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Slovak educational centres abroad

Streszczenie: W związku z zainteresowaniem słowackich rodziców przebywających za granicą powstały i nadal powstają w ich społecznościach centra edukacyjne. Ich celem jest m.in. motywacja dzieci, oprócz nauki i zachowania języka słowackiego, do udziału w zajęciach tych centr i przygotowywania uczniów w wieku szkolnym do egzaminów komisyjnych – warunku koniecznego do ich dalszej edukacji – na poziomie wyższym w Słowacji, lub do ukończenia ich edukacji obowiązkowej. Centra edukacyjne dla społeczności słowackich są nie do zastąpienia. Oprócz działań edukacyjnych związanych z nauczaniem i zachowaniem języka ojczystego organizują wydarzenia kulturalne, spotkania rodziców, na których wymieniają oni swoje doświadczenia, oraz różne wykłady, których celem jest dostarczenie informacji o życiu w kraju aktualnego zamieszkania.

Słowa kluczowe: centra edukacyjne, słowacka mniejszość narodowa, działalność centrów edukacyjnych, nauczyciele

1. Activity of educational centres

Based on annual applications, educational centres' activity is partially funded by a grant system provided by The Office for Slovaks Living Abroad. The full amount of money, however, is not funded, parents must finance the centres too. For children's education, especially of those children preparing for commission examinations in Slovakia, educational centres until now faced many problems arising from the fact that:

- the centres are created on the basis of volunteers;
- their activity is not coordinated and does not follow a single methodology;
- the number of lessons on Slovak language, culture and geography varies, since meetings usually take place at weekends;
- some of the teachers are volunteers and not all of them are qualified teachers;
- parents' motivation for their children's education varies – from the main-

taining of their Slovak language (parents do not return to Slovakia), up to the intentional preparation of children for differentiation examinations in Slovakia;

- there are no unified methodological guidelines on the part of the Slovak Republic regarding the individual grades and topic areas of education;
- there is no legal possibility of further education for teachers in the educational centres, since their teaching activity does not take place in the Slovak Republic.

Trying to resolve these problems, the representatives of Slovak communities and educational centres abroad initiated the establishment of a separate Section for Western Europe and USA within the Commission of Education of the Office for Slovaks Living Abroad (OfSLA). The Section's activities, together with the founding of the International Slovak Educational Institution and Association (ISEIA), are one of the greatest achievements in the given area. The ISEIA, a voluntary association of Slovak educational centres abroad, was founded on October 29, 2014 in Bratislava by the compatriot community representatives from Argentina, France, Ireland, Canada, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, USA and Great Britain, the representatives of the OfSLA and of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MoESRaS), aiming to support the education of Slovak children living abroad in their mother language and to support cooperation among the individual educational centres. The OfSLA, the national institutions for informal education of the Slovak children living abroad, the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (MBU) and Radio International became partners in this group.

The Section for Western Europe and USA came in their discussions to the conclusion and suggested that the OfSLA, within their grant system and financial resources, provides yearly grants for the provision of the teaching aids, children's literature and magazines for Slovak community educational centres and pre-school educational institutions abroad supporting Slovaks living in Western European countries and in the USA. It also recommended and appealed to the MoESRaS:

- to be helpful in cooperation with the OfSLA in dealing with the current problems regarding the Slovak language-teaching within the Slovak community educational centres and pre-school educational institutions abroad;
- to address the issue of commission examinations systematically;
- to initiate the preparation and signing of the relevant international

documents providing the possibility of sending the teachers and tutors specialized in Slovak language-teaching and awareness raising among the Slovak communities living abroad.

The members of the group undertake to be helpful in solving the problems related to the formation of new norms for Slovak pupils and students temporarily living and studying abroad. They are supposed to cooperate in validating the outcomes of the pilot project presented by MBU Banská Bystrica. They have recommended to the OfSLA that:

- it should, in cooperation with the competent authorities of the Slovak Republic, strive for the possibilities of improvement for Slovak teachers at the complementary educational institutions abroad.
- the MoESRaS should address the issues of the differentiation examination systematically. The members of the group will contribute to the solution of problems regarding the performance, the content, the extent and the place of the differentiation examinations¹.

The intensification of ISEIA's cooperation with OfSLA has been one of the most important outputs of the project. The relevant contemporary activities of OfSLA were provided for the purposes of our research by PhDr. Vilma Prívarová from OfSLA, who states that:

A. The support of the educational centres activity through the grant system has been increased.

The OfSLA collaborates with several centres, or more precisely, with the heads of these centres. The collaboration is either direct or within the board of the National Institute for Education, through the Section for Western Europe and USA within the Commission of Education of the OfSLA. The members of this section have been attending meetings in Slovakia for several years. Regular consultations with the educational centres' representatives on the premises of the OfSLA, but also **the financial support in the form of grants** could be regarded as examples of specific cooperation. There is also a very active cooperation with the Education Centre in Dublin, with educational institutions in Great Britain, in the USA, in France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Iceland. The representatives of these centres

¹ The conclusions from the first and the second meeting of the Commission of Education of the OfSLA, Section for Western Europe and USA. Bratislava, April 1–2, 2014 and October 29, 2015.

are also members of the office section. Grant applications are being submitted by educational centres from all the above-mentioned countries, but also from Australia, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand and Italy.

The OfSLA supports the organization of summer camps in Slovakia, which are attended by children of those compatriots living in Western European countries and overseas every year. In 2017, 108 children living in the aforementioned countries attended the camp.

In 2017, OfSLA in cooperation with MoESRaS provided funds for the purchase of textbooks for educational centres in these countries, according to the individual centres' demands.

Requests regarding the support of education clearly prevail in the individual applications, since the educational centres in Western European countries and in the USA have been created specifically for this purpose. The centres' representatives ask for funds mainly to pay for rent, to buy textbooks, teaching aids, school technical equipment, for the purposes of enhancing Slovak teachers' qualification, but also to organize extracurricular and cultural events on the occasion of some Slovak national and religious holidays. The support of the activities that stimulate the sense of belonging to the Slovak community, the appreciation of the Slovak traditions, the feeling of the Slovak national identity and the relationship to the native land are also very important.

Within the framework of its grant system, OfSLA provided the Slovak educational centres abroad with the sum of EUR 77,500 in 2016, in 2017 it was EUR 79,700 and in 2018 it granted EUR 98,485. Therefore, it is evident that the support tends to grow considerably.

The subsidies and the support of the activities are provided strictly in accordance with The Act on Slovaks Living Abroad. There is no other system of grants to support the educational centres abroad.

B. Cooperation and record keeping on centres in Western Europe and in the USA

Educational centres' representatives attend Permanent Conferences of the Slovak Republic and Slovaks Living Abroad, as well as other events organized by OfSLA. Regular consultations between centres concerning the preparation of educational standards, differentiation examinations, law amendments, and other relevant problems are being organized on the premises of OfSLA. At first, the OfSLA initiated the signing of the Memorandum

on cooperation with The National Institute for Education, based on the interest in the issues declared mainly at the section's meetings. Subsequently, the problem issues reached the Ministry of Education. At the present time, the Ministry tries to resolve the given problem issues in the form of amendments to the School Act and to the Act on Teaching Staff and Vocational Training Employees.

OfSLA usually learns about new educational centres from the Section for Western Europe and USA, as their members have a good knowledge of the current situation in the individual countries and also keep track of the newly emerging centres. Afterwards, OfSLA adds these centres into its database and communicates with them. After such formal integration of the new centres into educational institutions of Western European countries and the USA, the second stage follows. The centres start to communicate with OfSLA, get acquainted with its functions and with the work of other centres abroad and usually apply for a financial support of their activities within OfSLA's grant system. However, the number of children studying and teachers employed at these centres changes yearly. The office appeals regularly to all known centres abroad to re-submit this information.

- Other specific activities apart from the grant system:

Besides the bilateral negotiations with the heads of the centres, the annual meeting of the Section for the Western Europe and USA is a regular and effective platform where the representatives of the individual centres discuss current problems regarding Slovak language-teaching in their corresponding countries. The Section's meeting takes place in Bratislava once a year. The meetings bring new challenges, definitions of specific problems and also movement on possible solutions to these problems, which contributes to the improvement in quality of Slovak language-teaching in these countries.

As stated above, OfSLA, besides the financial support in the form of grants, provides finance for textbooks, organizes summer camps for compatriot youth, supports the competition *Prečo mám rád slovenčinu, prečo mám rád Slovensko*, provides the centres with relevant information regarding the increase of the Slovak education quality abroad and informs them about various competitions in Slovakia for Slovak children living abroad, as well as their teachers. OfSLA further cooperates with MoESRaS in organizing methodological seminars for teachers, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with Slovak representative offices abroad and with The National Institute for Education in solving problematic issues, such as concern of the countries for mother

language education provided to the individual communities by their respective countries, educational standards, children's commission examinations, teachers in educational centres in the Western European countries and the USA, providing scholarships from the Slovak government for Slovaks living abroad etc.

The current data on the number of children and teachers in educational centres and in various institutions were taken from the OfSLA's source material of March 31, 2018. Based on these data, educational institutions have covered the educational activity for 1,620 children. The data are, however, only approximate, since they are related only to institutions applying for financial support of their activity. The most educational centres are active in Great Britain (14) and paradoxically, despite Brexit, even more educational centres are being created there, which we discovered on a personal visit in 2017.

2. Activities of specific centres

In order to outline the specific educational centres activities, we present statements provided by the heads of three different centres, chosen with regard to their own specifics, but also to the countries in which they are active. In describing the activities of the individual centres, we point out their successes, but also the problems they face.

FLAMINGOS – THE SLOVAK SCHOOL IN CYPRUS (Marieta Gundová Horský)

1. Motivation to found the educational centre

It was my personal motivation to found the educational centre because I have a son of school age and despite the fact that there are a comparatively large group of compatriots in Cyprus, until now there has been no concept of a Slovak school here. After considering the possibilities and with the help of questionnaires in social media we came to the conclusion that people are interested and we decided to go for it. It's a shame that despite great initial interest, some of the parents eventually resigned from the project, whether due to financial or logistical reasons. The centre started operating in the 2016/2017 school year, in which we taught 25 children in four different cities.

It was difficult for us to accept the school fees which have also been modified several times. Many people expressed their opinion that education in language schools for compatriots should be freely available or just at a minimal charge.

The Cyprus-Slovakia Business Association and also the local Ministry of Education helped us and provided us with premises for education.

2. Current conceptual purposes of educational centres

Our centre follows the ISCED 1 programme – primary education, the focus of which lies on Slovak language-teaching and other subjects are taught incidentally.

As the centre develops, so does our concept, especially in terms of the differences in language proficiency in pupils – children have different levels of communication and understanding of the Slovak language. Most children at school are trilingual (Greek, English, Slovak – in some cases also other languages).

Children, who have been preparing for commission examinations during the last school year, passed them successfully. All children, who moved back to Slovakia last year, entered school and continue their studies in the following years.

3. Conditions for the activity of educational centres

Our centre is active in various places because of the specific parameters of island of Cyprus. Slovak families live in every town, so we are widely available, because our teacher travels to our children's homes. We have a mobile school – every day in a different town. To ensure we have premises, we decided to ask the local Ministry of Education and Culture for help. The Ministry accepted our application due to our afternoon education schedule and provided us with classrooms in the local schools for free. Therefore, we don't have to pay costs for the rent of premises, but still we have enormous transport costs. We are sorry that OfSLA doesn't provide subsidies for the operation of the vehicle, because, due to the mobile concept of our school, these amounts are the largest of all our costs. Concerning the concept of our school, the subsidies for this budget item should be provided soon.

Financial costs needed for the school operation are covered by tuition fees, sponsorship and subsidies.

The promotion of our school is ensured mostly via social networks, The Embassy of the Slovak Republic and personal contacts.

In addition to the regular classes, our school also organizes after-school activities, which are attended also by those children and parents who don't attend the school for various reasons. Therefore, we raise the awareness of the compatriots in Cyprus. Despite our short operation (since 2016), we have already built a great reputation, because we help the compatriots to keep and to establish social relations and friendships. We actively create a database about the Slovaks living in Cyprus, we cooperate with the Embassy and with other compatriot organizations. We also organize an open door day and formal and informal meetings with compatriots.

Our material support consists of an office (sponsored rental) used for administration work connected with school operation. Teaching aids, textbooks, books and other things necessary for lessons are also stored there. The motor vehicle (sponsored rental) and an accommodation (sponsored rental) is available for our teachers, too.

Our sponsors have helped us a lot; it would be impossible for the school to be in operation without them.

4. Pupils

Our school is in its second year of operation, but it is not possible to make statistics in trends yet – the school is in the process of acquiring pupils – the number has increased since last year.

Based on the communication with parents, they have the following motives: they want their children to be in contact with other children and with the Slovak language in order to improve their vocabulary. They want them to read, write, understand and express themselves under the supervision of a qualified teacher according to a given programme. They want them to master their mother language to a similar level as pupils studying at home, in case they wish to return to Slovakia, study at secondary and high schools, or find a job or partners. They want them to meet other children with a similar language background. To know the Slovak culture and geography and to feel like Slovaks.

5. Lessons

To ensure the best availability for children, lessons take place every day a week in a different town (5 locations – range of up to 200 km). Pre-school

children have one lesson a week, children in the first stage of the primary school have three lessons a week (one after another) and children in the second stage of the primary school have two and a half lessons a week. The classes are mostly aimed at Slovak language, literature and grammar, as well as Slovak culture and geography. Mathematics, geography and natural sciences are taught incidentally.

We have a qualified teacher of the Slovak language who has passed an interview. There was no qualified teacher in Cyprus, so we found our teacher in Slovakia and moved her to Cyprus. The school pays her monthly remuneration for social insurance in Cyprus, she has a budget for accommodation and her flight home. Due to the mobile concept of our school there is a vehicle available for her and also money for the operation of the vehicle. She has taught at the school since the school's opening (2016).

Our teacher's motives to work in Cyprus relate to personal development and new challenges. For her, it is not only a new experience, but also a whole new way of work – it includes continuous creativity, improvement and adaptation of a given competence to local conditions and individual needs of pupils.

6. Further education

A programme which would include methods and concepts about the way in which to teach children with Slovak as a second or third language would be welcomed. Teachers from the language schools should have specific skills as a language teacher for foreigners.

7. The greatest achievements

The school's opening is itself considered to be the greatest achievement, and it is followed by finding a teacher, the second year of successful operation and the reputation the school has gained over the last two years.

Cyprus is a small country in which to open a daily Slovak school. The current programme still does not fit some families due to various logistical and timing reasons. Ideally, finding a solution for them would be good.

It is potentially possible to have two teachers (and to divide their geographical activity on the island), and to divide lessons into shorter teaching blocks at least two times a week – this would help children to pay attention.

8. Demonstration of good practice

We are proud that we have a qualified and experienced teacher and that we managed to start a school with a complete educational programme for compatriot children in Cyprus. Furthermore, we are proud of our after-school programmes, which are increasingly growing in popularity among children and parents. We have also set up a library for children. The invitation to a Slovak children's theatre and an interactive show for children was our latest project.

9. Stimuli, ideas, inspirations and messages for Slovakia

It is appropriate to initiate a discussion about a coherent concept – an educational method for Slovak children living abroad.

We can imagine the discussion and subsequently the concept of education created directly for Slovak children abroad. In that concept, limited education time, initial differences in language levels, individual needs of children and the fact that education runs in groups of children at different ages and with different levels of general and language knowledge would be taken into account. The discussion about an alternative concept with thematical or project education would also be appreciated. This concept would include the education in the language, grammar and other subjects and it would be divided into topic units. Therefore, it would be better for children to acquire and develop the adequate vocabulary.

It would be appropriate to set up a complementary program of home-schooling for foreign children via online applications oriented at expanding the knowledge of vocabulary and Slovak culture and geography.

THE MARGARETKA SLOVAK SCHOOL (Educational centre) – PARIS (Zuzana Fodorová)

The educational centre (school, kindergarten and folklore group) Margarétka in Paris was set up in 2014 at the initiative of motivated teachers and folklorists. It is a nonprofit organization which insists on an education in traditional Slovak culture. The aim of this organization is to bring children into the collective of Slovaks, where the Slovak language extends further than the family environment, so we try to help parents to cope with bi –

or multilingual upbringing of their children. We try to use the concept of a small school with a "soul" where children have the possibility to actively develop their bilingualism. The number of children per teacher (three to four children) corresponds to this. The total number is always approximately 20 children. We maintain this number, because, according to our experience, the quality is reduced when the number is higher. Due to different levels of Slovak language, we would not then be able to fulfil our concept. Teachers with appropriate qualifications and experiences from bilingual environment are another condition. Mgr. Zuzana Thieux-s is an educational grant with certification for first degree 1 to 4 grade. Mgr. Laura Pacindová, PhD. and Mgr. Paulína Šperková are educational grants for second degree, both with the certification for History – French language. Mgr. Zuzana Fodorová is an educational grant in kindergarten with the certification for English and French language and Ing. Katarína Matušková, former dancer in a folklore group Poleno in Bratislava, is an educational grant for folklore. Our economist and assistant Ing. Ivana Fodorová is also a part of the team. In the school year 2017/18 three grades are being opened: the first, the second and the seventh. In a comparison to prior years, the number of pupils preparing for the differentiation examination has been increased – there are five students currently. All pupils are going to take the examination in Slovak language. The basic number of children in Margarétka has been unchanged during the last years, except for a few newcomers and two older pupils, who have had to leave our educational centre because of their French school. The French educational system is not unified, and some higher grades also have lessons on Saturday, which is counter-productive for us.

The language school "Europa formation" has helped us while founding Margarétka. They gave us premises for free for a whole year. Thanks to our persuasiveness, other people and institutions have also helped to realize our dream (Mr. Daage, Mrs. Bensoussan, ISEIA, MBU, OfSLA, Ministry of Education and parents, whose help is invaluable). The increasing attendance rate is remuneration for us. Currently we are settled in two locations: in Paris and, thanks to our teacher Laura, in beautiful rented premises in Vincennes, close to Paris. There are three rooms available for us – two classrooms and one big dancing hall, which also serves for kindergarten when necessary. The rental of premises requires strenuous efforts in France; it is hard to achieve it without appropriate contacts. School funding is another brainteaser. The rent is covered by the money from tuition fees; our textbook, books for library and folk costumes fund was set up thanks to subsidies from OfSLA and a gift

of textbooks from MoESRaS. Teachers don't get a salary. The non-existent storage space in institutions where we rent premises, is another unsolved problem. It means that the teachers must bring all teaching aids, materials and textbooks to every lesson; it is hard for them due to the long distances in Paris and the travelling time to Margarétka (approximately one hour).

The lessons take place two Saturdays each month, each 3.5 hours. The accent is on subjects like reading – writing and Slovak language. The topics from homeland study are sometimes added to these subjects. We try to proceed according to the teaching plans. We begin with the work with texts, where the vocabulary is developed by story retelling. In this way we can find out how much children comprehend from the given text. Then, we use this text as a source material for practising new topics. Last time it was searching for a hard consonant in a reading book. This method was used also in practicing vowels etc. We also work with textbooks full of material. The advantage is the combination of various textbooks. Less pupils means a greater possibility to print materials and therefore to diversify the source materials. The question is, how to ensure that the children develop. Will we create half-grades? How would it reflect on the children's results from commission examinations? We must find answers to these questions.

The teaching plan in kindergarten is also rich and similar to the plan in Slovakia. Nursery children handle many topics aimed at vocabulary development and facts about Slovakia over a year. For example: autumn and harvest of fruits, migratory birds, weather and seasons of a year, clothing and winter sports, universe, fairy-tale characters, plants and animals, spring, professions, life in a town and in the countryside, Slovakia and many others.

Due to our orientation to traditional culture and to the fact that almost all the children dance in our folklore group, we have set up a subject called "the source of our ancestors' culture", where the historical, literary and folklore projects are discussed.

The teachers from Margarétka work with children with different levels of Slovak language and we have language-teachers, who are used to be in contact with foreign language and children, but with little experience with Slovak as a foreign language. Within the last few years we have acquired all our knowledge in this field directly "on the ground" while working with Slovak children abroad. It would be beneficial if a study field "Slovak as a foreign language for children" would be established or methodical seminars within continuous education would be organized in teaching children Slovak as a foreign language.

USA – NEW YORK STATE, ASTORIA, QUEENS, NEW YORK (Ingrid Sivčová Kuzma)

1. The Slovak school was officially founded in 2000. “Officially” because back in 1960 a small group of Slovak children attended the Bohemian Citizens’ Benevolent Society of Astoria (BCBSA). Those children and Czech children attended the Czech school. After 2000 a group of Slovak female enthusiasts established a folklore group, which further inspired parents to ask for Slovak language courses for their children. So, the Slovak part has grown and in 2017 there were 71 children and five qualified teachers. Since 2013 it bears the name The Czech and Slovak Cultural Centre (educational centre), as the name “school” would have to meet different criteria. There were no problems with its foundation, because it is the only financially self-sufficient weekend school as it is a part of BCBSA. The premises are situated in the building of BCBSA in New York, Astoria, the urban area called Queens.

2. The conceptual changes go hand-in-hand with the requirements for children’s education. The synergy between the methodology of Slovak schools and our education is obvious. The important part of our education is not only the Slovak language, but also Slovak culture and geography and music. The music is emphasised as it helps children to be aware of terms in a language they don’t know. The commission examinations are not the most important focus in our centre. The reason for that may be that parents do not plan to return to Slovakia.

3. As already mentioned in the first section, the school has good conditions. But when the number of pupils is high, e.g. on Friday lessons, two classes have their lessons in the gym due to the insufficient number of classrooms. The gym is a part of the building, so the children do not have to leave the school and after lessons they have a dance rehearsal.

4. There are 60–70 Slovak pupils every school year. It depends on the number of pupils in the population grade. Five years ago, there were many new born children as the women, who were giving birth for the first time, or as those around 35–38 decided to have another child. It can be said that another numerous group of children has gathered; it will be a base for the next years of the Slovak part of the school. A similar group of Slovak children arose ten years ago, but they are leaving the centre now. The most important thing in New York is not the commission examination, but the regular contact with the Slovak language itself. Parents want their children to read in

Slovak language with comprehension, to respond to the Slovak pronunciation challenges correctly in terms of logopaedics, and to be in an environment in which they must express themselves in the Slovak language.

5. The lessons take place every Friday afternoon and Saturday morning. It is divided into 60-minute-long teaching blocks with 20-minute-long break. The structure of the lessons is not always the same, but the lessons start every time with the Slovak language. Then the schedule proceeds with the subjects determined by teacher and her preparation. In the grades with pupils aged six to eight it is mostly the subject of a first introduction to natural sciences. Older pupils continue with the homeland study and history. The motives for our teachers are the love of their profession as all of them are teachers with appropriate qualifications. They must pay tax on their salary. There is a very low rate of fluctuation; two of our teachers have been teaching there for 17 years.

6. It would be beneficial for our teachers to be included into an accredited programme that would be a result of a new methodology prepared for certain educational centres.

7. The greatest achievement is that the results can be seen after one year. It's worth it when you hear children speak in the Slovak language. The vision is always the same: to keep the number of children who study Slovak as high as possible.

8. It would be useful to set up a file of special preparation materials for classes, where it is impossible to work only with Slovak textbooks. The children from those classes come from mixed families and there is no methodology for them. Doing the crosswords, special audio exercises or exercises aimed at the production of individual genus and its comprehension would be helpful.

9. The unified methodological guidelines created according to the competences of children would be welcomed, too. The centres would then proceed in the same way. The methodology should be designed in a cooperation with teachers from the centres.

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Slovak educational centres abroad

Abstract: Due to parents' interest, educational centres have been being created in their communities. There is a strong motivation, apart from teaching the Slovak language and maintaining it, to attend these centres and to prepare school age children for commission examinations – a prerequisite for their further education, for a higher level of education in Slovakia or for completing their compulsory education. Educational centres in Slovak communities are irreplaceable. Apart from educational activities regarding tuition and maintaining the mother language, they organize cultural events, meetings of parents who share their experiences, and also various lectures to provide information about life in the host country.

Keywords: educational centres, Slovak communities, activity of educational centres, teachers, intercultural education

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