educators better understand and support Roma students. Similarly, after-school programs and mentoring initiatives can provide additional academic assistance while fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Agency, a central concept of the Capability Approach, refers to an individual's ability to act in pursuit of meaningful life goals. However, Roma children's agency is often constrained by societal barriers such as discrimination and exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving social services, ensuring access to better housing and healthcare, and fostering inclusive educational environments.

The Capability Approach emphasizes not only the freedom to achieve certain outcomes but also the freedom to make meaningful life choices. According to Sen (1999), well-being is intrinsically linked to this concept of freedom.

For Roma children, this means creating conditions where they can aspire to futures beyond poverty and marginalization. Access to quality education is a crucial component of this freedom, as it paves the way for employment, social participation, and overall well-being.

2. Methodology

The aim of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of Slovak government programs and NGO initiatives in addressing the educational challenges and systemic discrimination faced by Roma children. This thesis specifically focuses on early childhood education and mother-tongue instruction as key factors in breaking the cycle of generational poverty.

To achieve this, the research follows a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative research and policy analysis. This allows for a comprehensive examination of educational programs, official policies, NGO efforts, and expert perspectives on Roma education in Slovakia.

By analysing both government-led and NGO-driven initiatives, this thesis identifies best practices, existing gaps, and challenges in policy implementation.

Policy and Document Analysis

The policy analysis in this research examines Slovak state programs, funding mechanisms, and legal frameworks related to Roma education. The following key documents and reports were analysed:

- The National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) – Slovakia’s official policy framework on Roma inclusion, including education initiatives.
- Program Slovensko 2021–2027 – An EU-funded national program outlining priorities for education and social inclusion.
- Government Reports & Legislative Acts – Including laws on mandatory kindergarten enrolment and language rights for minority education.
- NGO Reports & Publications – Particularly from Cesta Von and Teach Next, detailing their community-based education programs and funding structures.

This analysis helped contextualize official commitments, funding strategies, and implementation challenges in Roma education policy.

Qualitative Method: Expert Interviews

To gain first-hand insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals directly involved in Roma education policy and NGO efforts. The two key respondent groups were:

1. Government Representative: Ábel Ravasz, former Plenipotentiary for Roma Minorities (2016–2020), provided insights into state-supported programs, policy decisions, and funding challenges.
2. NGO Representative: Pavel Hrica, co-founder and director of NGO Cesta Von, shared details on community-driven initiatives, particularly the Omama program, which focuses on early childhood education in marginalized communities.

The interviews explored: the effectiveness of government-funded and NGO-led programs, challenges in policy implementation and funding, and potential improvements in Roma education policy.

A thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and key insights from the interviews, with a focus on educational inclusion and program accessibility, language barriers and the role of Romani-speaking educators, and NGO-state collaboration and funding sustainability.

All participants were informed about the study's objectives, and written consent was obtained. Confidentiality was ensured, and interviewees' responses were used exclusively for this research.

Literary Case Study: Juraj Čokyna's "A Okraje Máš Kde?"

To supplement the policy analysis and expert interviews, this research incorporates a literary case study of Juraj Čokyna's "Okraje: Máš kde?" (2019).

Čokyna, a former Teach for Slovakia (now Teach Next) teacher, provides a first-hand investigative account of Roma education in Slovakia. His experience in Šarišské Bohdanovce, a primary school with a high number of Roma students, offers valuable on-the-ground insights into systemic educational challenges.

This book was analysed to examine the realities of Roma students in Slovak schools, particularly issues of segregation, bias, and systemic neglect, compare policy commitments with classroom realities, evaluating whether government and NGO interventions effectively address real-world challenges. Also, to highlight factors such as teacher expectations, toxic stress, and the long-term impact of poverty on education.

The findings from Čokyna's book were compared with government reports, NGO programs, and interview insights, allowing for cross-validation of qualitative data.

Limitations

While this qualitative and policy-based research approach provided a comprehensive analysis, some limitations should be acknowledged:

Limited sample size: The study relied on a small number of expert interviews due to accessibility constraints.

Absence of statistical analysis: While policies and programs were examined in-depth, the research does not include direct statistical evaluation of dropout or enrolment rates. Instead, it relies on policy reports and expert insights.

Potential biases in qualitative sources: While Čokyna's "Okraje: Máš kde?" provides valuable insights, it reflects the author's personal experience in one school, which may not be fully covering the overall situation. However, it was cross-referenced with other sources to ensure a balanced perspective.

Time constraints: Given the limited time for the study, not all stakeholders (e.g., additional government agencies or educators) could be interviewed.

Despite these limitations, the combination of policy analysis, expert interviews, and literary case study allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of the successes and challenges in Roma education in Slovakia.

3. Efforts to Address Educational Inequality in Slovakia

Efforts to improve Roma children's educational outcomes have been made both by the Slovak state and the NGOs as well. Many of those programmes focus on early childhood education and inclusive practices.

The Slovak legislation, such as the Act on the Use of Minority Languages (Law 184/1999), theoretically supports the establishment of educational institutions in minority languages. However, practical implementation has been limited, with only eight schools offering some classes in Roma language, but the primary language of education in those schools is Slovak as well. There is not yet a school which offers a curriculum taught fully in Romani language, but the Ministry of Education is preparing one pilot school in Rakusi to address this scarcity (Spectator.sk, 2024).

Other innovative programs, which are implemented through the Ministry of Education, such as having Romani-speaking teaching assistants in lower primary, show promise. These classes help children to better get used to mainstream education while preserving their cultural identity. Also, understanding the language while learning makes a significant difference, so they can be more successful in their studies.

The mandatory enrolment into kindergarten from 2021 has also made a significant impact, so kids from poverty can get used to the school system before enrolling into first grade.

Additionally, support systems like after-school clubs can provide Roma children to enrich their social lives, as well as create spaces to complete homework and prepare for lessons, compensating for the lack of calm study environments at home (Kiššová, 2017).

NGOs in this also play a critical role. Organizations such as Cesta Von and Teach Next implement initiatives to break the cycle of generational poverty through education. Their programs emphasize early child development, parental involvement, and community engagement, aligning with the Capability Approach's emphasis on holistic development. They also pay close attention to adolescence, providing a stable environment to learn and grow, form social bonds and build a strong agency.

4. Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development is crucial for educational success because it lays the foundation for essential cognitive, social, and emotional skills. According to the Capability Approach, as mentioned in the previous chapter, early interventions provide children with the capabilities needed to thrive in school and beyond, such as the ability to learn, interact socially, and exercise agency.

One of the NGOs I chose for this research is Cesta Von, which literally translates to “Way Out”, symbolising their slogan Way Out of Poverty. For my research, I conducted an in-depth interview with the founder and director of the organisation, Pavel Hrica, and analysed their work through their platforms, its success through responses, their collaboration with other NGOs and the Ministry of Education and reviewing their funding sources. The reason why I chose them, because this organisation deals primarily with the topic of early child development, and their main initiative already achieved a significant success, proving to be an effective approach to addressing the educational struggles faced by children living in poverty.

During our interview, Pavel Hrica emphasized, that the most critical period in human development is the first 1000 days of life, so from the conception to the second birthday. Research indicates, that during this period, human brain develops the most rapidly, and the foundation for a stable life, health and learning are all established then (M Health Fairview, 2021). Providing quality care and education during this period, as well as during the “next 1000 days”, (from ages two to five) is essential for later success in school and then in adulthood.

However, the environment of generational poverty is far from ideal for supporting this critical stage of development. Poor living conditions, financial struggles, leading to malnutrition and toxic stress, and parents’ low level of education all negatively impacts the child’s (neuro)development, and these start school already behind their peers, as shown in measures of school readiness (Ferguson et al., 2007).

As a result, children living in generational poverty often lag behind their peers in early development. This disadvantage frequently leads to school failures, grade repetitions, and early school dropouts, which, in turn, make it challenging to secure stable employment with decent wages (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009).

As Mr. Hrica highlighted, these outcomes often result in a reliance on social support, continued exposure to challenging living conditions, and an inability to break free from the cycle of generational poverty

This highlights that education can be a key pathway to change. Completing *základná škola* (lower secondary education) and successfully transitioning to and finishing high school can open doors to better job opportunities with higher wages, which can address the root issues of poverty. However, achieving this is particularly difficult for children growing up in generational poverty.

According to Pavel Hrica, the current education system is designed for average, middle-class children who have never experienced toxic stress, have developed in a stable environment, and most likely speak Slovak as their first language. In contrast, poverty impairs brain development, and children often face hunger, inadequate housing, and financial hardship.

For Roma children from generational poverty, the barriers are even greater. Many Roma children enter schools where they are expected to study in a foreign language (Slovak) with little support. While there are Romani-speaking teaching assistants, their presence is limited and mostly concentrated in the Košice region, where there are Slovak primary schools attended predominantly by Roma children.

Segregation further compounds those challenges. When Roma children from poverty are placed in segregated schools or classes, they are deprived of opportunities to interact with children from more privileged backgrounds. They cannot observe or learn from peers who might serve as role models, demonstrating alternative pathways out of poverty. Instead, they receive lower-quality education with reduced standards and expectations, resulting in fewer successes and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

4.1 Omama Program

According to Cesta Von's primary research, if the pathway out of poverty is through education, it is crucial to prepare children for the educational process itself. This preparation helps ensure that children do not fall behind but are instead ready to thrive.

Recognizing this, Cesta Von focused their efforts on early childhood development, particularly targeting children between the ages of 0 and 4, to equip both the children and their parents for later institutionalized learning.

The initiative, called the Omama program, was initially created as a civil movement by individuals determined to fight generational poverty in small communities (Cesta Von, n.d.). Before launching the program, the organization conducted extensive research into existing programs and studies emphasizing the importance of supporting impoverished families, with a particular focus on early childhood development.

The program drew on several frameworks and models, such as Ruby Payne's *Bridges Out of Poverty* (Payne, 1996), Patty Hannan's *Play Wisely* program (Play Wisely, n.d.), and insights from John Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Additionally, it incorporated research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, particularly on toxic stress and responsible parenting (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.), and the Nurturing Care Framework developed by UNICEF and the WHO (World Health Organization, 2018).

Once the theoretical framework was ready, Cesta Von set the goal for the Omama program: to focus on supporting families with young children, especially those aged 0-4, living in generational poverty. Although the program's target group is children living in poverty rather than specifically Roma children, in Slovakia, most people living in generational poverty belong to the Roma community (Cesta Von).

The Role of the Omama

The aim of Omama program is to promote healthy child development within the family, and to create a safe, stimulating and nurturing environment for the child.

The program seeks to empower parents/caregivers, while simultaneously reducing the developmental delays through stimulation and improving children's readiness for school and life overall. Its activities emphasize the emotional and social development of children, particularly through strengthening the parent-child bond, while also supporting the development of cognition, psychomotor skills, and language.

The activities are to develop the child's motoric and language skills, through various age-appropriate developmental games. Omamas frequently read to children from an early age, often in Slovak, to expose the little ones to the state language as soon as possible.

They are using a bilingual method, so during the lessons, in a precisely set time, the Omama communicates with the child in the language they will use at school, typically Slovak, or occasionally Hungarian. The Omama also encourages the parent to speak with the child and do the home activities with the child in their mother tongue, which is often Romani. This approach ensures that children develop proficiency in both their mother tongue and the school language, helping them distinguish between the two with ease.

As children grow older, Omamas introduce pencils, coloring activities, and shape or color recognition games, gradually preparing toddlers for skills like holding a pen and writing.

The sessions are regular and requires significant parental involvement. Parents are given home activities to do with their children, ensuring that the lessons continue beyond the sessions. The program not only teaches children but also educates parents on proper childcare, age-appropriate activities, and the importance of care. It is not because a conscious neglect, but because many parents in these communities come from generational poverty themselves and may have low levels of education, which can hinder their ability to support their child's development.

For example, a story of a young mother who asked her Omama why she should speak to her toddler, as she believed the baby could not yet understand. The importance of talking to one's child is clear from most of us, coming from the middle class and upper, but such misunderstandings are common in impoverished families with limited education. Omamas approach parents with kindness, understanding, and patience, helping to build trust and provide practical, relatable guidance.

Building trust with families is one of the most challenging aspects of the Omama's role. To ensure effective engagement, an Omama must be a woman from the same community in which she works, someone who understands the local context and challenges. She also needs to be fluent in Romani, respected within the community, and capable of creating strong bonds with families, so they would trust her, and engage in the activities.

Becoming an Omama is however, takes time and effort. It involves a three-round selection process and extensive training in childcare, child development techniques, communication, and family support. Omamas also receive ongoing mentorship, additional training opportunities, and support from other Omamas and Cesta Von's network. Many Omamas themselves come from impoverished Roma communities and may face educational or linguistic barriers, which is why Cesta Von offers supplementary training and Slovak language courses through their

AMAL program, which focuses on tutoring, mostly Roma children, in various school subjects by volunteers.

When the Omama program started, around 7 years ago, Omamas, and all Cesta Von employees were volunteers. Now, Omama is a paid job, and there is right now more, than 80 Omamas employed.

Since Omamas are from those communities themselves, they know which families might need their help. They either know the families personally, or they get to them via recommendations. When an Omama is starting their work, they often need to go after their clients themselves, explaining to them the program and its benefits. Usually, at first, the families tend to be sceptical, but once one family tries it by joining the program, the others would also want to give it a try. So from the initial ‘problem’, that the Omama has only a few clients, turns into the other side, that the Omama has way too many, and cannot accept more. That’s why Cesta Von is always open for Omama applications, usually in a set time /year, but the already working Omamas also can make recommendations for applicants, who would like to give it a try.

When the program began seven years ago, all Omamas were volunteers, as were other Cesta Von employees. Today, being an Omama is a paid position, with more than 80 Omamas currently employed. Because Omamas are from the same communities, they often know which families need help or receive recommendations. Initially, families may be sceptical of the program, but once they see positive results, word-of-mouth encourages others to join. Over time, the challenge shifts from finding clients to managing demand, as Omamas often have more families seeking help than they can accommodate.

Although the program is relatively new, early results indicate that children who participate in the Omama program are more successful in school compared to peers who do not have the same opportunity. Omamas report that children enjoy the sessions, often forming strong attachments to their Omama and becoming enthusiastic about learning. These short-term successes create a ripple effect, as families recommend the program to others, helping the network grow. Today, the program covers most marginalized communities in Slovakia (Hrica, personal communication, 2025).

4.2 Kindergartens

Omamas focus on early child development, primarily targeting the 0-4 age group. Their sessions aim to prepare children for institutionalized learning, beginning with kindergarten and progressing to primary education.

Currently, the Omama program operates as a non-state initiative. Although it receives funding from the Ministry of Education and the Slovak Government—primarily through the Recovery and Resilience Plan and additional EU funds—it has not yet been fully integrated into the national education system. Consequently, despite its expanding presence, the program cannot reach all marginalized communities across Slovakia.

In certain regions, where support from programs like Omama is unavailable, children's first opportunity for structured development is through kindergarten. However, individuals from marginalized communities often had negative experiences with institutions, such as local government offices, where they may have encountered discrimination and racism. This mistrust leads to a reluctance to enrol their children in such institutions. As a result, many children from these communities begin their educational journey in the first grade, arriving unprepared and already falling behind their peers.

To address this issue, in 2019, Árpád Ravasz, then Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities (2016-2020), initiated a legislative proposal to support children from marginalized backgrounds. Drawing inspiration from neighbouring countries where mandatory preschool education was already set in law, he proposed a similar law through a member's motion. The proposal was accepted in 2019 and came into force on September 1, 2021, giving the municipalities time to prepare. The law is mandating one year of compulsory pre-primary education for children who reach the age of five by August 31 of the given year (Eurydice, n.d.-a).

The ultimate goal is to extend compulsory kindergarten education to three years. However, due to current shortages in kindergartens, qualified teachers, and facilities like canteens, the implementation is being approached incrementally. Till this will be possible, they set a legal entitlement for children aged four from 2023, further extended to three-year-olds from 2024 (Eurydice, n.d.-b). This means, that when a parent approaches the local municipality with the intention of enrolling their child in kindergarten, the municipality is obligated to secure a place for the child, either in its own kindergarten or, if this is not possible due to a lack of capacity or the absence of a kindergarten within the municipality's territory, the municipality is

responsible for enrolling the child in the nearest kindergarten within its school district, providing travel support if needed.

This is a good step already, but many families are hesitant to utilise this opportunity, often enrolling their children in preschool only when mandated. The reason again is the deep-seated mistrust and the lack of information.

Similar to the Omama program's approach, where positive experiences within one family encourage others to participate, trust in kindergartens can be fostered through community testimonials. When one family has a favorable experience after enrolling their child in kindergarten, they are likely to recommend it to relatives and to others in the community. Additionally, if parents enrol their eldest child when compulsory, they are more inclined to enrol younger siblings at earlier ages, such as three or four.

To engage more families, the Ministry of Education launched the PRIM Kindergarten Enrolment Program. This initiative focuses on collaborating with families to explain the enrolment process, its requirements, and the benefits of kindergarten attendance. Dedicated development teams conduct fieldwork, visiting families to provide this information.

However, according to Ábel Ravasz, this program also faces limitations in reaching all targeted individuals. He suggests that the definitive solution to this challenge could be implementing compulsory preschool education starting at age three (Ravasz, personal interview, 2025).

Building kindergartens

To achieve the targeted goal of expanding access to early childhood education, it is essential to increase kindergarten capacity. While the Ministry of Education establishes the necessary conditions, the implementation largely depends on individual municipalities.

During the 2014–2020 programming period, Slovakia had access to European Union Structural Funds, with over €15.3 billion allocated to various sectors, including education, so it could be used for building kindergartens or renovate old ones. Despite this substantial allocation, these funds were underutilized due to a lack of initiative from municipalities, which perceived no demand from parents for kindergarten placements (Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic, 2019).

This scenario changed after 2019, following the enactment of Act No. 209/2019, which made pre-primary education compulsory for children who reach the age of five by August 31 of the given year. Consequently, municipalities became more proactive in utilizing EU funds to construct kindergartens. Funding opportunities remain available through the Recovery and Resilience Plan and the Program Slovakia 2021–2027 (Eurydice,n.d.).

The European Union is funding Slovakia through the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which have supported various Roma integration projects, including educational infrastructure – building kindergarten but also schools, teacher training, which is also needed when expanding kindergarten capacities, and scholarships for Roma children, this one mostly for primary and secondary education. Between 2014 and 2020, approximately 200 million euros were allocated from these funds to improve education, housing, and living conditions in marginalized Roma communities. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of spending has been criticized for not achieving significant progress, particularly in reducing segregation and improving living conditions. However, the new EU 10-year plan for Roma equality and inclusion provides Slovakia with another opportunity to meet its targets, with a stronger emphasis on combating discrimination and closing the gaps in education, employment, and social inclusion (Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic, 2019).

According to Ábel Ravasz, in the next three to five years, municipalities should be able to create sufficient capacities to extend compulsory preschool education from the current starting age of five to three years, particularly benefiting children from marginalized communities. This expansion would ensure that these children receive proper care and support in their early development, preparing them adequately for primary education in terms of motor, social, and language skills (Ravasz, personal interview, 2025).

4.3 Nurseries, Infant Care

While extending compulsory preschool education to start at age three is a significant advancement, research indicates that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are crucial for neurodevelopment. Exposure to toxic stress during this period can adversely affect a child's neurological development, leading to potential difficulties later in life (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.). Therefore, early interventions, such as quality infant care, are essential to mitigate these effects.

Currently, nurseries in Slovakia fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. Discussions are underway to potentially transfer this responsibility to the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport. Such a transition could facilitate the development of a network of nurseries accessible to all parents in need. For marginalized communities, this initiative could function similarly to the Omama program, emphasizing early child development and parental education. Until such changes are implemented, the Ministry of Education continues to support programs like Omama and other non-governmental organizations with similar objectives (Ravasz, personal interview, 2025).

5. Overcoming barriers in primary education

Compulsory preschool education and initiatives like the Omama program have shown significant promise in enhancing educational outcomes for Roma children. Through these efforts, children are better prepared, familiar with the school system, and have some understanding of the Slovak language. However, the language barrier remains a substantial challenge. One year in preschool, especially when surrounded by other Romani-speaking children, often does not suffice for understanding complex curricula across multiple subjects in Slovak.

To address these issues, several initiatives have been implemented. The employment of Romani-speaking teaching assistants in primary classrooms has been one approach to bridge the language gap. These assistants facilitate communication by translating and explaining content, thereby helping with comprehension and learning outcomes for Romani-speaking students. Additionally, preparatory or "zero" grades have been established to provide Roma children with an extra year of education focused on language acquisition and foundational skills, aiming to bridge the gap between Romani children and their peers from the majority population.

5.1 Zero grades

Introduced in 2002 in Slovakia, the "zero grades" were designed to prepare Romani children for the school system, particularly those who had not attended preschool. These classes aimed to provide a foundational year where children could adapt to the institutional learning environment, acquire basic skills typically learned in kindergarten, and gain a fundamental understanding of the Slovak language. The objective was that, after completing this preparatory year, Romani children would start the first grade on an equal footing with their peers from the majority population (Klein, Rusnáková, & Šilonová, 2012).

However, evaluations revealed that the implementation of zero grades did not meet these expectations. Instead of serving as a transitional phase, zero grades often became permanent segregated settings. Students remained in the same classes beyond the initial year, resulting in Roma-only segregated classrooms. In these settings, teachers frequently lowered their expectations, exhibited less enthusiasm, and set reduced academic standards. Consequently,

the original intent of zero grades, to integrate Romani children into mainstream classes, was undermined, and these classes inadvertently became instruments of segregation (Amnesty International, 2007).

Recognizing these shortcomings, the Ministry of Education decided to abolish the existing zero grade structure in conjunction with the introduction of compulsory kindergarten education. As alternatives, preparatory classes or transitional year groups have been proposed. These temporary programs, lasting up to half a year or one year, are designed to help students adapt before being integrated into regular classes. After this period, students are required to transition into standard grades, ensuring that these preparatory phases do not become permanent segregated settings (Eurydice, n.d.).

5.2 Romani Speaking Assistants

In Slovakia, however, not all schools possess the capacity or financial resources to establish preparatory grades. Consequently, many Roma children enter first grade with minimal or no proficiency in the Slovak language, leading to significant comprehension challenges in the classroom. This issue is particularly prevalent in the Košice region, where numerous elementary schools have predominantly Roma students who primarily speak Romani at home (Gažovičová, 2012).

To address this language barrier, the implementation of Romani-speaking teaching assistants was initiated in 2004, funded by the European Union. Initially, these assistants were often volunteers without formal qualifications in pedagogy; they were typically community members proficient in both Romani and Slovak, eager to support the children's education. They were standing by the teacher and translating the curriculum to the children.

Over time, the role evolved to include specific requirements, such as pedagogical qualifications or specialized training. This shift inadvertently excluded many original volunteers who lacked formal education, leading to a decrease in the number of available assistants and, in some cases, diminished enthusiasm among those who remained (Gažovičová, 2012).

Recognizing this challenge, as Ravasz Ábel shared in the interview, the Ministry of Education is considering restructuring the assistant role into two distinct positions: one requiring pedagogical qualifications and another based on volunteer involvement. This approach aims to

reintegrate excluded volunteers, leveraging their unique cultural and linguistic insights. Volunteer engagement within Roma communities is vital, as it provides positive role models for children, bridges cultural differences, and delivers support to these communities.

5.3 Remaining challenges

Despite all these efforts, challenges remain. These children, often born into generational poverty, face systemic barriers that result in high dropout rates, poor academic outcomes, and limited future opportunities. In my third main source, Juraj Čokyna's book *Okraje: Máš kde?*, published in 2019, an in-depth account is provided about the struggles Romani students encounter in primary schools on daily basis, based on the lens of the fieldwork conducted at the primary school in Šarišské Bohdanovce. This school, where the majority of pupils were Romani and lived in extreme poverty, illustrates the systemic issues facing marginalized students.

According to Čokyna (2019), Romani children in Slovakia are frequently destined for failure from the moment they enter the education system, they are automatically viewed as a failed attempt, by the system and often even the teaching staff.

Before the introduction of compulsory kindergarten in 2021, many Romani children started school with virtually no preparation. The existence of "zero grade" classes, intended to bridge this gap, was often insufficient to address the deeper structural issues. Čokyna's research highlights that many Romani students do not complete the ninth grade. Due to repeated grade retention, many students finish their primary education prematurely, often leaving school by the fifth, sixth, or seventh grade without obtaining an official primary school completion certificate. This early departure severely limits their future opportunities, leaving them with only two primary options: attending vocational schools or educational trainings / programs issued by the social offices, or joining the unskilled labor market as, for example, assistant bricklayers.

Living in extreme poverty worsens the difficulties these children face. Toxic stress from their socio-economic environment impacts their cognitive and emotional development, often resulting in attention and concentration issues. Teachers in underfunded and under-resourced schools are frequently overwhelmed and adopt a just getting by approach. The system does little to challenge this status quo, creating a cycle of low expectations and poor outcomes. As

Čokyna notes, the lack of systemic reform perpetuates these inequalities, leaving both teachers and students trapped in an environment of limited potential.

5.4 The teacher's approach

In response to these systemic challenges, organizations like Teach for Slovakia – now Teach Next have stepped in to provide innovative interventions. Inspired by the global Teach for All model, this initiative aims to bring passionate, well-trained individuals into schools in need. These volunteers undergo trainings and preparation before being placed in classrooms, where they work not only with students but also with their families to foster a supportive learning environment. The goal is to introduce new perspectives, encourage students to stay in school, provide them support and a new lens to look at the world, and at the end of the day, ultimately break the cycle of generational poverty.

Čokyna's personal experiences as a Teach for Slovakia participant provide valuable insights into the difficulties and rewards of this work. Teaching fifth and sixth graders at Šarišské Bohdanovce, he encountered students who had some understanding of the Slovak language but were hindered by the lasting effects of toxic stress. Despite the initial challenges, including classroom management and building trust, Čokyna (2019) highlights how persistence and a holistic approach can make a difference. By engaging with families and demonstrating genuine care, Teach Next's participants aim to create a ripple effect of positive change within the community.

5.5 Supporting Continued Education

While initiatives like Teach Next address immediate needs, systemic support is crucial for long-term impact. The Slovak Ministry of Education offers scholarships targeted at Roma children entering secondary education. These scholarships aim to reduce financial barriers and encourage students to continue their studies beyond primary school. However, awareness of such opportunities remains limited, and many families are hesitant to take advantage of them due to a lack of trust in the system.

Non-governmental organizations like Cesta Von – here also - play a vital role in bridging this gap. Their programs, such as FILIP and AMAL, provide critical support to Romani adolescents. FILIP focuses on creating spaces where young people can learn essential life skills

and explore opportunities beyond the confines of the settlements (Cesta Von, n.d.). AMAL, a tutoring program, pairs Romani students with mentors, volunteers, who guide them academically and personally, not only helping them in the subject they are tutoring, but also to build confidence and resilience. These initiatives address not only educational needs but also the broader socio-emotional development of Romani youth, offering them a chance to envision a brighter future.

Lastly but not least, The School Project ...

6. The Right to Mother Tongue Education

Under Slovak constitutional law, every minority child has the right to receive an education in their mother tongue (Constitution of the Slovak Republic, 1992). This right is further protected by international frameworks, such as the 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, which stipulates that no child should be denied access to quality education based on race, ethnicity, or language (UNESCO, 1960). According to UNESCO guidelines, the separation of students based on certain criteria, such as single-gender schools or denominational institutions, is permissible only if the quality of education provided is equal and students are not barred from choosing alternative institutions (UNESCO, 1960). This principle supports the existence of minority-language schools in Slovakia, such as Hungarian-language schools, which serve as a precedent for Romani-language education.

6.1 The Rakusy School: A Unique Initiative

The Rakusy minority school, once operational, will be the first of its kind in Slovakia to offer education in the Romani language. Unlike existing schools, (there is eight of them in Slovakia now), where only a few subjects are taught in Romani, and which are often private institutions, Rakusy aims to provide comprehensive education in Romani. This initiative is revolutionary as it aligns with the constitutional right of the Roma minority to access mother tongue education while also addressing long-standing inequalities in the Slovak education system (Amnesty International, 2007).

The Rakusy school, in contrast, aims to provide a choice for Roma children and their families, a high-quality education in their native language from the beginning, that equips them for future. Critics of the Rakusy school often argue that it could lead to further segregation of Roma children, and result in them not learning the Slovak language properly. However, this criticism fails to acknowledge the systemic inequities being present in current educational structures. Many Roma children are placed into segregated Slovak-language schools, where they often face lower expectations, substandard curricula, and limited opportunities to succeed (Roma Education Fund, n.d.).

Also, based on the interview with Ábel Ravasz, the initiative for the Rakusy school is, that the parents would receive prior information and based on this, make an informed decision on whether to enrol their child in this minority school, or opt for a Slovak-language school instead. The process would function in the same way as the enrolment into Hungarian minority schools (Ravasz, personal interview, 2025).

6.2 Addressing the Challenges of Language and Curriculum

A common challenge in Slovak schools is the lack of appropriate teaching methods for Roma children, who often speak Romani as their first language. In mainstream schools, they are frequently taught as if they already possess fluency in Slovak, which leads to significant comprehension barriers and poor academic outcomes (Presov University, n.d.).

This problem is also present in Hungarian minority schools, that the Slovak language is taught as a mother tongue, instead of a foreign language.

Rakusy's approach will include the development of tailored teaching materials, teacher training programs, and Slovak as a second language instruction. This shall ensure later on, that students not only develop proficiency in Romani but also gain the Slovak language skills necessary for higher education and integration into broader society.

According to Ravasz Ábel, who is also working on the Rakusy project, Presov University (Šarišská univerzita v Prešove) will play a key role as an academic partner in the Rakusy initiative. By leveraging its expertise in Romani studies and pedagogy, the university will contribute to teacher training, curriculum development, and the standardization of the Romani language for educational purposes (Presov University, n.d.). This collaboration between academia, the local community, and government stakeholders is vital for the school's success.

6.3 Overcoming the Critiques of Segregation

The Rakusy school's detractors often label it as a form of segregation, but this perspective overlooks the fundamental difference between forced segregation and voluntary minority education. Segregation occurs when children are involuntarily placed into inferior schools based solely on their ethnicity, as has been the case for many Roma children in Slovakia

(Amnesty International, 2007). In contrast, Rakusy offers a voluntary and high-quality alternative that respects cultural identity and meets the educational needs of Roma students.

Moreover, the Slovak constitution guarantees minority rights, yet there are currently no public schools offering comprehensive Romani-language education (Constitution of the Slovak Republic, 1992). Existing private institutions, where only a few subjects are taught in Romani, fail to fully address the linguistic and cultural needs of Roma students. Rakusy's establishment marks a significant step toward rectifying this imbalance and fulfilling Slovakia's legal and moral obligations to its Roma citizens.

6.4 Building a Community of Educators

The success of the Rakusy school will depend heavily on the development of a dedicated community of Romani-speaking educators. One of the barriers to minority education in Slovakia has been the lack of qualified teachers proficient in Romani. To address this, partnerships with institutions like Presov University and the National Pedagogical Institute will be crucial (Presov University, n.d.). Presov University's Romology program has already made successes in preparing teachers who are not only fluent in Romani but also trained in culturally responsive pedagogy.

Efforts to standardize the Romani language, which currently lacks a universally accepted written form, are also underway. This parallels historical efforts to standardize the Slovak language and highlights the importance of linguistic development for educational progress (Roma Education Fund, n.d.). By educating well-trained teachers and equipping them with appropriate teaching resources, the Rakusy school can ensure sustainable and high-quality education for those children, who will choose this school to study.

Time will show whether and how it will succeed.

6.5 Funding and Government Support

Funding for the Rakusy school comes from a combination of government grants, EU Structural Funds, and local community contributions. These resources will support the construction of school facilities, the development of teaching materials, and the recruitment and training of staff (Roma Education Fund, n.d.). The Ministry of Education has also pledged additional

support for initiatives aimed at improving minority education, including scholarships for Roma students and subsidies for schools serving marginalized communities.

6.6 A Model for the Future? –Discussion

The Rakusy school is not just a local project but a potential model for minority education across Slovakia and beyond. Its success could pave the way for the establishment of similar institutions in other regions, providing more Roma children with the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue by choice, and achieve academic success.

As the UNESCO research shows, education in one's mother tongue leads to great learning outcomes. In Slovakia, the Hungarian minority schools serve as a compelling example, how the Hungarian children with no prior Slovak language skills, who are placed into Hungarian schools tend to excel in their early studies. In contrast, their peers who enter Slovak schools without prior exposure to the Slovak language often struggle to catch up (UNESCO,n.d.).

A common criticism of minority-language education is the concern about students' ability to learn proper Slovak. However, the key issue is not the language, but rather the method used to teach Slovak as a second language. As seen in Hungarian minority schools, Slovak is often taught as if it were the students' mother tongue, rather than as a foreign language. This approach makes comprehension significantly harder for children who have no prior Slovak language exposure.

To address this challenge, a reform of Slovak language education is necessary. In both existing Hungarian and the potential future Romani minority schools, it should be a priority to implement effective second-language teaching methods. Slovak should be taught in an engaging and structured way, tailored to the linguistic background of the students. If approached correctly, learning Slovak could become a more natural and accessible process, ensuring that students gain proficiency without unnecessary struggle.

If this first step is successfully implemented, students will have the confidence and skills to continue their education in Slovak high schools and universities. They will also have broader employment opportunities, not being restricted to their local communities but able to work anywhere in the country thanks to their strong Slovak language proficiency.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the multifaceted challenges faced by Roma children in the Slovak education system, alongside the efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations to address these issues. The findings demonstrate that the barriers to Roma education are deeply rooted in systemic discrimination, generational poverty, and inadequate institutional support. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments like the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, Roma children continue to experience segregation, limited access to quality early childhood education, and a lack of opportunities to study in their mother tongue.

The Slovak government has made strides, such as introducing compulsory kindergarten and employing Romani-speaking teaching assistants, yet for these initiatives there is still a place to improve, to close the significant gaps in educational outcomes. The case studies of programs like Cesta Von's Omama, Teach Next's methods on bringing quality education, and the development of the Rakusy minority school highlight the critical role of both government-led initiatives and NGOs' community-based approaches in creating meaningful change. These programs not only address the educational needs of Roma children but also tackle the broader socio-economic factors that hinder their success, such as toxic stress and the lack of parental support.

The Rakusy school, in particular, is a bold step forward in fulfilling the constitutional right to mother-tongue education for Roma children. By offering high-quality education in Romani, supported by partnerships with Presov University and other stakeholders, the school challenges the narrative of segregation and demonstrates the potential of minority education to empower marginalized communities. However, its success will depend on sustainable funding, effective teacher training, and the continued collaboration of local, national, and international actors.

While progress has been made, this thesis underscores the need for further research and action in several key areas. These include evaluating the long-term impact of initiatives like the Omama program, expanding access to minority-language education beyond Rakusy, and addressing systemic biases within the Slovak education system. Additionally, more comprehensive strategies are required to ensure that early childhood interventions are integrated with primary and secondary education, creating a seamless pathway for Roma children to achieve academic and personal success.

In conclusion, improving the educational outcomes of Roma children in Slovakia requires a holistic approach that addresses both the structural and cultural barriers they face. By investing in inclusive, high-quality education and fostering trust within marginalized communities, Slovakia has the opportunity to not only uplift its Roma population but also demonstrate its commitment to equality and human rights. The lessons from this research offer a foundation for policymakers, educators, and advocates to work toward a future where every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Resume

1. Úvod

Táto bakalárska práca sa zaoberá postavením rómskych detí v slovenskom vzdelávacom systéme a analyzuje snahy vlády a mimovládnych organizácií (MVO) o podporu ich vzdelávania. Napriek legislatívnym zárukám, ako sú články 28 a 29 Dohovoru OSN o právach dieťaťa, rómske deti na Slovensku často čelia segregácii, diskriminácii a nedostatočnej podpore v ranom vzdelávaní. Táto práca skúma faktory, ktoré ovplyvňujú ich vzdelávacie výsledky, vrátane: generačnej chudoby a toxického stresu, nedostatočného prístupu k predškolskému vzdelávaniu, jazykovej bariéry a nedostatku škôl s výučbou v rómskom jazyku, segregácie v základných školách a umiestňovania rómskych detí do špeciálnych škôl, úlohy štátu a MVO pri riešení týchto problémov.

Hlavným cieľom výskumu je posúdiť efektívnosť štátnych a MVO iniciatív v oblasti vzdelávania rómskych detí a identifikovať faktory, ktoré prispievajú k úspechu alebo zlyhaniu týchto programov.

2. Metodológia

Práca používa kombinovaný metodologický prístup, ktorý zahŕňa analýzu politík a dokumentov, expertné rozhovory a literárnu prípadovú štúdiu:

Analýza politík: Preskúmanie vládnych iniciatív, vrátane Národnej stratégie integrácie Rómov a programu Slovensko 2021 – 2027, ktoré sa zameriavajú na vzdelávacie opatrenia pre rómske deti.

Rozhovory s odborníkmi: Ábel Ravasz (splnomocnenec vlády SR pre rómske menšiny v rokoch 2016 – 2020), a Pavel Hrica (spoluzakladateľ a riaditeľ MVO Cesta Von).

Prípadová štúdia: Analýza knihy „A Okraje Máš kde?“ od Juraja Čokynu, ktorá ponúka pohľad na realitu vzdelávania rómskych detí v praxi.

Táto metodológia umožnila komplexné zhodnotenie toho, ako vláda a MVO reagujú na výzvy spojené s vzdelávaním rómskych detí.

3. Rómske deti v slovenskom vzdelávacom systéme

3.1. Segregácia a umiestňovanie do špeciálnych škôl

Veľkým problémom je segregácia v školách. Rómske deti sú často umiestňované do rómskych tried alebo špeciálnych škôl určených pre deti s mentálnym postihnutím, a to aj bez opodstatnenia. Táto segregácia zhoršuje ich vzdelávacie výsledky, obmedzuje ich sociálnu integráciu a znižuje ich šance na pokračovanie v štúdiu.

3.2. Generačná chudoba a jazyková bariéra

Mnohé rómske rodiny žijú v extrémnej chudobe, často bez prístupu k základným potrebám ako je voda a elektrina. To negatívne ovplyvňuje školskú dochádzku, pripravenosť na vzdelávanie a schopnosť sústrediť sa na učivo. Ďalším problémom je jazyková bariéra – mnohé rómske deti hovoria doma iba rómskym jazykom a pri nástupe do školy neovládajú slovenčinu. To často vedie k nesprávnemu hodnoteniu ich schopností a ich zaradeniu do špeciálnych tried.

4. Štátne a MVO iniciatívy na podporu vzdelávania

4.1. Povinné predškolské vzdelávanie

Od roku 2021 je predškolské vzdelávanie pre päťročné deti povinné, pričom cieľom je rozšíriť túto povinnosť aj na trojročné deti. Výskum ukázal, že predškolské vzdelávanie výrazne zlepšuje školské výsledky rómskych detí a pomáha im lepšie sa integrovať do vzdelávacieho systému.

4.2. Program Omama

MVO Cesta Von realizuje projekt Omama, ktorý sa zameriava na raný vývoj rómskych detí vo veku 0 – 4 rokov. Program pracuje priamo v osadách, kde vyškolené „omamy“ (ženy z komunity) učia deti a rodičov základné kognitívne a jazykové schopnosti. Výsledky ukazujú, že deti zapojené do programu Omama majú lepšiu slovnú zásobu a vyššiu mieru školskej úspešnosti v porovnaní s deťmi, ktoré program neabsolvovali.

4.3. Školský projekt Rakúsy - škola s vyučovacím jazykom rómskym

Štát plánuje otvoriť prvú školu s vyučovacím jazykom rómskym v obci Rakúsy, čo predstavuje prelomový krok v inkluzívnom vzdelávaní rómskych detí. Kritici tvrdia, že by to mohlo viesť k ďalšej segregácii, avšak výskum ukazuje, že prístup k vzdelaniu v materinskom jazyku výrazne zlepšuje vzdelávacie výsledky menšín.

5. Závěry a doporučení

Výzkum ukázal, že segregácia a nesprávne umiestňovanie rómskych detí do špeciálnych škôl zostáva závažným problémom. Predškolské vzdelávanie a iniciatívy ako Omama preukázateľne zlepšujú vzdelávacie výsledky rómskych detí. Projekt Rakúsy predstavuje inovatívny prístup k vzdelávaniu v materinskom jazyku, avšak jeho úspech bude závisieť od kvality výučby a integrácie do vzdelávacieho systému.

Odporúčania:

- Zvýšiť dostupnosť predškolského vzdelávania už od troch rokov.
- Posilniť financovanie programov na podporu učiteľov hovoriacich rómskym jazykom.
- Zlepšiť kontrolu segregácie a podporovať integráciu rómskych detí do zmiešaných tried.
- Rozšíriť podporu komunitných programov ako Omama na celonárodnú úroveň.

Hoci Slovensko podniklo významné kroky v oblasti inkluzívneho vzdelávania, na odstránenie diskriminácie a segregácie je potrebná systematická zmena politik a posilnenie komunitných iniciatív.

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Appendixes

Appendix no.1 – Consent Form Template for Research Participation

(All interviewees gave their consent, including the use of their name and position).

Title of Research: Vareso

Researcher: Melinda Vincze

Affiliation: Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

Contact Information: saffi0325@gmail.com

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of educational policies on Roma communities in Slovakia. Your insights and experiences are invaluable to this study, and your participation will contribute to a deeper understanding of the topic.

Confidentiality and Data Handling:

- All information provided during this interview will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.
- Your responses will be used solely for the purposes of this research and will not be shared, published, or used in any other context without your explicit consent.
- Any personally identifiable information will be anonymized to ensure your privacy.
- The data collected will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher directly involved in this project.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You may choose to skip any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason.

Consent Statement:

By signing below, you acknowledge that:

1. You have read and understood the purpose of this research.
2. You agree to participate in the interview voluntarily.
3. You consent to the use of your responses for the purposes of this research, under the conditions outlined above.

Appendix no.2 – Interview Transcript 1

Transcription of the Interview with NGO Cesta Von's co-founder and director, Pavel Hrica, in Slovak language

1. Program Omama sa zameriava na rozvoj v ranom detstve pre deti vo veku 0–6 rokov, ako aj na vzdelávanie matiek, ako sa správne starať o svoje deti. Ako program funguje v praxi? Aké aktivity alebo metódy používate na podporu kognitívneho a jazykového rozvoja u malých detí?

- Program Omama vznikol ako občianska iniciatíva s cieľom riešiť generačnú chudobu. Spočiatku fungoval v malom, len na dobrovoľníckej báze, ale postupne sa rozšíril a dnes pôsobí vo viac ako 300 komunitách a zamestnáva viac ako 80 omám.
- V praxi program funguje tak, že omamy – miestne ženy z marginalizovaných komunit – pracujú s deťmi priamo v ich domácom prostredí. Využívajú metódy, ktoré podporujú kognitívny a jazykový rozvoj, napríklad:
 - Interaktívne hry na rozvoj reči a motoriky,
 - Knihy a rozprávanie príbehov na podporu jazykových schopností, v slovenčine a rômčine
 - Praktické cvičenia na rozvoj jemnej a hrubej motoriky,
 - Vzdelávanie matiek o význame raného vzdelávania a výchovy.

2. Ako sa niekto stane Omamou? Je znalosť rómskeho jazyka alebo pochádzanie z rómskej komunity podmienkou?

- Omamami sa stávajú ženy priamo z miestnych komunit, ktoré rozumejú rómskej kultúre a jazyku. Na začiatku prechádzajú sériou krokov, ako výber vhodnej komunity, vyhľadávanie kandidátok s odporúčaniami od miestnych, pohovor, testy a hodnotenie komunikácie s deťmi, štvor-dňové školenie, a potom záverečné hodnotenie a rozhodnutie o prijatí.
- Znalosť rómskeho jazyka je kvázi podmienkou.

3. Ako zapájate matky do programu a aký vplyv ste pozorovali na ich rodičovské zručnosti a rozvoj ich detí?

- Omamy pracujú nielen s deťmi, ale aj s matkami. Tie sú zapájané cez individuálne stretnutia, kde sa učia, ako podporovať rozvoj svojich detí. Pozorovanými vplyvmi sú:
 - Zvýšená informovanosť o význame vzdelávania, lepšie rodičovské zručnosti, vyššia účasť detí v predprimárnom vzdelávaní, zlepšené jazykové a sociálne schopnosti detí.

4. Aké sú najväčšie výzvy pri implementácii programu v týchto komunitách?

Najväčšie výzvy sú: nedôvera rodín k vzdelávaniu a vonkajším organizáciám, nízka účasť detí v predškolskom vzdelávaní, segregácia a nedostatok vzdelávacích príležitostí v osadách, chudoba a toxický stres v rodinách.

5. Mohli by ste sa podeliť o konkrétne príbehy úspechov?

Program pomohol mnohým deťom lepšie sa adaptovať v škole. Napríklad, deti, ktoré prešli programom Omama, majú lepšiu slovnú zásobu a súboje v slovenčine sú pre ne menej stresujúce. Mnohé matky sa taktiež začali aktívnejšie venovať výchove.

6. Aké sú hlavne ciele ďalších programov, čo ponúkate, ako napr. Filip, Zebra a Amal?

- Zebra: Podpora mladých (teenagerov) cez mentoring, doučovanie, umenie a šport.
- Amal: Jazyková a predmetová podpora pre deti v osadách.
- Filip: Pomoc rodinám s finančnou gramotnosťou, dlhmi a hľadaním práce.

7. Ako je Cesta Von financovaná, aké sú hlavné problémy pri zabezpečovaní financií?

- Program je financovaný kombináciou zdrojov: súkromné dary, granty od firiem a nadácií, podpora štátu, MINEDU a eurofondov (napr. Plán obnovy).
- Problémy sú napr. chýbajúca systematická podpora od štátu, administratívne bariéry pri žiadaní o fondy EÚ.

8. Aké sú najväčšie bariéry v predškolskom vzdelávaní rómskych detí?

- Jazyková bariéra (školy predpokladajú slovenčinu ako materský jazyk),
- Segregované školy,
- Nedostatočná podpora detí do 3 rokov,
- Nedôvera rodičov k školskému systému.

9. Aké sú riešenia?

- Povinná škôlka od 3 rokov (so systematickými opatreniami), lepšia spolupráca s rodičmi, a rozšírenie programov ako Omama na celonárodnú úroveň.

Appendix no.2 – Interview Transcript 1

Transcription of the Interview with former Plenipotentiary for Roma Minorities (from 2016-2020), Ravasz Ábel, transcribed into English language, as for the interview was conducted in Hungarian language.

1. Where did the idea of the one year of mandatory kindergarten come from?

- The initiative aimed to support disadvantaged children. Unlike neighboring countries, Slovakia had no mandatory preschool education. Work on this started in 2016, and the proposal was submitted as a legislative initiative in 2019, with implementation set for 2021 to give municipalities time to adapt.

2. Were there enough kindergarten spots available?

- Since 2014, EU funds were allocated for building kindergartens, amounting to 130 million euros under the Slovak Operational Program for a seven-year period. However, these funds were initially underutilized due to a lack of children enrolled. After the 2019 reform, more kindergartens were built using EU funds, and additional funding is still available, including from the Recovery Plan.
- Starting in 2023, four-year-old children became eligible for kindergarten, and from 2024, this will extend to three-year-olds. Municipalities are now required to provide spots if families request kindergarten enrollment.

3. What happened to the zero-grade year after mandatory kindergarten was introduced?

- The zero-grade year was phased out because research by the Ministry of Education's Institute for Educational Research showed that it did not statistically improve educational outcomes. Instead, it created segregated classes with lower academic expectations, preventing students from reintegrating into regular classrooms.
- From 2025, Slovakia will introduce adaptation classes or preparatory years as transitional solutions, lasting six months to a year, after which students will be integrated into regular classes.

4. Would mandatory kindergarten from age three be beneficial, particularly for disadvantaged families?

- The initial push for one year of mandatory kindergarten was already aimed at eventually expanding to three years. However, a lack of capacity, including teachers, school transport, and meal services, has so far prevented this expansion.
- As of 2020/2024, a “right-to-enroll” system is in place:

- Mandatory enrollment (Povinná): Children must attend kindergarten.
- Right to enrollment (Nárokovateľná): If a child is brought for enrollment, the municipality is obligated to accept them. However, if families do not take the initiative, the child may not be admitted.
- Within three years, full mandatory kindergarten attendance is expected.

5. How do you ensure that families understand the benefits of kindergarten?

- Awareness programs, both public and private, funded by the state, help inform parents about the importance of early education. The PRIM Kindergarten Program involves community engagement teams that explain the benefits to families.
- The Omama program, which receives government funding, focuses on early childhood development for ages 0-4. However, there is often distrust toward institutions among families living in multi-generational poverty. In practice, once an older sibling attends kindergarten and the parents see its benefits, they are more likely to enroll their younger children earlier.

6. What are the challenges for Roma children who do not speak Slovak when entering school?

- The government has funded Roma teaching assistant programs with EU support since 2004. These assistants are present in classrooms, speak the Roma language, and act as a bridge between teachers, students, and parents. However, professionalization efforts required formal qualifications, leading to a decrease in the number of assistants.
- A key challenge is preventing linguistic isolation—children should not be placed in separate Roma-language classrooms unless their parents actively choose this option. The goal is to provide education in a way that does not lead to segregation while respecting constitutional rights to mother-tongue education.

7. How is Slovakia working on the native-language education approach?

- Every minority student has the constitutional right to be educated in their mother tongue. However, this must not result in segregated education. The UNESCO 1960 guidelines outline that separated education is only acceptable under specific conditions, such as single-gender schools or religious institutions, provided they offer the same quality of education as mainstream schools.
- For example, a Roma child attending a Slovak school but being placed in a Roma-only class with a lower curriculum quality would be considered segregation. However, if the child chooses a Roma-language school and receives a high-quality education, it aligns with inclusive principles.

8. What steps are being taken to improve teacher training for Roma students?

- Development of Slovak as a Second Language programs for minority-language schools, training and resources for teachers to better support Roma students, and creation and distribution of new teaching materials.
- The National Pedagogical Institute and Presov Univerzity is involved in these efforts, with specialists like Jozef Facuna (a Roma educator) contributing expertise. If more Roma-language schools emerge, more Roma-speaking teachers will be trained to meet demand.

9. Are there financial support programs for Roma students?

- Yes, the Roma Education Fund (REF) provides scholarships for disadvantaged students, particularly those entering secondary education. The aim is to ensure that once students enroll in high school, they have the financial and academic support to complete their studies. Schools also receive information and guidance to help Roma students succeed.