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**Digital Support of Developing Narrative Competence Among Children from Excluded Rural Communities in Slovakia**

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**Abstract:** Children from excluded rural communities in Slovakia are at permanent risk of low school achievement which is often related to social, language and digital exclusion. A closed circle of social exclusion and childhood poverty usually leads to school attrition, adult exclusion, and unemployment. One way how to break this circle is helping these children to succeed at school from pre-primary and primary education. As far as the language of instruction (Slovak language) is often not their first language, these children fail to fulfill school requirements very early. To develop their narrative competence in the Slovak language we adopted a set of materials for the teaching of Slovak as a second language (Hocus & Lotus narrative format programme, Taeschner, 2005). We prepared for teachers and children printed books and handouts as well as digital materials like audiobooks, videos, web-based colour books and handouts usable with an interactive board. These materials were available via the project website and can help children to develop both language and digital competences which may bridge the school achievement gap in later education. An experimental project was designed to verify the programme in 10 classes of children from 6 to 10 years of age (N = 104). The teachers were asked to evaluate the outcomes of using the digital materials in narrative format education and the further needs were analyzed. Based on these results further recommendations for socially disadvantaged children are discussed. This study is a part of the project KEGA 060UK-4/2017 Supporting narrative competence in the Slovak language for children from marginalized language environment – a set of teaching materials and of the project VEGA 1/0409/17 Teachers' personality and professional vision related to the dealing with challenging situations in the classroom during the transition into service.

**Keywords:** narrative format; social exclusion; digital exclusion; achievement gap.

## I. CHILDREN FROM EXCLUDED RURAL COMMUNITIES AND EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA

Education of children, especially Roma children, needs not only innovative and modern educational methods that attract children's interest and attention, but it is also important to reduce the social exclusion related to misconceptions and prejudices towards minorities [13], [30]. According to European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2016), only about 56% of Roma children from selected EU countries (9 member countries) attend school at the age between 4 and 6 years of age. In Slovakia, it is only 34% compared to 77% of the whole population [30]. Even the school attendance of Roma population in Slovakia is relatively good, there is still a problem with early school leaving (58%) and the segregation of Roma children in schools (FRA MIDIS II, 2016, [29], [30]).

In the excluded rural communities children and their parents communicate usually in Roma dialects. Children are exposed to Slovak language and its written form usually after entering primary education. As far as only five school assistants speak Roma language, the language of instruction is only Slovak, which they have heard for the first time at school. Due to insufficient school readiness, most of the Roma children attend preparatory classes in elementary school, so-called zero grade class [29], [14]. Despite attending the preparatory class, Roma children from excluded rural areas have

problems with using the Slovak language. “Children with Romani mother tongue do not have the opportunity to be educated in their first language in kindergartens or in schools, and teacher assistants are not required to speak Romani” [30]. People in Roma settlement in the eastern parts of Slovakia do not use standard Slovak and they do not master written form of Romani language. That is why the parents are not able to help children with school work and develop their literacy, which causes that pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have low chances of accessing higher education [2], [8].

### **1.1 Digital Technology and Education**

Based on several studies, it is possible to foster motivation and interest in learning among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minority children by modern digital technology [7], [9], [4], [6]. As digital technology, we consider ‘electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data’ [21, p.251]. These include various applications, video games, social media, multimedia, cloud computing, mobile devices, tablets, education software etc. Over the recent 20 years the usage of personal computers and the Internet has increased around the world and digital technology has become a common part of everyday life [1] despite the fact, that culturally and linguistically diverse individuals still face systemic, cultural and financial barriers in using technology [28] and older, less educated, minority and lower income individuals have lower internet usages as the majority groups [27], [22]. In 2012 in OECD countries 95.2% of students had at least one computer at home and they reported to spend an average of 104 minutes per weekday on the Internet [23]. In Slovakia in 2010 and 2011 84,5% of students had an Internet connection at home and they used it mainly for a chat, downloading music and videos, playing games, and sending e-mails [10]. Cheaper smartphones allowed to make digital devices available also for Roma children and adolescents, which helped to develop their computer literacy. Slovak research of using tablets in the classroom [17] showed that using tablets may have benefits especially among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds as they “may benefit more from overall motivating effect of the change and from the change to experience success in novel education situation” [17, p.178]. Based on various experiments with so-called ‘hole in the wall’ [18], [20], Mitra suggested that children from rural communities who could use public computer, and if possible also the Internet connection, for a certain period of time (from 1 to 9 months), were able to reach a certain level of computer literacy on the own, without any instructions. They also found that these children were able to self-instruct and obtain help when required. In further research Dangwal [4] reported not only the improvement of computer literacy and social cooperation but also an overall improvement of intellectual maturity, and academic performance in English and Mathematics [11].

Currently, there are many digital learning projects. „Digital learning was further described as any type of learning that is facilitated by technology or by instructional practice that makes effective use of technology. Digital learning occurs across all learning areas and [21, p.251]. In Slovakia, we use for example education packages created for interactive whiteboards and digital content called „The Planet of Knowledge“ [16]. In poorer regions of Slovakia, especially pre-primary and primary schools use digital technology for education [15].

### **1.2 Project “We learn together”**

The aim of the project “We learn together” is to develop narrative competences among children from excluded rural communities [12]. As a background for this project we used the results from previous projects and surveys, such as digital education of parents and children “Let’s become a bilingual family” [26] or “Soft integration” [25] focused on the teaching of foreign languages for immigrants. Both research projects were based on working with the narrative format method [32] which was created to develop language competencies among children. For the purposes of our project, we translated the teacher's guides [31] and picture books, and we created a website where teachers can download the materials for children or they can work online using the interactive whiteboard. The teachers involved in the project were provided with two-days training including the presentation of the [website](#). The introductory part of the website contains 10 pictograms representing 10 stories (picture 1). The materials for each story are divided into the following sections: a) materials for children (a book, an online book with a podcast, a dino-comic book, exercises); b) digital content for children (songs, karaoke version of the songs, audio version of the story, cartoon); c) materials for teachers (a

guide book for each story and a video-guide for dramatization of the story). Audio and video materials are available in mp3 and mp4 formats. On-line books are not available for download; they have to be used online. Complete materials are available for six stories; the next four stories are not available in audio and video formats. The number of stories taught per one school year depends on children's communication and cognitive abilities, and also on the amount time that a teacher dedicates to working with the narrative format. Teachers can modify the use of the materials according to the needs of their pupils.



Picture 1 Digital material for the work with a story – a website layout

## II. TEACHERS' EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The project “We learn together” started in 2017 and it is expected to finish by the end of 2019. The aim of the project is to create effective materials for teachers and children to develop children's narrative competences. To evaluate the effectiveness of the method we monitor not only children's achievements but also the procedures, barriers, and needs of the teachers. As far as we use closed online space, it is important to know, whether the materials are useful for the teachers and whether they have opportunities to work with them in the classroom. We also needed to know, what technical facilities the teachers who work with children from socially disadvantaged environment use, whether their pupils are motivated to work with new media and how do the teachers evaluate the use of digital technology among Roma pupils.

We interviewed 10 primary teachers involved in the project on phone. They were willing to answer a researcher's questions. The semi-structured interview (Table 1) was recorded and the answers were transcribed and analyzed. All the teachers work with Roma children. Nine teachers work in classes with 100% of Roma children, which is caused regional composition of the population, or by the fact that parents of non-Roma origin enroll their children into different school. Three teachers work in special classes for children with communication disorders. One of the teachers work in preparatory class, three teachers teach in the first grade, one teacher teaches in the third grade and three teachers use the narrative format within extracurricular activities for mixed groups. Eight teachers continually work with Hocus&Lotus narrative format, one teacher stopped working with the method after one month because she preferred to develop reading skills instead of developing narration in the language of instruction. The second teacher had used the method with extracurricular activities and she decided to focus on more practical activities.

<b>category</b>	<b>questions</b>	<b>Extensions of the discussion</b>
Technology facilities at the school	What are their opportunities for work with digital technology in the classroom? How do they use digital technology in the classroom? Do they spot if Roma children or their older siblings and parents have smartphones, tablets or personal computers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How often do they join digital education?</li> <li>• What applications do they use?</li> <li>• In which subjects do they use technology?</li> <li>• How do children react when teachers use technology in the classroom?</li> <li>• Do children have smartphones? How do they use them? Do they have an internet connection?</li> </ul>
Usage of narrative format digital content	Do they use the narrative format of digital content?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which story do they teach?</li> <li>• How do children work?</li> <li>• Do they use the website for the preparation of the lesson?</li> <li>• Do they use the website in the classroom?</li> <li>• Which sections of the website do they use?</li> <li>• How do children react?</li> </ul>
Opinions, attitudes, and emotions	What is their opinion on digital technology?	What do they think about using smartphones among children?

Table 1. Semi-structured interview questions

The questions were not asked in the same order, the questions were selected based on the interview content.

## 2.1 Potentials and barriers of digital content usage at school

Based on previous surveys [29], schools are mostly well-equipped with digital technology. They have interactive whiteboards, notebooks or personal computers with Internet connection. Most of the teachers confirmed this. However, the teachers from smaller schools located outside the village near Roma settlement usually have limited space, small classrooms, one computer with data projector or interactive whiteboard for the whole school, or insufficient Internet connectivity. Those teachers appreciated printed materials and the songs and podcasts on CD. *“We use the materials we got. We have one CD player that we use to play songs. The interactive whiteboard is only in one classroom, but it is used by older children, we can use it only rarely. But children enjoy it.”* (7ZZ-0-1).

On the other hand, the teachers who teach in the classroom equipped with interactive whiteboard used the website and digital content more often, even they did not have always stable internet connection. *“It is everything easy to download, so I have downloaded everything to the board and then we used it with children. It is very helpful, also when I need to leave for a while, I play the video and they really enjoy it...”* (1M-MC-2). The teachers use the digital version of the stories with older children. *“The older girls like the dramatization, but the boy does not want to join them, he just sits and I read the story with him, while the girls play the video of the dramatization and play the story. They like it very much, they sometimes say “You cannot do it so nicely, we want to play the girls (i.e., teacher's video guide)”* (Z-LS-4/2S). The other teachers reported, that they use the materials mostly with younger children because it is too easy for older ones... *“In the preparatory or the first-grade children enjoy it very much, however, in the third grade it is more difficult. They have different interests.”* (2CH-TC-023). Those two teachers worked less often with the narrative format and they did not use digital content.

The first-grade teachers reported also the interest in digital education among children. If the school is well-equipped, they often use the “Planet of Knowledge” digital content (more about the application in Masaryk & Sokolová, 2012) at Mathematics, Slovak language, Writing and Reading Lessons. According to the teachers, children like these activities, however, the problem is that they cannot wait and they want to work all at the same time. The teacher needs to find the system, how to

use technology effectively. Several teachers think, that children perceive narrative format learning as a game. They have fun and they like performing various activities from this method. In a similar way, the teachers described using the smartphones. Small children usually do not have their own smart device, however, their older siblings and parents do have smartphones. According to the teachers, children usually have older models of phones, some of them have also the internet connection and they use it. If the children have school wifi password, they sit in groups and mostly listen to music. *“They came to me, because they wanted to play a song, but they realized that if they did not know how to write a singer's name, they could not find it. The other day they came with a name written on a piece of paper because they wanted others to listen to their favourite song too. So, yes, they learn this way, they need to spell the name correctly to find the song”* (3L-VS-34). Based on the interviews we can conclude that children are motivated to learn how to spell the names to find the songs, they download the lyrics and then they sing the songs. Mitra and Rana [18] described this type of learning as minimally invasive education or self-organized learning by Children [19], in which children develop literacy based on their own interests. Also, the other teachers reported that children are interested especially in downloading their favourite Romani or modern music. That might be the reason why they prefer audio and videorecords when working with the narrative format. According to the teachers' reports, they use with Roma children mainly songs and cartoons. They also appreciated the option of listening to the stories as a relaxing activity, during the break, or using the teacher training video for dramatization. This option was preferred by the teachers who have an interactive whiteboard in their classroom. Only two teachers used the comic book and additional exercises. The on-line books with podcasts was used only by one teacher (picture 3). For reading activities, the teachers used black-and-white paper books or coloured books. They often displayed the books in the classroom, so children could see and retell the story anytime (picture 2).



Picture 2 Printed books displayed in the classroom



Picture 3 Reading a book by the teacher using the interactive whiteboard

The teachers used digital content only as an additional way of teaching. They focused more on the building of relationships and dramatization. As children developed their narrative abilities in the course of time, the teachers started to use more diverse material in their teaching. *“At first we trained the dramatization, movement, and gestures, so they could retell the story, we played with letters, read the books and now, when they got the songs and cartoons, they enjoy it very much and return back to old stories. I think this is the right way because now they perceive the stories in a different way and it is easier to work with them.”* (1M-MC-2 – the teacher who has worked with narrative format experimentally for two years).

The benefits of education with narrative format are reported also by other teachers, they reported the improvement of children's verbal and image memory, concentration, cooperation, and social relationships. *“They are nicer, and how to say it... they even remember more, I think, they are able to learn short poems more quickly, and they cooperate better. Also, the class is more cohesive when compared to the other classes I had before.”* (7M-0). All the teachers confirmed that they would join the project again because they see the positive impact of this education. They enjoy the work with the narrative format and they can navigate at the website easily. In Table 2, we summarize the benefits of the usage of digital materials created for narrative format project.

<b>Benefits of the use of digital content</b>	
Interactive and connected* learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children have fun when learning.</li> <li>- They do the activities together.</li> </ul>
Personalised learning*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They can use the materials any time they need (during the lessons, breaks, even without a teacher's presence)</li> </ul>
Variability and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teachers and children are allowed to choose a different type of content (soundtrack, training videos, online books, printed materials, cartoons)</li> <li>- The teacher can modify the lesson according to the actual pupils' preference.</li> </ul>
Simple operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teachers appreciate easy navigation and operation with the materials.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Effective use of digital technology

Note: \*terms of effective digital education are adopted from [5]

The main problem in the education of Roma children from excluded rural communities reported by teachers is frequent absence. An average absence rate per pupil is 158.5 hours [29]. The absence rate causes that children are not able to proceed at school. Probably, bad hygiene and financial conditions do not allow parents to send their children to school and to provide them with appropriate learning conditions. Despite that children enjoy learning and narrative format. Those who attend school more frequently have higher achievement in narrative competencies. These achievements are motivating also for other areas of school literacy.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results we may suggest that the connection of dramatization and digital content in this project is perceived positively by both teachers and pupils. The activities supporting the development of reading competencies are used by teachers working with children from the second grade while with younger children teachers prefer movement and music. Using digital technology depends on the access to an interactive whiteboard, internet connection and teachers' opinion about technology. Similar results were reported also by PBS [24]. The teachers' observations of the children's behaviour lead to similar conclusions as international surveys about the online behaviour of youth and children, both in Slovakia and in other countries [10]. Even among the majority children the use of digital technology is not always connected with significant increase in literacy and academic self-concept [17], among pupils from excluded rural communities, might the use of digital technology lead to some benefits, caused by so-called „novelty effect, but also the effect of intuitive learning or learning based on a good relationship between teacher and children.

As far as the urban location, culture, and literacy are the factors affecting the access to use of information technology [22], the children from excluded rural communities do not have opportunities to develop computer literacy at home. A school is an institution where children can learn how to use digital technology effectively. School-provided access to computer-based learning may compensate for social stratification of technologies [6]. The development of communication, cognitive, social and

digital competences may contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of people from excluded rural communities and to their inclusion into society.

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