

CASE 3 - The School under the Castle in Krásnohorské Podhradie

Basic information about the town and the school

The primary school in Krásnohorské Podhradie, Pokroková street, is a local school and one of the two in the town. It is situated under the castle dating from the 14th century, which is visible from the windows from the classrooms. It is spread over 5 buildings, with 242 pupils in total, almost all of them bilingual (Romani and Slovak) or trilingual (Romani, Slovak, Hungarian). The primary school of Krásnohorské Podhradie, Pokroková street is the only primary school with the Slovak language curricula, while the other school in the town have Hungarian as a language of instruction.

The school has traditionally been a local educational institution, welcoming all children within the town district of Krásna Hôrka, whose population is currently around 40 % of Slovak ethnicity and 60% Romani (of which around $\frac{3}{4}$ live in the local settlement). However, due to the fact that parents can choose the school for their children, most of the children from the majority population commute daily to the nearby city of Rožňava (less than 10 km away). Therefore, even if historically the school had a variety of students from different linguistic or ethnic backgrounds, the pupils of the school are nowadays almost entirely of Romani origin, due also to the “white flight” phenomenon.

“15 years ago, we were the first school in the region to receive support, aimed also at inclusion. Me and a colleague from Bratislava, we were the only ones to go to Sofia for a big congress. Back then we had a ratio of 60 to 40, back then we could talk about inclusion. We tried, we did not separate Roma and non-Roma classes. (...) We had joys and worries, we were never perfect, nor we will be, but our teachers would deserve the attention from the State, from the ministries to see the conditions in which we have to work.” (School principal)

Roma and non-Roma relationships and the school in between

The relationships in the town of Krásnohorské Podhradie have been disrupted by an event in 2012, when a large part of the castle was burned down. The fire was attributed to two Romani boys who were playing with fire in the dry grass. The event has been since then portrayed as a national tragedy with strong anti-Roma connotations. The escalation

of hateful sentiments towards the local Roma (and Roma in general) has been intensified by the presence of the far right extremist party “Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko” (People’s Party Our Slovakia) with Marian Kotleba as the leader of the party (currently the chairman of the Banská Bystrica region). The group organizes yearly demonstrations in the town as a “commemoration” of the event. However, the most recent demonstration in 2015 were rather small, also due to the loss of interest of the local residents of Krásna Hôrka.

While the fire in the castle disrupted the relationships in the town, the school management responded very well by trying to protect their pupils from hatred and distanced themselves from anti-Roma sentiments projected towards their students.

“Despite the burned castle you see here and Kotleba, despite all these issues, I think that the cooperation was not bad here before. Surely it has been shattered by the burning, the relationships became worse. (...) but we have to be here together all the time and resolve day-to-day problems, not only big ones but also those that are small. And the children should not be the ones to blame, not for their parents, not for the politics. Because if the problems are long-term ignored on a higher, state level, there is no effect here. And the children are those who suffer.” (School principal)

Moreover, the school organized a powerful symbolic event – a “human chain” of pupils and teachers around the castle, sending good energy towards the renovation of the castle.

“When the castle was burned, we made a human chain of our students, we have sent good energy to the castle...we want to repeat it again when the castle is renovated, to send a good energy, as a memento, so that it will not happen again.” (School principal)

Organization of classes

The teaching in the school is organized in five buildings (with inside and outside sport facilities), in classes from grade 0 to grade 9. The school also has one segregated class for around 16 pupils with different disabilities, and around 15 pupils with disabilities (including psychosocial disabilities or partial deafness) being integrated in to mainstream classrooms. There are four teaching assistants (two of them through the state financing) in classes, two of them in the zero grade.

The two zero grades are intended for children that are not yet advised to enter the first grade where the education process of a primary school begins with a general curricula,

due to the lack of pre-primary education. There is also a lack of places in the kindergarten in the town, a systemic problem in the country.

Some children have to learn Slovak as a second language, therefore the zero grade is intended to help them with Slovak which is the official language of education. The teachers thus regard the zero classes as beneficial and claim these pupils to be better prepared for the first grade, even when compared to pupils that attended the kindergarten. Despite this fact, zero grades are being criticized by non-governmental organizations as a form of streaming of Romani children (who are the only ones attending such classes), a separation that continues throughout the whole primary school. However, as the pupils in the primary school in Krásnohorské Podhradie are almost entirely of Romani origin, this aspect of streaming is not present at the school.

Teaching assistants, intended to help the teachers in the education process of the Romani children from unprivileged background also help with the education of the pupils with disabilities who are integrated in the mainstream classrooms. However, there is still more support needed in order to successfully educate all children with disabilities and special needs into mainstream classrooms, without the need to segregate them into special classrooms, even if the process of educating them separately seems more preferable for the teachers or the students themselves.

Atmosphere at the school

The primary school in Krásnohorské Podhradie can be characterized as a school with a friendly atmosphere, with outside large green areas, sports facilities and openness of space (a real benefit of having a school in a smaller town). Very friendly relationships between the teachers, assistants and the school management add a feeling of community. All teachers, assistants and the management themselves appreciate the friendly relations, accessibility and mutual support.

“It is great when a person comes to the school in the morning and comes to a collective of people, where one has friends and can talk and is supported.” (Educational adviser and teacher)

“Overall, I can assess that this is a good school. The cooperation with the parents, with the assistants, colleagues and counselling office is good. I have nothing bad to say.” (Special pedagogue).

Even if the school buildings and the facilities are quite common as in other primary schools, due to the efforts of the school management - especially the cooperation with Samsung - the school is very well equipped with modern technology. The school is furnished with laptops, interactive boards and tablets that are being used to explain the curriculum starting from the lowest grades, to the enjoyment of the students (and the researcher). The introduction of the latest technologies at school seem to keep pupils interested and focused and helps teachers to use more creative methods to enthuse the students for the gaining of knowledge.

The school management

The principal of the school plays an important and active role in creating the accepting atmosphere and focus on the ideals of democracy, humanity and tolerance. Due to the fact that pupils are almost entirely of Romani origin and come from unprivileged backgrounds, the school's focus under the management is to reflect on the negative stereotypes attributed to Romani pupils and try to support Romani pride. Even if all the "adults" at school are aware and talk about the problems associated to the education of disadvantaged Roma pupils, the teachers and management answer by trying to create a supportive environment with a sense of school community. The school principal and a deputy principal do talk about their pupils with honesty, pride in their achievements and are guided by the humanist ideals and non-discrimination – virtues that are not to be underestimated and taken for granted in the Slovak background. The management sees their pupils as children in the first place, but also tries to protect them from the hatred and negative comments for them being Romani. Such anchoring in the humanist ideals and absence of racism, while reflecting on the education of unprivileged Romani children is really what positively stands out in comparison with other schools.

The teachers themselves report beneficial relationships and the friendliness of the school management:

"There is definitely a very good cooperation with the management. Surely there are some problems. However, we are trying to agree. The principal accepts my teaching guidance as a special educator. I have to say that when something occurs, we always try to resolve it with him [the principal] and the deputy principal." (Special pedagogue)

“The principal is skilful and provides everything through the projects – we have interactive boards, almost everyone has notebooks, he really tries that we have everything.” (Teacher, lower grades)

The teachers in focus

Altogether, there are 21 teachers and 4 teaching assistants at the school. The principal appreciates their endeavor in education, with some of the teachers being employed there more than 15 years, thus reflecting also on the change of student’s composition. The teaching assistants are much appreciated and understood as highly needed in order to effectively educate children from unprivileged communities. The school management also reflects on the lack of support and valuation of the teachers from the part of the State:

“It is sad that these teachers are not valued and remunerated as much as they should be. (...) I have to pay also two assistants, but the ideal would be if I had 6 – 7 assistants, there is not enough of them to help all teachers. (...) Look at the Finnish model, they have 2 – 3 assistants in one classroom and 10 – 15 students like this, they integrate them directly and they do not even have to have special classrooms, the roles there are divided.” (School principal).

The role of the teaching assistants is, therefore, highly valued and necessary at school. Sadly enough, finances for two of them have not been further approved by the regional administration for the ongoing year. Taking in to account that there are also students, for which classroom assistants, or personal assistants would be not only highly beneficial, but also vital for safeguarding that they are not segregated due to their disability, the lack of support from the State in teaching assistants, and even cut-backs in their number is highly negative for the successful inclusion of children with various special educational needs.

In addition to the teachers and teaching assistants, the school also employs a special pedagogue that teaches pupils with disabilities in special classroom, four tutors for after-school program for pupils in classes 0-4 and an educational adviser (who is also a teacher).

The special pedagogue oversees education of children with disabilities in a separate classroom as well as those integrated within mainstream classes and provides advice for other teachers or parents.

The school puts focus on after-school programs for children up to class 4, that serves as a place for catching-up on curriculum and a place to make homework, as well as general after school leisure activities. Regarding the fact that for some pupils, this is the only place where they do their homework, all teachers and tutors agreed that it would be also needed for older students. Students from class 5 do not have a tutorship program, yet can benefit from numerous after school clubs (f.e. sports, mathematics, drama, creativity, environment or music).

The educational adviser serves as an important counsellor for older students in order for them to choose well their future secondary education (the school is very successful in encouraging their students to follow up on education). Some of the students follow on grammar schools, pedagogy schools or commerce academies (mostly those from a majority ethnicity). Romani students almost entirely follow up their secondary education in the two schools in Rožňava, the nearest town, studying for a vocational three year training, such as services or mechanics. One of the reasons why the students choose only these schools is due to the fact that their parents are not sufficiently well-off for them to pay larger travel or accommodation costs. Another reason is that the pupils tend to choose easier subjects or follow their friends despite the fact that the vocational occupations are not met with the job opportunities in the region.

The educational adviser created an interesting advisory technique. After seeing that the parents of the students were not really interested in meeting representatives of the secondary schools, the adviser invited former pupils, now in secondary education, to talk about their own experiences after school. Listening to their friends or students of their own age category helped them to choose more wisely, with references from practice and not only from “brochures” of the schools.

“So they come to talk to us about how they are doing and those discussions are quite beneficial, because they often tell the students much more than in the case of some teacher or adviser from the school. And those students really do tell some curiosities and interesting things from their own experience that the teacher would not tell. And it is beneficial because our students then talk to them and it happened that some changed their mind.” (Educational adviser and teacher).

In addition, the visits of the former students do help the teachers with feedback on their work and provide them with satisfaction when the former students claim they have been taught well and now are successful in the secondary school.

The primary school also recently helped two students with a fellowship for Romani students in order to be able to attend pedagogical school in a city further away, thus being able to financially cover the costs of secondary education.

In addition to permanent employees, the school is attended by a speech therapist (twice a month). The special pedagogue expressed the need for a psychological assistant that is missing (likewise in other primary schools).

The pupils in focus

The primary school in Krásnohorské Podhradie currently enrolls 242 pupils, who are upon the estimates of the school 99% of Romani ethnicity. However, in terms of stated ethnicity by the parents, 46 % are Slovak, 5 % are Roma and 49 % are of a Hungarian ethnicity. A high majority of students come from families that are in material need and therefore apply for financial assistance, such as lunches or after school activities (those are paid by parents a small amount of money, such as 2 Eur/month).

Due to the fact that Romani is not a language of curricula in any primary school in Slovakia, Romani pupils have to always study in Slovak or Hungarian. Those options are also available in two primary schools in Krásnohorské Podhradie. Most of the pupils are therefore bi- or trilingual from the early age. The primary education system also includes a first compulsory foreign language (English, German or Russian in the school) from the grade 3 and a second foreign language from the grade 7, which is according to the school very challenging.

The primary school employs 4 pedagogical assistants (former so called Romani pedagogical assistants) who also serve as assistants for the education of children with disabilities that are integrated in mainstream classrooms.

The school in Krásnohorské Podhradie, as any other school that educates children with different special pedagogical needs, would certainly benefit from a larger support of the State, in the form of pedagogical support. However, the school management reported the school will not be supported enough with the pedagogical assistants in the future, after the cutbacks from the State for these special positions.

The school also asked for personal special assistants for the children with disabilities in their school, however have been denied any such assistance from the State, which curtails

effective education and inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom without separating them outside or within the class.

Integrated thematic education

In lower grade, teachers apply integrated thematic education that entails cross-cutting topics, through which the children learn different subjects. For example, one teacher for a lower grade introduced the topic of *Alice in the Wonderland* at the beginning of the school year. After watching the fairy tale with the kids, she uses the themes from *Alice* in all subjects such as Mathematics or Reading. With the help of modern technologies and most importantly, her own enthusiasm and kind approach to children, her class seems to be really enjoying the learning process and the pupils are active and interested in the process.

Regarding the changes in the composition of the school's students, the teachers reported the achievements and expectations have become lower. However, the legacy of a successful school is much visible and the skills, attitude and motivation of the teachers and management of the school is noticeable and interest in their students and their future is very present.

Student Parliament

Representatives of the students from grades 4 to 9 (2 from each class) form a student parliament that is being voted by their fellow classmates. The student representatives both bring to the table and resolve troubles that the students are having and make and manage some school activities.

One of the very interesting activities the student parliament manages is *Slniečkovanie* (Sun-making) - a form of welcoming ritual for incoming pupils. In this activity, students from grade 9 welcome students from grade 1, make a program for each other and create a big paper sun with a color imprint of each small pupil's hand and name. This paper sun is then included in each class:

"It is an interesting activity, first grade pupils and nine graders come together; first graders make program for them and then the 9 graders make program for the small ones, they grab each other's hands (...) so they know who is whose tutor and will take care of them for the whole year (...) the small ones see them as authorities. (...) This has been a tradition for more than ten years." (School principal)

Another activity that the student parliament does annually is a charity collection for a national cancer awareness and treatment organization, in which the students are very active to the joy and pride of the school principal:

“Three years ago, despite the hard conditions we have here, we have been the best school (in the region), that has collecting most money divided by the number of students, I almost have tears in my eyes, because it made us feel so good.” (School principal).

By these activities, the school aims to teach the children the ideas of empathy and solidarity with others.

The activity of Sun-making seems to be also well enjoyed by the small pupils themselves as it has been one of the main things they reported to be liking the most at school. Other “most favorite things” included school technologies, informatics and green areas, trees and flowers at school. The things small children did not like at all where connected to the behaviour of older students: destroying facilities or pushing in corridors or outside and fighting.

Older students, student relationships and truancy

The school management and teachers reported some troubles with students in higher grades, mostly in the age the students attend classes 5 to 6 or in cases where the classroom is almost entirely attended by boys.

“I have nine graders now, there are two classes, in one class, there is a very good group of students, I can work there very well, they are trying their best and we will miss them. In the other class, they are a bit worse with grades and behaviour, maybe it is also that it is almost entirely a boys’ class. (...) In the beginning, when they were attending grades 5 to 6, the teaching there was very hard, but now we were talking that it seems they calmed down, maybe also because of the age, they want to work more.” (Educational adviser and teacher).

The relationships between the students are reported to be good and friendly and when a conflict arises, the head teachers of the classes try to resolve them with the children, or also with the assistance of the educational adviser. In case the child is missing a lot of classes, the school notifies the school commission of the town who tries to resolve the problem with family. The educational adviser reported that the missing of high number of classes also happens due to the financial reasons of the family:

“It is hard. For example, we have one family that is from Rožňava (a nearby town) who moved from here and commute daily. And when they do not have money for a bus, they will not come. It is hard, I believe, that when they do not have money for the bus and they have 3 or 4 children here, at the end of the month they do not have the finances to come to school.” (Educational adviser and teacher).

The reasons for a high number of missing classes are therefore according to the teachers mainly due to the family reasons of their students. In case of more than 50 classes that have been missed by a student, the school therefore notifies the town and with the help of the director of the school, mayor and other people in the education commission, they visit the child’s family. This approach is according to the school headmaster successful in a less than half of the cases. There have been also some instances in which the school had to ask the assistance of the police due to the behaviour of some higher grade students.

The special pedagogue also reported that in some cases the reduced curricula of the special class increased the motivation and attendance of children who previously had been missing a lot. The reason then seemed one of loss of motivation and it would then be only beneficial that the school would be trying to apply an individualized approach to each student, so the referral to special class is not needed. The flexibility and individual approach to each student are necessary means for inclusion in education, though the State does not allow or support much space in this area. The special school or special class therefore seems beneficial for the students by reasons of limited possibilities to educate children with special needs in mainstream classrooms.

Romani studies and cultural awareness

The school is engaged in numerous activities that encourage pride and knowledge in the Romani identities of their students. Leisure activities include competitions in dancing or Roma day (financed by the State project). In addition, the school curricula include *“Romani studies”*, where the students are taught the history, culture or well-known personalities of the Roma. School management’s idea is also to map the history of Roma in the town with the help of the students as a form of awareness-raising of the Roma in the town of Krásnohorské Podhradie:

“We want to make a history of the settlement in the town and Roma in general.(...) We want to visit the oldest residents, parents, grandparents and research when and where they

settled here, we want to paint and make posters about life of the Roma here from different perspectives.” (School Principal).

The school is proud on all the success of their current and past students and also supports Romani pride which is to be appreciated very much and serves as a practice to be followed. The school management also criticizes and is concerned about any instances of racism or condemnation of their students, for example in cases of anti-Roma demonstrations in town or hate speech on the web pages of their school. In some instances, it is also former students of the majority population that show their back towards their former classmates of Romani origin, events that show to be very sensitive and harmful.

The teacher-pupils relations

Even if the time we spent at the school has been limited, the visits in the classrooms during the classes, leisure activities and interviews with the teachers and small pupils show high skills, motivation of the teachers, their interest in the children and empathy with the difficulties they encounter due to the fact of being from unprivileged backgrounds. The teachers seem to be also counsellors to their students and try to help them with their personal problems:

“When we see they have troubles, or are sad, because of i.e. their parents went through a divorce, we have many children like this, and really when I teach in that class and I see something is wrong with the student, so the head teacher of the class or me, we ask whether there is something wrong with the pupil. And if they want, they talk to us. Or their fellow classmates talk to us, so when they want some help we help them in case it is not a family matter that is too personal.” (Educational adviser and teacher).

In some instances it however seems that the teachers lost their motivation or patience and were experienced to talk to the children in a very demeaning or insulting way. This fact have been highlighted also by some parents. While it might be understood that the teachers work in hard conditions and in challenging situations, such attitudes should be entirely avoided, especially in case of very small children that can stay highly traumatized and harmed.

The school is nevertheless to be thanked for many motivated, skilled and creative teachers and management that work at the school for many years and try their best in

educating their pupils. This is to be underlined also due to the fact that some teachers decided to leave the school after the change in its composition.

In questioning what are their students best qualities, the special pedagogue said:

“Strong qualities? Firstly that they come to school. That is of a high importance. They are ambitious, friendly and you can build a nice relationship with them. And we don’t take importance in that they are Roma and the teachers are white. I think that is important as well.” (Special pedagogue)

The teachers show to be also empathic towards the daily problems their students might have:

“Some of them have problems with hygiene, they do not even have basic resources that they should have, and they do not have a good environment at home, care or help of their parents. I don’t talk about everyone, because there are also normal ones, but there are more of those that need help. (...) it is hard for me to look at them. Lately I brought some clothes I do not need anymore.” (Teaching assistant)

The school, the parents, the community

The attitude and communication between the school and the parents is rather limited. The school management and teachers report lack of interest on the part of the parents in the education of their children (although individual experiences vary, there are some parents who are highly interested, there are some who have not been seen at the school yet and tutors report that a high percentage of the parents are interested and talk to them).

“Parents who have work also have possibilities, (...) we see this on the care of the children. That those families are better well-off, they have more possibilities to invest in their children, I do not think only financially, but in general, they have possibilities that the majority do not have. (...) But there is a high unemployment not only of minority, but also of majority. (..) I wanted to say really that it would be much better if they have some possibilities to work.” (School Principal)

On the other hand, parents report a lack of information from the part of the school, for example in cases of unscheduled holidays or school events. Some troubles between the school and the parents therefore might stem from a lack of communication and

understanding. The parents suggested that they had some notice-board at the entrance where all the announcements would be posted for an easy access for all the parents.

What is to be also recommended is that, even if perhaps complicated, the school should not close itself to the parents. The school understands this as a form of “protection” of the children, i.e. in discouraging the parents from coming for their small children earlier, while the after-school is the only place where the child does its homework, or not inviting the parents to school events:

“We had balls with the presence of the parents and everything and then the whole settlement came, there was no place for the children. You do not do the event for the parents to feel well, but for the children.” (Tutor)

The school therefore stopped inviting the parents for the school completely, which is of course critically understood by the parents:

“I am annoyed by that, because lately they had an event here in the gym and I asked my daughter, whether the mothers can come and see their children. Because it had been a custom that they could come. She said that the teacher told her that no one can come. And I said how that is possible? I want to see you! So I couldn't go there and I did not like it. It is not good like this.” (Mother of a lower grade child)

As in any other school, the representatives of the parents are also meeting regularly in the school in the form of a Parent's school board and the cooperation with the school is reported to be good. There are also many parents that are said to have very good relationship with the school, especially in case where the teacher knows how to reach to them. It might then be highly beneficial and welcomed that the school finds some compromise, maybe with the help of the active parents, and the mothers can come to see their children performing.

The parents also reported that they do not know what to teach to their children and lack information about how to improve the performance of their children at school. The school tries to resolve this by afternoon activities, where the children (though only until grade 4) make their homework. According to their experience, it is the only place where the child does their homework as the parents do not assist them at home.

„I do agree with the parents that they will read together, so they read for example for a month and then it stops again. But a great advantage here are after-school activities. I cannot imagine how this school would work without that. Because they do lot of their

homework there. So it is good that all our pupils in lower grades go to after-school activities. Even if it is paid, I think it is for 2 Eur/ month but the parents are willing to pay that.”
(Special pedagogue)

It is visible that the parents would like to assist their children and are interested in their good performance, however, there is a lack of necessary information or assistance from the part of the school on how to do that or what exactly their child has done wrong. This suggests that both parents and school expect a pro-active role from the other part and do not meet in the middle. It is then to be suggested that the school, as a provider of education should be the one to play the role that as more active, at least in providing necessary information even to those parents that do not come to pick their children (i.e. in form of notes and suggestions sent to parents).

Conclusion

The primary school in Krásnohorské Podhradie is an open and aspiring school with motivated, friendly and mostly tolerant staff. The sense of community is seen and felt at the school or even at the canteen, where teachers eat side by side to the students (researcher does not remember their teachers doing so). While the school works in challenging conditions and lacks the support of the State that is crucial for adequate and efficient inclusive education, it is valued that they try to stay focused and motivated on education. While it is clear that the school cannot yet be seen as inclusive, the management and teachers are to be encouraged for further development of individual capacities, dreams and skills of their pupils.