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Reorientations on the educational integration of Roma children in the Czech Republic

Reorientacje w zakresie integracji edukacyjnej
dzieci romskich w Republice Czeskiej

Abstract

The article is set in the social context of the Roma in the Czech Republic. The subject of the analyses are inter alia, the phenomenon of school segregation, systemic errors in the field of educational diagnosis and education of Roma children as a part of educational programs for students with intellectual disabilities. The aim of the article is an attempt to identify the routine with inclusion of Roma children in general education in the Czech Republic. The primary research method is the document analysis - optional legal documents, official school teaching documents and statistical summaries. Observational studies show that in inclusive education, on the one hand, there is an orientation on mastering Czech language by Roma children in both speech and writing, and on the other hand, a tendency to differential diagnosis. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports has taken action to equip teachers with the knowledge of the native language of their Roma students and knowledge of the Roma socio-cultural bases, which allows to avoid misunderstandings and ethnic conflicts. However, concerns are raised by the high turnover of Roma children not completing compulsory schooling, their low participation in pre-school education as well as educating a large percentage of Roma children in educational programs for students with

intellectual disabilities (the phenomenon of misdiagnosis and applications for transfer from mainstream education to the area of special education). A great support for the integration educational policy pursued in the Czech Republic towards Roma students attending universities are neurological research and development projects by scientific centers, identifying the needs and indicating the possibilities of including Roma children in the mainstream of general education. The research analyses carried out begin to require an urgent solution with social integration of the Roma courses in the Czech Republic, based on the current educational policy of the European Union towards Roma pupils and students. In this regard, it is necessary to set priorities by the Czech Ministry of Education and to make basic decisions with a focus on comprehensive support for Roma children in their development and education that includes them in the mainstream education.

Keywords: Czech Roma, Roma child, inclusive education, social integration.

Abstrakt

Artykuł osadzony jest w kontekście integracji społecznej Romów w Republice Czeskiej. Przedmiotem analiz są między innymi: zjawisko segregacji szkolnej, błędy systemowe w zakresie diagnozy edukacyjnej oraz kształcenie dzieci romskich w ramach programów edukacyjnych przeznaczonych dla uczniów niepełnosprawnych intelektualnie. Celem artykułu jest próba identyfikacji problemów związanych z włączaniem dzieci romskich do edukacji powszechnej w Republice Czeskiej. Podstawową metodą badawczą jest analiza dokumentów – obowiązujących aktów prawnych, oficjalnych dokumentów dotyczących nauczania w czeskich szkołach oraz dostępnych zestawień statystycznych. Badania wykazały, że w edukacji włączającej widoczna jest z jednej strony orientacja na opanowanie przez dzieci romskie języka czeskiego w mowie i piśmie, z drugiej zaś tendencja do poszanowania różnic językowych. Ministerstwo Edukacji, Młodzieży i Sportu podjęło działania ukierunkowane na wyposażenie nauczycieli w znajomość podstaw języka ojczystego ich romskich uczniów oraz znajomość romskich podstaw społeczno-kulturowych, co pozwala na uniknięcie nieporozumień i konfliktów na tle etnicznym. Niepokój budzi jednak duży odsetek dzieci romskich nierealizujących obowiązku szkolnego, niski ich udział w edukacji przedszkolnej oraz kształcenie dużego odsetka dzieci romskich w ramach programów edukacyjnych przeznaczonych dla uczniów niepełnosprawnych intelektualnie (zjawisko błędnej diagnozy i wnioskowania o przeniesienie z głównego nurtu edukacji do obszaru edukacji specjalnej). Dużym wsparciem dla integracyjnej polityki edukacyjnej prowadzonej w Czechach wobec romskich uczniów uczęszczających do szkół podstawowych są projekty naukowo-badawcze realizowane przez ośrodki naukowe, identyfikujące potrzeby i wskazujące na możliwości włączania dzieci romskich do głównego nurtu edukacji powszechnej. Przeprowadzone analizy badawcze wskazują na

konieczność pilnego rozwiązania problemów związanych z integracją społeczną mniejszości romskiej w Czechach, na podstawie aktualnych kierunków polityki edukacyjnej Unii Europejskiej wobec romskich uczniów i studentów. W tym zakresie niezbędne jest wyznaczenie priorytetów przez czeskie Ministerstwo Edukacji oraz dokonanie podstawowych rozstrzygnięć z ukierunkowaniem na wszechstronne wspieranie dzieci romskich w rozwoju, oraz edukację włączającą je w nurt edukacji powszechnej.

Słowa kluczowe: czescy Romowie, dziecko romskie, edukacja włączająca, integracja społeczna.

Introduction

In contemporary, united Europe, the emphasis is on issues relating to equality, justice and social integration. In addition to extensive debates, advisory, substantive and professional meetings, there are also ambivalent, often confrontational presentations of positions. A stormy exchange of views is also visible in the field of education due to the lack of unity in both the perception and implementation of the idea of inclusive education.

The Czech Republic has been a member of the European Union since 2004 and since then it has been obliged to fulfill the obligations resulting from the EU regulations, rules and directives relating to many areas of economic and social life. The Czech democratic state is obliged to implement EU law, respect it and apply it to all citizens, citizens of other countries and other people and groups living on its territory.

The population of the Czech Republic is currently estimated at over 10.5 million¹ inhabitants, of which almost 2.5 million are not citizens of this country. The ethnic structure of the Czech society is regionally diversified (Bohemia, Moravia), and the only region where the inhabitants admit to being Moravian is southern Moravia. The indigenous Czechs (over 9 million people) are the most numerous group inhabiting the Czech Republic. The remaining ethnic groups are: Moravians and Silesians (approx. 385,000), Slovaks (approx. 184,000), Poles (approx. 51,000), Germans (approx. 38,000), Roma (12,000 – official data) and others (approx. 353,000)².

One of the state-recognized ethnic groups, perceived quite critically by the Czech society, is the Roma minority. According to the estimates, there are ap-

¹ <https://www.populationof.net/pl/czechia/> (access date: 07.06.20).

² https://www.mzv.cz/warsaw/pl/informacje_o_rcz/kraj_i_jego_mieszkanicy/index.html (date of access: 07.06.20).

prox. 200,000 Roma people in the Czech Republic, which constitutes about 2% of the total population. This number is much higher than the official figures³. This inaccuracy is mainly due to the fact that the current law in the Czech Republic makes it impossible to obtain reliable data on the number of Roma in this country. The Czech legal system prohibits the collection of any ethnic data which nature could contribute to discrimination and many other adverse social phenomena. There is no doubt, however, that the Roma ethnic group, which occupies a significant place in the social structure of the Czech Republic, is an important but also sensitive component of social life not only in this country, but also in all countries where Romani people live.

The Czech Roma were pushed to the margins of social life during the political transformation. This phenomenon developed as a result of privatization and restructuring of industry, which resulted in the loss of not only jobs but also housing by a significant part of Roma. At that time, settlements and estates of Romani favelas arose in many areas of the Czech Republic. The Roma who lived there usually did not have basic education, were unskilled and long-term unemployed, and thus were dependent on social assistance (Połec 2003, p. 137). Living in isolated settlements, they experienced not only problems related to the satisfaction of basic needs and everyday existence, but also had serious difficulties in accessing health care and education. Unemployed, often illiterate parents did not send their children to school, which generated a vicious circle effect. As a result of social marginalization, the Roma have also become a group strongly disadvantaged in the labour market, which further deepened the distance of Czechs towards this ethnic minority. This image of the Roma community, preserved in the Czech public opinion, is confirmed by the results of research conducted over the last two decades, which indicates that during this period over half of the Czechs showed a lack of acceptance and an unfavorable attitude towards people of Roma origin (Feliksiak 2008).

The aim of the article is an attempt to identify problems related to the inclusion of Roma children in general education in the Czech Republic. Research explorations were carried out on the basis of documents analysis – legal acts in force, official documents concerning teaching in Czech schools and available statistical summaries.

³ Ibid.

1. Integration of Roma in the Czech Republic – educational perspective

The beginning of changes in the state policy towards the Roma and actions taken to improve their situation was the Information on the situation of the Roma community in the Czech Republic, adopted in 1997, prepared by Roma activists, human rights activists and government representatives (Vermeersch 2007, p. 83). Since then, the Roma have been constantly subjected to attempts at assimilation with the Czech society, and the issues of social integration of the Roma in all areas of their functioning have for many years been the subject of not only numerous professional discussions, but also political efforts.

The most pressing issue currently raised in social discourses is education. Despite numerous legislative and social initiatives and the state's continued efforts to integrate Roma, the Czech Republic is often criticized by the European Commission because of the large number of Roma pupils enrolled in compulsory primary education but outside mainstream education.

In 2015, 34,191 Roma pupils attended primary schools, which constituted 3.9% of the total number of people enrolled at this stage of education. However, it turned out that 15.1% of Roma children were educated in accordance with a framework curriculum for primary education with reduced content resources and lower requirements (Vláda České republiky, 2016). In practice, this meant expecting lower results than Roma children in terms of mastering key competences. This unfavorable phenomenon raised serious doubts as to the correctness of the procedures used in diagnostic and control processes.

Among the many problems related to the education of Roma children in the Czech Republic, the high percentage of children not completing their schooling is of concern. The reason for this state of affairs is most often migration, which is the family's reaction to increased administrative pressure with regard to the start of their child's education in a district school. The migration of Roma families (most often to Great Britain) has a negative impact on the educational level of children growing up in such families. After returning to the Czech Republic, Roma students have to get used to school rules again and they have to catch up with the curriculum. Their return is accompanied by an increased reluctance to study and the lack of school documentation during their stay outside the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, the still low participation of Roma children in pre-school education is also a serious problem. Their parents prefer primary school preparatory classes. This is a disadvantageous phenomenon, as the main goal of preschool education is to compensate for the uneven development of children before they start primary education. It mainly comes down to:

ensuring that all children adapt successfully to school conditions;
introducing children to early intervention;
ensuring the comprehensive development of children, including children from different social and cultural backgrounds.

Using national resources and the European Structural and Investment Funds, the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport actively supports the integration of Roma children, e.g. by gradually increasing the capacity of kindergartens. Another activity is another amendment to the Education Act, aimed at introducing one-year compulsory pre-school education for all children, including children from ethnic minorities (Vláda České republiky 2016). The amendment to the act introduced compulsory pre-school education for children over the age of five from the 2017/2018 school year. As part of this solution, the principle of free use of the last year of the child's participation in preschool education applies. Compulsory pre-school education in an individual form is also allowed.

According to the data of Česká školní inspekce (2018), the children who did not fulfill the legal obligation were mainly from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Due to the large representation of Roma in socially excluded localities, it can be assumed that among the 3% of children who do not participate in compulsory pre-school education, Roma children are also present (Kolaříková 2015). Regional government reports also inform that non-governmental non-profit organizations run pre-school clubs in several regions, thus helping Roma children both in the transition to the compulsory final year of pre-school education and in equalizing the conditions necessary to start primary education. The amended act also makes it possible for children to participate in preparatory primary school classes, which are organized in the last year before compulsory schooling begins. Since the preparatory classes started to implement the content of the preschool curriculum as early as September 2016, they have become one of the possible alternatives in which compulsory education takes place in its entirety (Kaleja 2019).

Inclusive integration programmes assume that the participation of Roma children in pre-school and primary education (preparatory classes) should be equal or at least similar. However, the data below shows that the participation of Roma children in pre-school education remains low. In the 2018/2019 school year, 7,748 Roma children attended kindergarten, which constitutes 2.1% of the total number of pre-school children. If we compare the participation of Roma children in pre-school education (2.1%) with their participation in compulsory primary education (3.7% in preparatory classes), we see that it is 1.6% lower.

Starting from the 2015/2016 school year, the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports carried out a four-year study aimed at estimating the participation of Roma pupils in primary schools. The individual educational programmes were taken into account, i.e. the Framework Programme for Primary Education (hereinafter referred to as “FEP ZV”) with appendices regulating the education of pupils with intellectual disabilities (hereinafter referred to as “FEP ZV LMP”) and the Framework Programme for Special Education for Primary Schools (hereinafter referred to as “FEP ZVS”). Data on the number of Roma students were obtained through the school statistical information system and prepared in electronic form. Research has shown that the participation of Roma pupils in compulsory primary education changed only slightly over the years: 2015/2016 – 3.9%, 2016/2017 – 3.6%, 2017/2018 – 3.6%, 2018/2019 – 3.7%. Moreover, it was found that the participation of Roma pupils in primary education varies regionally and is determined by the structure of the population and by the approach of the majority society (Zpráva o stavu romské menšiny v České republice 2018).

Another problem is the education of Roma children within the framework of educational programmes intended for pupils with intellectual disabilities. In the 2018/2019 school year, 29.1% of children out of the total number of pupils in primary schools participated in this type of education. After the 2019/2020 school year, their education is planned as part of classes and integration programmes (ibid.). Research conducted in the Czech Republic and other European countries shows that the prevalence of people with intellectual disabilities in the Roma population does not exceed 3%, therefore the percentage of Roma students with a diagnostic application for their transfer from mainstream education to the area of special education is very misleading. There are several factors that contribute to this to varying degrees. These are primarily factors related to the pupil’s family, teaching staff and the school system of institutional education (Kaleja 2019). However, the volume of this article does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the causes of this phenomenon.

The above-mentioned problems of the Roma minority in the Czech Republic and in other European countries were the subject of the 8th meeting of the Council of Europe Dialogue with Roma and Traveller Organisations. It took place on 10 and 11 October 2019 in Strasbourg. During the session, the solutions to numerous problems and educational barriers of the Roma minority were discussed. It was emphasized that already at the stage of pre-school education, the educational potential of Roma children is not adequately stimulated. Moreover, many children do not participate in pre-school activities, which results in their impoverished socialization and poorly developed communication and language skills.

2. Key areas of knowledge and integration activities – forecast

Inclusive education requires not only pedagogical but also general reflection on the facts related to school practice. The impulse here may be problems-questions the solution of which may lead to a change in existing education towards inclusion of Roma children in the social life. The basic questions concern the diagnosis of the condition, methods and measures supporting them in the efficient functioning of preschool and school, and the relationship between the teacher/educator and the pupil. These include the following questions:

What is the level of readiness of Roma children to participate in preschool or school education?

Who can support Roma children in the processes of adaptation, socialization and education? And how?

How do Roma children perceive teachers / educators in the educational process? Is this perception constant throughout the educational path? Who is involved in changing this perception, how, in what sense and with what effect?

How do teachers / educators deal with personal animosities, prejudices and stereotypes towards Roma in their professional activities?

How do educators interpret the characteristics and behaviour of Roma children and pupils? How often and how do they communicate and cooperate with their parents or legal guardians?

What is the perception of Roma parents and legal guardians, teachers and educators working with their children in the compulsory school system?

The above-mentioned impulses for reflection and research on the educational situation of Roma children may highlight a clear and not entirely favourable background of school institutional education conducted in the Czech environment – from the approach to responsibility through the perception and evaluation of school success or failure, to the nature of the strategy of dealing with problems (Dubayova, Kozarova 2018).

In the field of inclusive education, school practice in the Czech Republic includes the use of methods, measures and mechanisms aimed at reducing, correcting and eliminating undesirable conditions. An important activity is supporting learning processes, applying preventive procedures and stimulating the desired educational social climate in the peer group. The pedagogically desirable, interactive model of communication between teachers and pupils and their parents is also implemented. Nevertheless, numerous forms of discrimination against Roma pupils and ethnic segregation in schools are still recorded.

Pedagogical recommendations in the field of inclusive education are aimed at respecting linguistic differences. On the one hand, there is a visible focus on mastering the Czech language in speech and writing by Roma children, and on the other, on equipping teachers and educators with the basics of the mother tongue of their Roma students. The knowledge of the Roma socio-cultural foundations (traditions, habits and behaviours) by educators helps to avoid misunderstandings and ethnic conflicts, which have so far often appeared in school practice.

The 2015 report on the status of the Roma minority (Úřad vlády České republiky 2016) shows, on the one hand, little interest in teaching the Roma language, and on the other hand, notes the presence of many Roma language teachers who could work as qualified specialists in kindergartens and integration schools. Unfortunately, the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports continues to neglect this possibility, despite the legal grounds indicating that the Roma are a recognized national minority in the Czech Republic and have a fully guaranteed right to education in their mother tongue.

In the Czech school system, teaching of the Romani language is not provided in pre-school education institutions and primary schools. However, it is conducted in several secondary schools in the Czech Republic, especially where the representation of Roma pupils is dominant. The Roma language teaching programme is mainly aimed at mastering communication competences in the field of social work and welfare. In turn, teaching the Romani language at the level of higher education is present mainly in pedagogical and social work study programmes (Úřad vlády České republiky 2018). Some public universities offer the teaching of the Romani language as an option – the Romani language is included in the offer of compulsory optional subjects. There are also many indications that more and more students of pedagogy, social work and other fields of study are interested in the possibility of mastering professional competences focused on working with Roma children. Unfortunately, the educational offer in this area is unsatisfactory, as the authors of the study programmes do not take into account these needs and do not make appropriate conceptual changes. In the curricula of pedagogical studies, there are no subjects the implementation of which would allow students to learn about linguistic peculiarities and understand the phenomena occurring in school practice, which is a condition for a reliable assessment or pedagogical intervention. It should be emphasized that professional pedagogical training programmes that take into account the learning of the Romani language generate pragmatic benefits both individually and as a team, according to the formula: “I know and I understand and that’s why I do it”.

3. Selected projects for inclusive education in the Czech Republic

In response to the problems related to the education of Roma children, the University of Silesia in Opava has developed a project entitled: “Direct support of Roma for school inclusion – the issue of school, family and environment, registration number: CZ.02.3.61/0.0/0.0/15_007/ 0000239”. The project was carried out in 2016–2019 in two regions of the Czech Republic: Moravian-Silesian and Zlín. It covered a total of 52 primary schools located in four cities: Opava, Krnov, Ostrava and Vsetín. Five key activities were carried out under the project:

Action 1 aimed to develop educational programmes to facilitate the transition of Roma pupils from primary schools to the next levels of education. The offer included 8 educational modules supporting the key competences of primary school pupils, 4 of which were extracurricular activities conducted on the school premises, and 4 related to pupils’ ‘free time activities and were carried out at home’ (in the presence of pupils’ parents). The programme of learning to read and developing mathematical skills was also implemented in 2 groups;

Action 2 was aimed at strengthening the position of a school pedagogue in terms of competences and extending the scope of their activities to include work in the living environment of a disabled child (supporting their parents or legal guardians). In the last year of the project implementation, the position of a school pedagogue was reformulated into the position of a school integration coordinator;

Action 3 was related to the introduction in two partner schools the position of a school assistant, whose scope of activities included the individualized education of pupils with special educational needs;

Action 4 offered competence support to selected target groups (teachers, parents, non-profit employees and other entities involved in the education of children and pupils from socially excluded backgrounds) by participating in three thematic workshops;

Action 5 was aimed at conducting modular classes in the training system for teaching staff. The concept of this activity also included consultation meetings and exchange of experiences between teachers and headmasters of primary schools.

The presented project activities constituted the desired support for the inclusive educational policy towards Roma primary school pupils. The objectives of the project in question took into account the current needs of the practice resulting from the previously implemented research project: “Sociological monitoring of the learning outcomes of children and pupils in the Czech Republic, including

children and pupils with special educational needs (CZ.1.07/1.2.00/47.0009)". This project was also developed at the University of Silesia in Opava, and the research carried out within it covered the following issues:

subjectively perceived readiness of primary school teachers to educate various groups of children and pupils;

pupils' reading and math skills, including pupils with special educational needs;

barriers to preschool education for children at risk of social exclusion;

local school education policy in two selected cities in the Czech Republic

320 teachers working in the DVPP system, 2,589 pupils and 52 primary schools participated in both projects.

4. Necessary changes in inclusive education – recommendations

Summing up the considerations in the article, a question should be asked about the directions of the European Union's policy in the field of school education of Roma children – pupils and students. As the final summaries of the aforementioned meeting of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (10–11 October 2019) show, in the coming years activities promoted in the European Union countries will lead to:

changes in the attitudes of teachers and educators towards pupils from ethnic minorities and their family context;

elimination of systemic errors generating a large number of Roma children and pupils studying outside the mainstream of education;

developing systemic solutions for teaching the Romani language, perceiving its cultural attribute and taking actions aimed at its dissemination;

increasing the importance of research in the field of Roma language and literature;

creating the possibility of using the Romani language in official communication and school educational processes;

focus on targeted, active participation of the Roma in social events and in making decisions about systemic solutions in the field of inclusive education.

It should be emphasized that over the last two decades in the Czech Republic, positive changes have been observed in the aspect of the Roma minority integration. Educational initiatives aimed at the competent preparation of teachers to work with Roma students are particularly valuable. However, the conducted

research analyses indicate the necessity to urgently solve the problems related to the pedagogisation of parents, inclusive education for preschool children and education for Roma pupils attending primary schools.

In conclusion, the Czech Republic's inclusive education policy towards Roma pupils and students should be based on the above-mentioned European Union's current directions for educational policies and the results of cyclical and extensive research, identifying the needs and possibilities of including Roma children in the mainstream of general education.

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