

“Finally looking forward to school.”

Support for socially disadvantaged Roma pupils and their families through the work of Teaching Assistants

Zbyněk Němec, Barbora Šebová et al.



NOVÁ ŠKOLA, o. p. s.

*Každý má právo na plnohodnotné vzdělávání.
Někdo to má ale těžší...*

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Project: Developing communication and cooperation between socially disadvantaged Roma pupils’s parents and the school

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Action research / case studies

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Každý má právo na plynulostné vzdelávanie.
Niekto to vedie lepšie...

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Introduction

Contemporary society considers good-quality elementary education the most significant pillar supporting any future success in life. Having successfully completed elementary school, one has a good chance of enrolling at a good secondary school, and sometimes of studying at college, followed by getting a meaningful and well-paid job, which further earns one a good social status in the society. In our education system, based – to a considerable degree – on the family’s encouragement for the child, and on cooperation between the school and the child’s parents, many children are disadvantaged right at the very beginning: whether they lack the standard family background, or they come from very poor families, their parents cannot help them with school preparation at home, their parents are afraid from the majority society’s institutions and rather avoid any contact with the school...

We do not know exactly the number of such socially disadvantaged pupils attending schools in the Czech Republic although qualified estimates mention tens of thousands. A few years ago, a study compiled by the experts at the Palacký University in Olomouc and the People in Need NGO (2015) stated this might concern up to 140,000 pupils with social disadvantage in school all over our country.



Educating socially disadvantaged Roma pupils

Understandably, nowhere near all socially disadvantaged pupils are of Roma ethnicity; there are a number of children from ethnically Czech or foreign families or other ethnic minorities. On the other hand, many Roma pupils actually are disadvantaged. According to the data presented by the European Commission (2022) and the Council of the Czech Government for Roma Community Affairs (2021), the Roma minority is – on both European- and country-wide level – one of the most numerous and, simultaneously, most socially disadvantaged ethnic minorities. Therefore, Roma children are frequently amongst socially disadvantaged pupils, particularly in locations where the Roma minority has more members in general, and where municipalities are more affected by social disadvantage issues.

A number of the barriers encountered by socially disadvantaged Roma pupils are fundamentally identical with the barriers encountered by other (non-Roma) socially disadvantaged pupils – in practice, this is for instance insufficient educational support in the home environment, insufficient funds for school equipment and school event participation, insufficient vocabulary or low level of pupil motivation. However, in some regards, the situation of many socially disadvantaged Roma pupils is even more complex, for example due to their parents having been (often without justification) enrolled at “special schools” and, consequently, achieving a lower level of formal education, or because the continuing discrimination in the labour and housing markets frequently prevents Roma individuals from finding good jobs and lifting themselves out of social exclusion, thus providing good role models for Roma children. The European Agency for Fundamental Rights currently points out the issues concerning education of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils – according to its research (2022), only 22 % of respondents in the group of young Roma adults (aged 20 to 24) have completed secondary education in the Czech Republic.



About the New School (Nová škola, o.p.s.)

Nová škola (New School) is a public benefit non-profit organisation that has been working towards encouraging education of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils since the 1990's. The text of this publication is an output of the *Developing communication and cooperation between socially disadvantaged Roma pupils's parents and the school* implemented in October 2020 to March 2023 with the financial support from the Active Citizens Fund program (funded by the EEA and Norway; project number 0016/2019/ACF/2). The project was based on the belief that genuine success of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils in education requires support for the pupils which will not only focus on the educational/school environment but which will cross the border between the education system and the pupils' and their families' social background.

The core of the project was the involvement of teaching assistants (hereinafter also referred to as "TAs") from four locations in ČR (Ústí Region, Hradec Králové Region, Central Bohemian Region and Prague) – assistants whose standard activity provides support for socially disadvantaged Roma pupils, in some cases in segregated schools or catchment schools for socially excluded locations. The common job description for such Assistants is usually restricted in the standard school operation to assisting the pupils in the school environment; the Assistants also commonly only work part-time (introducing time limits). Therefore, the project introduced contracts for work done which facilitated extra work hours (paid) to visit the socially disadvantaged Roma pupils, provide mentoring in the home environment, facilitate communication between the schools and the pupils' families as well as to otherwise encourage mutual trust between the teachers and the pupils' parents. The assistants also organised events for the socially disadvantaged Roma pupils' parents at school and tried to bring the parents to the school environment more often and more in general.

The assistants enjoyed continuous methodological guidance and the regular possibility to consult their practical experience in all of the aforementioned fields. The composition of the project team where some assistants were of Roma ethnicity proved truly functional – in such meetings, these Roma assistants were able to explain some influences of the Roma language on the language skills of Roma children even some specific features of Roma pupils’ and their parents’ behaviour and actions.

The project also involved mapping of best practice examples from the work of teaching assistants, and compilation of case studies to point out the importance of teaching assistants’ engagement in the work with socially disadvantaged pupils and their families also outside school – the teaching assistants’ reach over to the social environment of the pupils and their families proved to be really effective in many cases and, sometimes, necessary from the point of view of the pupils’ overall success. Selected best practice examples of the TAs’ work are presented in the following pages of this publication.



Methodology and Objectives of the Action Research

The stories portrayed in the following case studies were gathered throughout the project in October 2020 to December 2022. Two basic strategies were applied to data collection:

1. Consultations with the teaching assistants concerned – throughout the project, there were group consultations with all participating TAs (online, as well as in person on the premises of Nová škola, o.p.s.), and also individual consultations (over the telephone and in the form of visits to schools where the TAs work).
2. Analyses of written reflections compiled by the TAs – each of the teaching assistants involved was asked to compile a written reflection of her work with a selected pupil and their family three times during the project.

The case studies presented herein are based on the content analysis of the notes taken during the consultations with the TAs, and on the analysis of the written reflections compiled by the TAs themselves. With respect to maintaining the anonymity of the pupils and their families, the case studies feature different names for both the children and the teaching assistants.



Summary of Main Findings

The case studies presented aim to point out the importance of the teaching assistants' work and the significance of their involvement in support outside the school environment. The data collected from the TAs' practice demonstrates that if set up correctly, the work of teaching assistants is effective in the education of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils particularly in the following areas and activities:

- ▶ Individual work with the pupils outside school and in their families improves school success of such pupils and further their motivation to educate themselves;
- ▶ Assist in reduction of the language barrier in pupils with insufficient command of the Czech language; even with efficient use of basic Roma language for some Roma pupils;
- ▶ Substitute for lacking pupil support in families where the pupil's parents only have a low level of formal education and cannot provide sufficient assistance with school preparations to their child;
- ▶ Provide individual support to the pupils in environments where such support is missing due to various objective reasons (e.g. a family with more children or a child being cared for by grandparents with limited options to support the child);
- ▶ Provide support for the pupils in the home environment at times when the children are absent from school due to medical reasons, thus preventing gaps in pupils' knowledge;
- ▶ Advance parents' competences in the field of preparation for school through support of the pupils in the home environment;

- ▶ Sensitive conveying of information concerning the pupils' social background and its impact on their education helps teachers to understand the circumstances of the pupils' education and to create a more empathic approach to such pupils;
- ▶ Within their remit, provide basic social advisory for pupils' parents to facilitate creating conditions for the children's education to the maximum possible level;
- ▶ Connect pupils' parents with local social services which, inter alia, contributes towards establishing overall trust between the pupils' parents and teaching assistants (and by proxy the entire school institution);
- ▶ To the extent possible, substitute for the missing social services which helps to create the potential for education of the pupils but also teaches the pupils how to navigate difficult life situations.

Viewed globally, the experience gained in the project clearly demonstrates that the engagement of teaching assistants in the education of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils may bring a principal qualitative change and that the overlap of TAs' work over the school into out-of-school support of the children and their families is a great benefit not only in the process of improving the pupils' attendance and academic results.

One of the partial but really significant features of the TAs' work is given in the title of the publication already – a TA stated in the supporting documents for a case study that after extensive intervention and thanks to a greater involvement of the family, the pupil concerned “is finally looking forward to school” – and this is what we want to wish all socially disadvantaged Roma children: may the work of assistants and teachers not only improve their academic results but also help them genuinely look forward to school.



Dear Colleagues, thank you for your interest in the field of education of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils. May you find encouragement and relatable examples for your own teaching in the following stories.

Authors' collective, Nová škola, o.p.s.

Huge absence from school is a major problem of educating socially disadvantaged pupils in a number of cases. However, this is not always a case of truancy; sometimes, it might be a “natural” consequence of poor housing conditions due to which children residing in various hostels and excluded locations fall ill more often. Combined with the parents’ limited ability to help their children with school preparation at home, such high absence rates result in the children lagging behind in class and, sometimes, in overall failure at school.

This is one of the reasons why it is so important for TAs to provide support for socially disadvantaged pupils in their home, to bring the class materials and cover at least a part of the curriculum when the child is absent from school.

In an ideal case, such support in the pupil’s home environment may inspire the pupil’s parents who can see how the TA works with the child, and may follow their lead (sometimes called “pedagogization” of the family environment).

“Her mother did not send her to school.”

Handling school absence and communication with the parents of a preparatory year pupil

Adriana has been working with socially disadvantaged pupils in the preparatory year for four years. Last year, the seven-year-old Maruška from a socially very unfortunate environment joined her class. TA Adriana described the conditions in Maruška’s family as follows:

“They live in a flat of the lowest possible standard, no windows in the corridor, and only plastic foil was installed in winter... This is council housing and they are not the only socially disadvantaged family, it’s called the House of Horror locally... It seems as if Maruška suffered from chronic cough, she is always coughing, but if it is caused by her living conditions, I don’t know... It’s not a complete family, there’s no dad, although her mum has a boyfriend but he’s unemployed, just like her. The daily routine is a bit of a problem. For instance, when there was online school, I arrived at the flat at ten or eleven and they were just getting up.”

The difficult conditions in the home were the reason for the main problem in Maruška’s education – her high absence rate. According to Adri-

ana's description, Maruška lacked basic routines of a pre-schooler and she shied away from other children in her class; however, things tended to improve after a few days of class attendance. Then a few days' or weeks' absence followed (caused by her chronic cough or repetitive head lice infestation), which knocked Maruška's knowledge and behaviour back down again.

Backed by the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, TA Adriana started visiting Maruška at her home as well as assisting her at school, pursuing two clear objectives: 1. Guide Maruška's mum to encourage her daughter's school attendance and provide timely justification of absences. 2. In time of her absence from school, guide Maruška and her mother towards completing the homework assigned by the school.

The TA's assistance helps considerably improve both the girl's attendance and the mother's reporting of her absences. TA Adriana comments as follows:

“To start with, in September or October, she would be absent for two weeks for instance, and nobody would let the school know. So I had to go there and remind the mother that she must report the absence and pick up the homework. She has learned to do that, she notifies school of Maruška's absence, she even sometimes comes to school in the morning to do so. This is a great improvement. During the online school, one could see they tried at least now and then, twice they even brought some finished homework, although it was not all done, one could see they had made an effort.”

From her position of a relatively experienced TA, Adriana also realises that it is necessary to help Maruška with her homework in her home environment also with respect to her mother's low level of education – even if she wanted to help her daughter do her homework, she would most likely have no idea how to do that.

“When she’s not at school, I visit every week, I always take the homework and we always do at least some worksheets together. Sometimes I work with her at home, but not everything is usually finished; they make excuses that she had been sick so she couldn’t do it but I tend to think they have no clue what to do. The mother herself has only finished the special school.”

However, the Nová škola, o.p.s. project and the TAs’ work aims to enhance the competences of the parents of socially disadvantaged pupils in this regard as well – therefore, Adriana tries not only to do homework with Maruška but also to show her mother how she could do homework with her daughter:

“When I take the homework there, I explain to the mum what she should do with it, how to do it, and she sometimes stays with us during the mentoring and she praises Maruška... “

Such support – as Adriana says – has helped the girl *“to work as she should “*. Without the TA’s assistance, it would hardly be the case...



With respect to children and elementary school pupils, social disadvantage is often associated with their family's poverty, although the major educational problems often are not caused by a lack of money. The biggest problem of socially disadvantaged pupils is not infrequently their insufficient command of the language of tuition – the fact they do not understand the assignment well enough, do not know the meaning of some words in the textbooks, fail to follow the teachers' explanations etc.

Problems with the knowledge of the language of instruction occur even in the case of Roma children who seemingly speak Czech but actually use the Roma ethnolect of Czech, i.e. a variant of the Czech language which features multiple influences of both Roma and Slovak languages.

It is less frequent to encounter a child who can speak Roma well in class. However, if such a child appears, it is undoubtedly a huge advantage to have a TA at the school with at least an elementary command of the Roma language.

“She had no command of Czech when she joined.”

Supporting a pupil whose mother tongue is Roma in her preparatory year

Teaching Assistant Zuzana has been working with socially disadvantaged Roma children for more than eight years; she served as a volunteer in the local NGO in her first year and the subsequent seven were spent as a TA at school. She met the six-year-old Leontýnka last year, when she joined the preparatory class at the elementary school where Zuzana works as a teaching assistant.

Leontýnka is a Roma girl living with her parents and five siblings on the local socially excluded site. The family moved to the Czech Republic from Slovakia three years ago. When she joined the preparatory class, Leontýnka seemed shy and quiet, staying away from other children. Her main problem was the language barrier – as described the TA Zuzana:

“At the beginning, Leontýnka knew nothing; when she joined, she had no Czech, even her mum said she did not speak Czech, that they only speak Roma at home. The teacher and I had no idea what to do with her... “

The situation was even more difficult as there was no chance of Leontýnka learning basic Czech the way other pre-schoolers with foreign language background do – using TV stories. As Zuzana says, Leontýnka’s family had close to nothing when they arrived in the country, they lived with no TV for a long time and when they finally managed to get one, one day it had to be pawned due to their financial problems.

So the primary support area was the language. Having made an agreement with the teacher, Zuzana’s efforts at school focused mainly on establishing communication and developing Leontýnka’s knowledge of Czech. As Zuzana puts it, particularly in the first days and weeks her own knowledge of the Roma language was a huge benefit which allowed Leontýnka to understand the instruction as well as get a sense of safety and acceptance at school:

“... I tried to speak Roma with her and she was surprised to be spoken to in Roma, and to be understood. First I was talking and she just nodded yes or no, and a week, two weeks later, she started speaking herself, just Roma to start with. So what she told me in Roma, I said in Czech, and she gradually remembered those things; then we combined Roma and Czech together and now she speaks only Czech most of the time...”

Leontýnka gradually started to trust Zuzana a lot, talked about what they were doing at home, how she was playing with her sisters, what they had for lunch etc. About three months later, Leontýnka started speaking Czech and she has seldom been using Roma since then – only in cases where she doesn’t know how to say something in Czech. She has also become a part of the class group, playing with the children and communicating with the teacher.

On top of assistance with overcoming the language barrier, Leontýnka needs further extra support in her education. Her parents cannot help her much with her school preparation. TA Zuzana describes the complex situation in the family:

“The mother is very young; she is twenty-five and she already has six children. She has only completed elementary school and the dad is two years older and also with just elementary education. He goes out to work, he’s working twelve-hour shifts in a factory here. And the parents are really making an effort, they care... “

Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, TA Zuzana started visiting and helping with Leontýnka’s schoolwork preparation even outside the class times in the family home. In the home environment, Zuzana assists also Leontýnka’s two older sisters who attend Year 1 in the same school. Here, they also practise mainly reading and Czech:

“We always sit down to work in the kitchen and the mum and other children go either next door to the nursery or out in the yard. The three girls are with me in the kitchen, the older ones doing their homework while Leontýnka and I are reading, I take my own picture books for her to learn what the individual pictures mean... “

Zuzana helped with the girls’ schoolwork in the family even during the online school time (the anti-Covid measures in the 2020/2021 school year), and she visits when the girls are ill – this helps the girls not to miss any part of the curriculum and avoid lagging behind their schoolmates. TA Zuzana’s support is an absolutely necessary tool to allow the girls to achieve good-quality, full elementary education in a family that is incapable of providing assistance to their children.



Extending pupil support to after-school environment is an important part of the TAs' work also with respect to providing individual support proportionate to the needs of individual children.

It is often crucial for their success that someone can sit down with them in the afternoon and go through whatever they did not manage to do in the morning at school, or help with their homework for the next day. In a number of other families, parents can provide this kind of support; however, in the case of socially disadvantaged pupils the involvement of parents is difficult, if only because they have to look after the pupil's younger siblings or because they live in substandard accommodation where there is no peace and quiet for individual work with a child. In similar situations, the TAs may help the families find the time and space for individual work with a pupil.

“Paying attention and sitting quietly was a superhero achievement for him.”

Supporting a Year 1 pupil with a low level of school readiness

Patrik, a pupil from a socially disadvantaged Roma family, started Year 1 in the local elementary school in September 2021. Right on the first day, he met Natálie – teaching assistant who has been working with the local Roma community for several years so she knows the family backgrounds very well. Patrik’s first days at school proved to be rather difficult, particularly as he was not prepared and ready to start school. As TA Natálie describes it:

“He started school as a playful boy who would gladly spend another year at kindergarten. Listening and learning to obey the rules with the routines, or even paying attention and sitting quietly, that was a superhero achievement for him.”

Prior to starting school, the option of having Patrik delay school attendance by one year had been considered but Patrik’s parents did not want that. They worried that Patrik would lose contact with the group of children he knew from kindergarten.

At school, Patrik obviously needed individual approach which was, however, next to impossible to arrange without further assistance in a class with many children – and this is where cooperation with TA Natálie proved invaluable as the teacher and TA agreed to alternate working with Patrik during classes, paying close attention and providing support.

The overall positive approach and initiation of communication with the family were also contributed to when TA Natálie explained the complex situation of Patrik’s family to the teacher:

“I explained to the teacher that the situation in the family was difficult. Although Páťa comes from a good family, he has four siblings, one sister is already repeating a year at school, one of the older siblings has a severe disability, the family also receives the carers’ benefit while Páťa would need let’s say an hour a day but his mum does not have the time, since she is looking after the others. And the dad doesn’t have time either, he has two jobs just to put food the table for his large family.”

The TA’s explanation of the family’s situation the teacher adopted a highly empathic approach to communication with Patrik’s family, which helped involve the parents in working with the school at least as much as possible for them.

Simultaneously, with respect to the minimal possibilities of supporting Patrik’s education in the family, a system of after-school mentoring had to be set up – this mentoring was provided by TA Natalie at home thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project. The TA also handled very well the limiting conditions of the home environment where a quiet place for studying was difficult to get:

“They live in a one-bedroom flat, and there are six of them so it was sometimes quite challenging. Particularly Patrik’s younger brother, a pre-schooler; when he saw us he followed and wanted to talk. So I always brought some colouring books for the younger brother to keep him occupied during the mentoring so I could work with Patrik.”

During the school year, the Year 1 teacher discussed with the TA the possibility of recommending an assessment by the educational psychologist at the counselling centre but, in the end, they made the joint decision to postpone the assessment to Year 2 – when the effect of the TA’s intensive support for Patrik both at school and in the home environment is more obvious.

TA Natálie sums up Patrik’s school year by saying that “*he can read whole sentences beautifully and counts to ten. This was our goal, mine, his parents’ and the teacher’s, completing his school year like this.*”



For many socially disadvantaged pupils, the typical situation is their parents not showing much interest in their child's education – not because they are not interested in their child's academic success but because they handle other, more urgent and important problems. It is basically quite natural, all of us need to arrange our housing, food, health first and then, and only then do we pay attention to education.

Therefore, if possible in practice for the TA to help (even if just by advising) the parents of socially disadvantaged pupils in other walks of life, we recommend such involvement of the TAs. These are interventions which also have an educational effect – if the disadvantaged pupil's family has its needs covered, the parents can work towards the child's schooling with more intensity.

***“They came from Brno
and did not know it here at all.”***

Supporting a Year 1 pupil, initiating communication with the family and providing links to other services

Teaching assistant Helena has been professionally involved in supporting socially disadvantaged Roma pupils for almost sixteen years. She has been working part-time for five years at the school where she is right now, as well as having a part-time job with the local low-threshold facility for children and young people (NZDM).

Besides supporting many other children, Helena worked with Ester, an eleven-year-old girl from a single-parent socially disadvantaged Roma family which moved into the region during the term (in March). Ester joined Year 4 in the elementary school during the hard lockdown time (schools closed due to the spreading of Covid-19) when classes were held online, and Ester did not connect overly well. Ester’s mother sometimes picked up the print-outs from school but Ester did not complete most of them. The girl thus had almost no contact with the school, and her class teacher monitored accumulating quantities of uncompleted homework.

Within the framework of the Nová škola, o.p.s., TA Helena initiated (beyond the framework of her standard job description at school) more intense communication with Ester's mother, and arranged the necessary after-school mentoring for Ester. Helena describes the initial support as follows:

“I offered her [note: the mother during a phone call] the option of Ester's attendance of the club [NZDM] and mentoring and she said that would be brilliant because she did not understand it herself, she did not know how to help Ester and that there were many unfinished assignments. So I offered to come and pick her up, she gave me their address, I went there, collected the girl and took her to my office [note: in the church institution operating the NZDM], we have tiny offices there so we did her homework there, and I showed her the way to go home... And then she used to come on her own, she managed to travel by herself and she was happy that someone showed an interest in her and was with her, because it's just her and her mum who goes out to work.”

For two weeks, Ester came to the TA's office three times a week and they gradually completed all the outstanding school assignments.

Helena won Ester's mother's trust also by helping her with orientation in various other, non-academic areas which were essential to Ester's mum at that time. Talking about this, Helena mentions directly that:

“They came from Brno and did not know it here at all. So I told the mum about some social issues, like where the food bank was or where she should go in search of a doctor...”

Communication with Ester also revealed that Ester did not have the necessary software for online classes and, therefore, had no way of connecting to her classes. Helena used her personal contact with Ester to tackle this – as she says:

“It was the online school time. But Ester did not have Teams so she could not connect; she only had her mobile phone so I thought I could install Teams on her phone. We made an agreement to that effect, she brought her phone the next day, I installed the software and we tested it together to make sure it really worked, to prevent any potential problem with her classes...”

In the end of the school year, Ester visited TA Helena’s mentoring session twice a week right at the school together with about six other classmates. The teaching assistant reviewed and revised the curriculum with them. When they had trouble understanding, she tried to explain it in a simple way easy to understand for them. She also devised various entertaining ways of reviewing to make sure the children stay focused and motivated.

In a nutshell, TA Helena helped Ester and her mother find their bearings in the requirements of school as well as in the options offered by social services nearby, gain access to online classes and catch up on the curriculum parts Ester missed during their move and transfer to her new school. The TA’s support was crucial to Ester to avoid any drop in her education development or lagging behind her peers.

For some socially disadvantaged pupils, their absence from classes and school failure can form a vicious circle – the more classes the pupil misses, the bigger their academic failure. This decreases the pupil’s motivation and some somatic problems might appear, which results in increasing absence from classes.

Individual support for the pupil provided by the TA out of school proves to be a very efficient tool which can break this vicious circle. The assistant’s individual work with the pupil has the potential to enhance the pupil’s academic success, encourage their motivation and reduce their absence from classes.

“He’s enjoying school thanks to you.”

Supporting a pupil in doing his homework

For teaching assistant Magda, working with children is a mission, so to speak – besides her job as TA at a school with a huge number of socially disadvantaged pupils, she is also a foster parent and organises summer camps. Her empathic approach and charismatic manner helped her win Pavel, a socially disadvantaged Year 3 pupil in the last school year.

Pavel had faced the danger of repeating a year due to huge gaps in his knowledge; the teachers’ thoughts included also a suspicion of intellectual disability and, potentially, the option of transferring to the practical elementary school. Pavel lives just with his mum who, however, only has a low level of education; moreover, she tolerated Pavel’s high absence rate in the past. The first task for TA Magda’s communication with Pavel’s mum was convincing her of the necessity of regular school attendance. As Magda herself puts it:

“To start with, it was difficult to persuade the family to cooperate, which I ultimately managed to do, and the mum was positive about my work with Pavel as she mentioned herself she could not help him with

his schoolwork. Together with the teacher, we explained to her that it was fine, these things can happen but that is exactly the reason why he needs to go to school, that's where we can help him. There was a huge problem with establishing the regularity which we also managed to do. Our communication occurs over all the accessible channels."

The TA's steady assistance in the family helped reduce Pavel's absence from classes – in the second half of the past school year, he was only absent from 10 classes, namely due to a doctor's appointment and a sports competition. Pavel was even awarded at the school convention at the end of school year as one of the three pupils with lowest absence rates in term 2.

The launch of online classes (resulting from the closure of schools in 2020/2021) negatively affected Pavel's overall education conditions – at that time, Magda (with the support of the Nová škola, o.p.s. project) started working even more intensely with Pavel and his school preparation both in his home environment and online (and, subsequently, in the school environment as well):

"At the start of online classes, his writing deteriorated and he made a lot of mistakes. Repeating the process of sending his homework also took a lot of time. Pavel does almost everything by himself at home, he is sometimes assisted by his older sister but she has her own family already and so she doesn't have that much time to help him. He needs regular guidance, he's lost without that, and he can't manage to send his work on his own... at the beginning of the online school, I used to go to his home, once he returned to school, we had lessons together before his regular classes. Since the beginning of January, we have been communicating via online classes, by phone and also via Messenger, through texts, calls and video calls. We have a fixed timetable set in our calendars but we are in individual contact on top of that, as needed by Pavel."

Pavel and his TA concentrated primarily on practising Czech, mathematics and English. His progress was notable – a pupil on the verge of failing a year before, who had been considered with respect to transfer to a special school for pupils with mental disabilities, received a “very good” in English for example at the year end. However, the metamorphosis of Pavel’s entire approach to school should be judged as even more of a success – as Magda says:

“I can see a shift in Pavel’s approach particularly in that he got interested in learning and in school. He was more communicative, in a good humour and visibly looking forward to school. There was a change of paradigm in classes, too. He felt a need for mentoring and communication even during the spring break. Later on, his progressed slowed down due to all the changes and switches to online and back but, on the other hand, he managed connecting to online classes very well and had no absence when compared to standard (face-to-face) school attendance. He is significantly more active in class compared to the beginning of the school year. And he managed to remain active and put his hand up even if he had been unsuccessful with something prior to that.”

The success of Magda’s work is confirmed by a letter Pavel brought to school at the end of school year. It is signed by Pavel’s mother and Pavel himself, and it says, among other things:

“We would like to use this letter to thank you for what you are doing for Pavel. With respect to school, behaviour and grades, Pavel has been nothing but improving. He is enjoying school, thanks to you. He likes learning. He likes you, respects you and, of course, he is grateful for your mentoring. As a single mum, I would also like to thank you for the time you spend with Pavel. He is frank with you and trusts you absolutely...”

Involving teaching assistants in the support of pupils and their families with respect to social issues is, in some cases, a consequence of the lack or unavailability of social services in the location. In our school practice, we encounter cases of many disadvantaged pupils whose families face difficult life situations but receive no support from social services – whether because the social services have no knowledge of them, or because the families have no knowledge of social services, or because the needed social service is non-existent in the location concerned.

Teaching assistants, though, are available in school for such children, and their empathy and interest in the children helps them see the problems of such families.

Although TA's interventions exceed the scope of standard teaching activities, they still retain an educational character – with the help of a TA, children from socially disadvantaged families learn to handle various difficult life situations in the future as well.

“I explained to the father the way to do the homework with his girls.”

Educational and social support of children in a single-dad family

Kateřina has pledged her entire professional life to working with disadvantaged children – in the past, she used to work in special schools, and now she is a teaching assistant at a school which is formally a standard school but with a high number of socially disadvantaged pupils. In the last school year, based on requests submitted by teachers, Kateřina focused on Monika, a socially disadvantaged Roma girl in Year 2 whose complex family situation is described in Kateřina’s words as follows:

“Monika has two younger sisters, one is Year 1 and the other in kindergarten. The family was complete before their mother succumbed to drug addiction and prostitution. It has been three years of the dad being a single parent; he lives with the girls in a housing estate in a one-bedroom flat. The mother does not visit the girls.”

Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, TA Kateřina could work more closely on with Monika straight in the family which, as she says herself,

was necessary primarily with respect to school classes being converted to online teaching:

“I first visited the family in November, following a consultation with the class teacher. During online school time, they did not pick up the homework. Communication with the dad over the phone went very well, he dropped in to the school to get the homework and took it home to the girls. As much as he can, the dad works with Monika but the problem is, when he doesn’t understand the schoolwork, Monika does not learn it either and doesn’t complete the homework in her workbook. So I explained to the dad the way to do homework with his girls.”

During her visits to the family, Kateřina helped Monika and her sisters to prepare for school and, at the same time, explained to the dad how to do the homework, and assisted in improving communication between the father and the teachers.

Kateřina’s assistance in the social area proved no less important – within the framework of her project workload, the TA helped the family even with things that are only indirectly connected to schooling while providing the necessary background to allow the girls to do their homework at all. As Kateřina describes it:

“The next visit was caused by the need to take Monika home as her head was infested by lice. Upon arrival, the dad was really upset that Monika had head lice again, and blamed the school. I tried to calm him down, and suggested helping. I sent the dad to the pharmacy to get the head lice shampoo and we washed the girls’ hair together. We took off all the bed linen and laundry and washed it. We made a joint effort to clean and tidy up the entire flat. The girls got involved, too, and helped us with a smile. I arranged another visit with the dad to continue cleaning the flat. The dad was really happy to see the flat so fresh and clean, and we also set up some clear rules concerning the household chores which he promised to keep. We folded all the laundry in the clean cupboards to-

gether. On the same day, I asked a few of my friends if they had anything to donate, like shoes, clothes, toys, tablecloths, curtains, bedlinen, pots and pans.”

In some areas of assistance offered by Kateřina to the family, the help was somewhere on the border between social work and learning support – for example, Kateřina went shopping with the dad and the girls a few times to show them how to plan the family budget and secure staple foods for the household which was an indirect (yet very practical) lesson in financial literacy of the girls (as well as their father). In other areas of assistance, e.g. in organising the cleaning and tidying in the household, this was purely social support work although, at the same time, it was really important – there is no organisation that could help the family with similar issues in the area. The fact the teaching assistant provided this assistance had demonstrable positive impact on the girls’ education as well as the communication between the girls’ dad and the school. As Kateřina herself describes it:

“When I came visiting again, everything was working out very well. The girls talk about everything they had received, the clothes had been put away in cupboards and toys were on display. The girls’ school grades had improved, too. They had started doing their homework and the dad was working with the school more closely.”

Kateřina’s work as well as the work of many other TAs supporting similar families clearly shows that the support of education of socially disadvantaged children and socially oriented support of their families are two interlinked areas which may not be completely separated in practice; synergy of the assistance provided must be ensured.

Specifically, with socially disadvantaged pupils from Roma families, a low level of formal education of the parents is often a barrier. This is a consequence of the trend where Roma pupils were enrolled, prior to the 1989 revolution and unfortunately also afterwards in the 1990's, in special schools of the time – often without justification, based exclusively on their limited knowledge of Czech or insufficient support in the family environment. In such schools, Roma pupils often formally obtained elementary education, yet the level of knowledge they acquired was rather low. Of the little they knew, many forgot a lot after they left school. With the current generation of Roma pupils, we can encounter parents – graduates of the ex-special schools who often lack the necessary knowledge to help their children prepare for school, even in Year 4 or 5.

Therefore, the intervention of teaching assistants in both school and out-of-school environment is important for a number of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils also because it compensates the lacking support on the part of their parents, who cannot help their children due to objective reasons (because of their own low level of formal education).

“Both his parents attended special school.”

Supporting a socially disadvantaged pupil with a vision impairment

Kateřina is one of the most experienced teaching assistants; after her thirty years of working in special schools, she is a TA at a standard school where she focuses primarily on supporting socially disadvantaged pupils. In the past school year, she paid a lot of attention to Martin from Year 5, a Roma boy in whose case the consequences of social disadvantage are combined with obstacles resulting from his physical handicap.

Martin has a congenital defect in his right eye, in the range of severe visual impairment, so he practically only sees with his left eye. The assessment centre also diagnosed him with dyslexia, dysgraphia and dysorthographia. Martin lives in a family with two sisters, their housing is good and the family finance is stable as well, both parents work shifts in Germany – however, this also means that the parents spend a lot of time out, and the parents’ capacity in the field of supporting their children is limited by their own low level of formal education. As Kateřina puts it:

“Working with Martin’s parents was fine, they communicate very well with the school, too; the dad was willing to take him to the assessment centre, they go to doctors’ appointments for his eyesight. They can’t help him with schoolwork though – both his parents only attended the special school. I know this because I used to teach them there myself.”

There is a grandfather living in the household, too, who helps look after the children when the parents are in working in Germany. Not even him has any capacity to help with schoolwork:

“The maternal grandfather lives with them, he helps with the grandchildren, preparing school snacks, but he didn’t manage to do homework. The children managed that on their own, helping each other. The grandfather was always really grateful for any help provided to little Martin...”

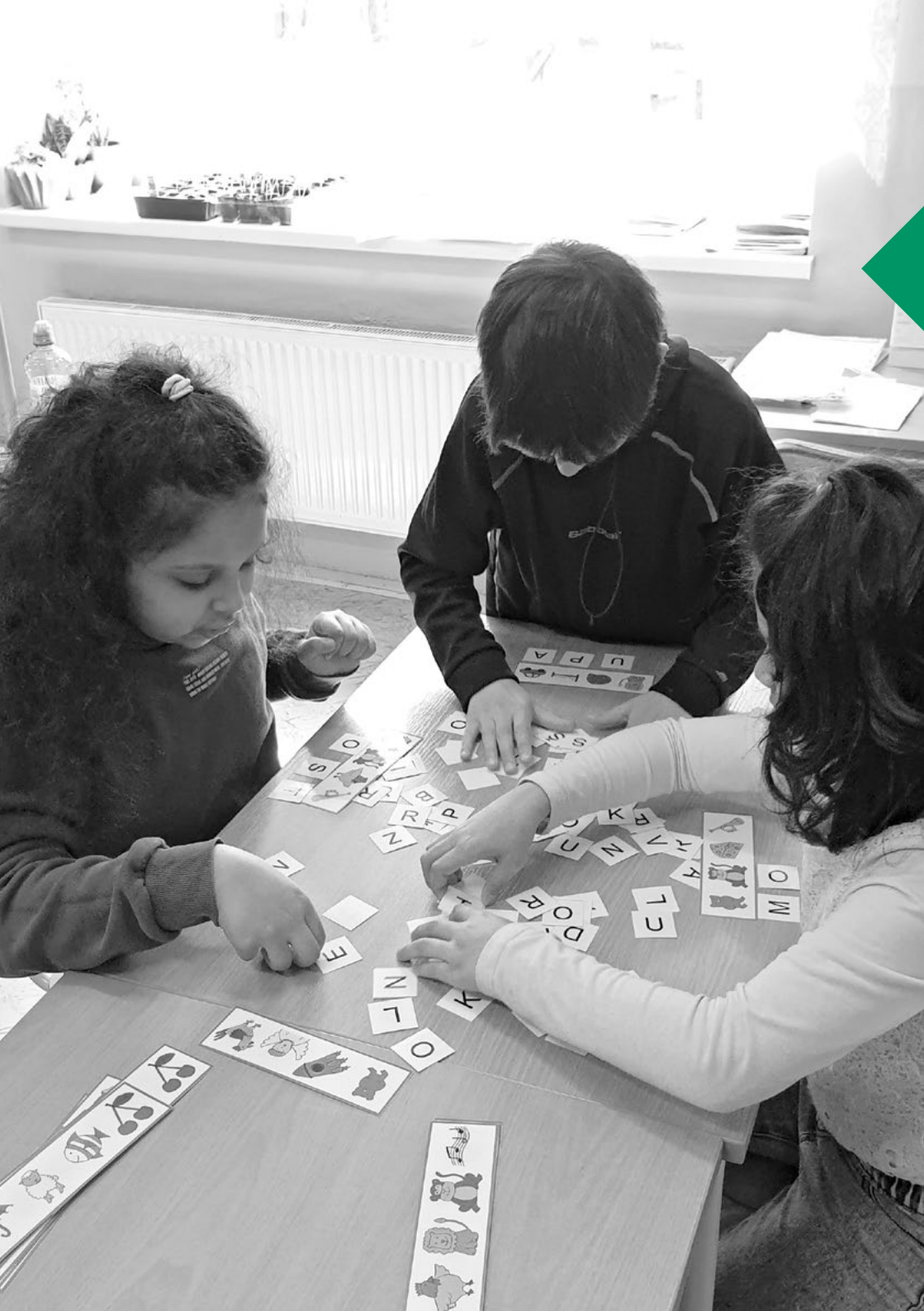
In the past school year, Kateřina was helping Martin at school during classes, but also during the breaks when she tried to help him become a part of the class. Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, Kateřina had the opportunity to visit Martin right in his family regularly:

“Twice a week in the afternoons, I visited their family within the framework of the project. We did his homework to ensure he was ready for the next day, sometimes Martin’s older sisters joined us. To lighten up the load, we used a lot of visual aids, our mentoring had the most playful forms, using games like matching pairs, domino or Ludo while everything reflected the curriculum.”

All that effort clearly paid up – as Kateřina also notes:

“Martínek made great progress in the year; he had his homework completed, the teacher was not cross with him, he was on time and what is important: he was enjoying going to school.”





Teaching assistants' interventions outside school often compensate for other deficiencies in the system.

With many socially disadvantaged pupils in our experience, we encounter families forced to live in an environment that is hardly suitable for a child. A number of children grow up in noisy, unsafe and unsanitary environment with no possibility of keeping their privacy and having a quiet space for schoolwork. None of the families living like that chose this kind of environment willingly though – almost always those are families with no chance of finding better accommodation which would be more appropriate for their children's needs.

The fact that a child's family lives in an inappropriate environment naturally affects the pupils' education; for example, the pupils are not rested enough, repeatedly experience health problems and cannot prepare for school at home. The specific consequences of unsatisfactory social situation of a family on pupils' education can often be at least partly addressed or compensated for through the intervention of a teaching assistant.

To a degree at least, TAs help handle the consequences of the state's failure when it comes to social services.

“He says there is a lot of noise at the hostel till the wee hours; he can’t get enough sleep.”

Mentoring and tackling the absence of a Year 1 pupil

Last school year, teaching assistant Marie, who has extensive prior teaching experience from her position of tutor and teacher at a vocational school, worked very closely towards supporting Dan, a Roma pupil in his first year. With Dan, there was an obvious language barrier from the very beginning of school attendance – the family had left Slovakia only shortly before he started school, and the household language is still Slovak. Moreover, as Marie describes it, the family’s social situation (not very good to start with) deteriorated markedly over the school year:

“Their housing circumstances gradually deteriorated; their rental agreement on council apartment was terminated and all they could find then was just one room at a hostel in [note. Location name], where the situation is not good. There are shared sanitary facilities which are in poor shape, too. I also know from Dan’s mum that there is noise up to late at

night, they can't get enough sleep and that might be reason why Dan is missing so often. When he oversleeps he does not go to school at all."

Unfortunately, the school that Dan attends has a lot of children with frequent problems of high absence rate, so it is not humanly possible for the teaching staff to address the absences of each pupil individually. Dan's absence increased, moreover, also as a consequence of Covid-19 contracted by every single member of the family.

One of the TA's important roles thus was organising and providing Dan's mentoring which would help him compensate for his absence from class. The optimal form of mentoring, at home, where Dan's mum could participate as well, was not possible in this case – as Marie says:

"They only have one room at the hostel, there is no space for learning and they don't want any visitors, either – they are ashamed of the way they live."

The mentoring had to be provided at school in the afternoons. Apart from the Czech language which is complicated for Dan due to the Slovak-Roma descent, Marie focused on mathematics assignments which, however, were not always easy for her either due to the alternative methods used to teach mathematics at the school:

"Dan often misses classes so we try to catch up with what they are doing at school. There is a lot of homework in Czech but also in the Hejný mathematics method... We use the support of correct results in the workbook but I must admit I sometimes fail to understand what the children are supposed to do and what it means right away. Sometimes it takes time for me to understand the assignment myself."

The (mathematics) assignments which are difficult even for Marie with her extensive teaching experience would naturally be absolutely unmanageable for Dan's parents; there would be no chance for Dan's absence to be catered for without the TA's support.

Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, Marie can dedicate her afternoons also to communication with Dan's mother which she considers important for both the present and future success of not only Dan but his younger sister, too:

“If possible, I would like to continue my work with Dan although it is not always easy. The case revolves around working with the family, particularly with the mum, who needs everything to be explained to her in simple ways, although she takes really good care of her children – Dan has a sister Klára who will be starting school this September – considering her circumstances. I would be really sad if either of the children should end up in the ex-special school; that would be a pity.”

Assistance of teaching assistants in the families of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils and interconnecting the pupils' parents with social service providers help create an atmosphere of mutual trust between the TA and the pupil's parents.

This fact is often a logical consequence of the situation that the pupil's family is facing. For example, if the pupil's parents have no certainty of accommodation in the near future, it is quite understandable that their child's educational problems appear to be of a minor significance. If, in such a situation, the TA has the possibility of advising the parents which organisation or which specific social worker they can contact (who can help them solve their problems), it strengthens the relationship between the TA and the pupil's parents who then view the TA as someone who genuinely helps them and who is really concerned about their situation, as reflected in the advice.

“The mum was overjoyed to have someone help them with the technology.”

Helping to prepare for classes and social interventions in the family of a pupil

Teaching assistant Magda got to work with Adam, a Roma pupil in Year 5, after his failing three subjects at the end of the previous school year and having to retake the year. The foundation of Magda’s support thus was assistance with his mentoring – help that, as Magda says, naturally responds to Adam’s needs resulting from his social background:

“Adam comes from a family with four siblings, and his mother and father attended special school. Neither parent could help Adam prepare for school because they don’t understand the assignments in most cases. I think that in such a case, the school should overtake responsibility for teaching and provide conditions for educating such a pupil. These children need our help – help from outside, so they can experience success at school.”

Thanks to after-school mentoring that Adam had with Magda two or three times a week during the school year, his mathematics and Czech grades improved to B's and C's (he was failing these subjects the previous year). Adam's most significant problem remained in English where he repeats the same mistakes over and over – Magda discussed this situation with Adam's parents as well as school teachers at the end of the school year, and they were thinking about referring Adam for an assessment at the assessment centre to rule out any potential specific learning disorder.

Being part of the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, Magda could provide mentoring as well as focus on extending the social support to the family – for instance, cooperation with a selected foundation was initiated for Adam to get a desktop computer for his home. During repetitive visits at the home, Magda helped Adam and his mum plug the computer in, and start operating all of the educational software:

“I helped them launch the computer, start the school system Bakaláři and help Adam's mum navigate them. The mum was really overjoyed to have someone help them with the technology; they have three boys in elementary school and one notebook was not enough for online classes so they were happy to have a desktop computer and to have someone showing them how to work with it.”

The support provided by Magda to the family over time has exceeded the framework of educational work, and extends over to social assistance – this is important not only because the intervention aiming to improve their social background helps create suitable conditions for the children's education but also because such assistance creates a mutually trusting relationship between the TA and the pupil's parents. Magda describes one of the examples:

“I visited their home repeatedly, they live in a social flat and the lease is for a limited time. So Adam's mother begged me to help them, they

would like to file an application for social housing but they can't fill in the form. So I arranged with a friend of mine who works as a social worker in the local [note. Local NGO name] to help with the application. I was happy that the mum talked to me with that level of trust..."

Again, Magda's work with Adam and his family in the long term proved how closely interlinked educational interventions and social interventions are, and how they are basically inseparable parts of the higher effort to achieve the best education of pupils with social disadvantages.



TAs' work right in the families of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils and intensive communication with the pupils' parents often help improve the overall communication between the pupils' parents and their school as well as generate a more empathic approach to the pupils on the part of their school teachers.

The truth is that in classes with often very many pupils, it is difficult for teachers to monitor the specific conditions for education of each individual pupil. Without intensive communication with the parents – for which the teachers often have no time or strength – the teachers may not even learn of fundamental changes in a pupil's family that should be taken into account in the education process. In this case, too, the TA's role is irreplaceable as the TA may provide more intensive communication with the pupil's parents (both remotely and directly in the family), get a better insight in the pupil's family circumstances and help the teacher see, too, to encourage a more empathic approach to the pupil.

“They moved house four times in total over the space of three months.”

Supporting the education of a pupil with instable home background

Teaching assistant Magda worked with Pavel, a socially disadvantaged Roma pupil in Year 4, in the past – in Year 3, her intensive mentoring work and communication with the family managed to considerably reduce his absence rate and prevent school failure. In this school year, Pavel’s situation became quite difficult again, as Magda describes it:

“In the first term, Pavel attended the mentoring sessions as well as classes regularly, and his grades were much better. However, there was a major change in the second term due to the family’s repetitive relocations. At the end of the term, they moved four times in total over three months. This time was hard for Pavel both in the physical and mental respect; it affected his health and on top of that, he broke a toe in May. Now he’s living in [note. Name of village], there isn’t much of a bus service and it

takes over half an hour to get there, moreover the ticket costs eleven CZK which means over four hundred in fare in a month, and that's no small change for this family."

Understandably, Pavel's absence rate grew although there was no intentional truancy behind this; there were objective obstacles caused by the family's difficult housing circumstances. Although it was not easy for Magda to catch up on Pavel's missed schoolwork, intensive mentoring succeeded in filling most of the gaps – so even if Pavel's grades deteriorated in general, the deterioration was not as significant as it would have been without Magda's support.

Magda's intervention played an important role also in relation to Pavel's class teacher who did not have so much understanding for the pupil's difficult life situation – as Magda herself notes:

"We fought with the teacher who threatened that if Pavel doesn't know the curriculum she'll have him repeat the year... Even when Pavel was sick (tonsillitis) and his mum did not report his absence, the teacher threatened to lower his grade for conduct. It was not Pavel's mistake at all, it was his mum's fault and he could do nothing about it – so I tried to persuade the teacher that Pavel was not to blame and that we should not punish him for it..."

Within the framework of the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, it was not only the mentoring but also Magda's involvement in assistance directly in Pavel's family that was of huge importance. One of the examples that Magda describes is the assistance with electronic communication between the family and the school:

"They do have data plans; they have the technology but the school application (Bakaláři) is extremely difficult to navigate for them. Pavel's mum had trouble with the absence settlement protocol, so I used to help her with that many times."

Overall, Magda feels how her intervention helps improve not only Pavel's school results and the communication between the family and school, but also build a long-term acceptance of positive educational perspective for Pavel as well as his mum:

“Thanks to my work with Pavel, I believe that his mum’s communication with school and approach to Pavel’s education have changed, too. During one of the meetings, she noted that if he is capable of earning nice C’s for his term tests, there is no reason why he couldn’t be a policeman one day, as he wants, which really pleased me. When I started working with them, she wanted Pavel to transfer to the special school, saying that there was too much to learn for him and he couldn’t manage a standard elementary school.”

Teaching assistants' help right in the families of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils is important also with respect to some specific differences characterising such families – this is quite obvious for instance in supporting pupils from large families.

It generally applies that standard cooperation between school and a family in the field of a pupil's education is adjusted to a standard majority family model. The school's expectations with respect to the pupils' families are based on families with one, two or three children as a maximum, and on a level of support the family can provide to that many children. When the school encounters a pupil from a larger family which, moreover, lives in a socially disadvantaged environment, it is rather logical that such a pupil can hardly receive the expected level of family support.

The teaching assistant's intervention in the families with more children helps the individual children manage their schoolwork, which the parents have no time for, as well as prevent absence that could arise due to less parent time available to the child.

“After some time, she no longer looked frightened.”

Supporting learning and communication with the family for a preparatory year pupil

This was the first year of working with socially disadvantaged children in the preparatory class of an elementary school for teaching assistant Jana. Moreover, she only met the seven-year-old Roma girl, Lenka, in January when Lenka was transferred to the preparatory class. She originally attended Year 1 but she was failing there; she had not been ready to start elementary education.

Lenka had not been ready for school possibly due to her family background. The girl comes from a socially disadvantaged environment, from a large family – she has seven brothers and sisters and even though her mum is rather young, she does not have the time to spend with each child individually. Consequently, Lenka was not ready in terms of school skills on the one hand, but she was relatively very independent in everyday life on the other hand. As described by Jana:

“For example, she did not know how to tell colours and similar things; it felt like she had been neglected at home, the mum could not manage all

eight children. However, at the same time she seemed independent, her mum sent her to school on her own and Lenka walked home from school all alone, too, at the mother's written request. In some respects, she was smarter than her peers..."

Besides supporting her readiness for school, Jana's work with Lenka focused on helping her become a part of the new class group – as a personality type, Lenka is rather introverted, and since she only joined the class mid-year, it was more difficult to get used to her new classmates:

"When she joined her new classmates, she was a very shy girl who spoke extremely little. I started working with Lenka more at school, I talked to her, explained the parts of the curriculum she obviously did not understand, I involved her in games and collaborations with her classmates which was a huge problem for her due to her shyness. Sometime later, she no longer looked frightened whenever someone talked to her, she started responding and smiling. She did not try to stay away from other children and we could see she liked going to school. Finally, three months later, she was able to ask a question or request something; she finally became a part of the class."

However, Lenka's high absence rate still remained a problem. As Jana describes it, the specific characteristics of her home environment were a significant factor contributing to the absence, apart from the common diseases of the young age:

"Her school attendance was sporadic. The mum left her at home whenever she was busy looking after the other siblings. Communication was poor, telephone numbers listed by the mother were mostly out of operation..."

Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, Jana fortunately had enough time for interventions directly in the family in the afternoons, and this proved to be the most effective way to address the absence:

“When I went to the family home during Lenka’s absence from school, the mum was standing in the doorway with one, or even two kids on her arms, listened to me and promised that Lenka would be at school the next day. She actually did attend for a few days afterwards. Also, when Lenka was ill, the teacher sent me to the family to at least deliver the worksheets...”

Thanks to the TA’s visits to the family, Lenka’s absence rate could be reduced to a certain degree at least, and the girl stayed in contact with her class even when she was ill.



On top of the aforementioned involvement of the pupil's parents, mentoring sessions held by TAs directly in the pupil's family can have another advantage, namely engaging their siblings – the mentoring takes places in an environment where the children feel safe, and helps develop skills of not just one child but also of their siblings and parents.

The preconditions of successful mentoring in this case are at least basic knowledge of the rules applicable in the family or location, and an empathic, uncriticising approach on the part of the TA when it comes to the often low accommodation standard, the improvement of which is usually beyond the scope of the pupil's parents' abilities.

“When his younger sibling joins us, we engage the mum in the mentoring session as well.”

Supporting learning at home in the pupil’s family

Teaching assistant Natálie who has been working with socially disadvantaged Roma pupils for a number of years dedicated a lot of her attention last school year to supporting Lukáš, a socially disadvantaged Year 7 pupil. Lukáš had major educational problems primarily in English which is partly due to the lesser educative support in his home environment, and partly to his diagnosed dyslexia which creates specific barriers to learning a foreign language. Natálie describes Lukáš’s situation as follows:

“Lukáš had problems with English, his demotivation with each new F grade was extreme. When his mum first noticed this, she asked if I could help him. Of course I was happy to agree to that, and I met Lukáš at home the next day. Lukáš did not know how to build a system in learning vocabulary, composing sentences and most of all, how to say, learn and create the topics they were studying at school. First, we focused on forming easy sentences and learning basic vocabulary. I visited Lukáš regularly, if only for twenty minutes to review the vocabulary.”

What was one of Natálie's advantages in the home mentoring sessions was her Roma descent and consequent good knowledge of the social environment of disadvantaged families – so she knows that it might be a problem having mentoring sessions in a small flat with four other siblings. She is also aware of the specific features of Roma culture – so it is obvious to her that any unexpected and unannounced visitor may create an obstacle to the learning as the Roma hospitality tradition gives no one a chance to turn a visitor away:

“They live in a residential building, one-bedroom apartment so all the children are together in one room. When the dad is at home, all other children are sent to the living room to watch TV so we can study. But sometimes visitors arrive and then – as is habitual in a Roma family – no one can hint that they should leave because there is mentoring going on, so we sometimes need to go and study outside or somewhere else...”

One of the greatest benefits of the mentoring organised in Lukáš's home with support by the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, was the opportunity to involve Lukáš's mum who could improve her own skills in supporting school preparation of her children. As Natalie says, the mum got involved particularly at moments when Lukáš's younger brother joined the session:

“When his younger brother joins us, we include the mum in the session as well. I explain to the mum what we are doing, how the tasks and exercises should be completed, and I also clarify that we are not playing but learning through games, and I show her that she should check the notebook, look at messages from the teacher and Lukáš's grades in his log – the mum's skill in this respect improves, too, and she checks these things on her own more often.”

The long-term support in the form of mentoring sessions directly in the family helped Lukáš to improve his grades, namely to earn a C even in English which is his most challenging subject – although in the first term, it looked like he might fail.

The TA's work in the family also significantly benefited the communication between Lukáš's family and his school. As described by Natálie:

“According to the teacher, communication with the family improved by one hundred per cent which is extremely important as Lukáš used to often hide his student logbook to prevent his parents, and later even the teacher from seeing it, the family's phone number was not up-to-date – we rectified all that right at the start of our cooperation. Communication with the family had been rather difficult for the teacher, and she said that my help in the family was genuinely meaningful.”



Teaching assistants' interventions in school education as well as out-of-school learning are extremely significant for those socially disadvantaged who are in foster care, being looked after by their grandparents.

We encounter this rather frequently; a child in the care of their grandmother and grandfather has their essentials relatively well provided (food, clothes, accommodation etc.), and even receives the necessary emotional support from the grandparents; however, the child may face deficiencies in the field of school preparation – as caring and diligent as the grandparents might be, sometimes they have no power left to help the child with catching up with the curriculum or doing homework. Or the grandparents might have the strength to support the child's schoolwork but they don't know how to help. In both cases, the TA's intervention is important as the TA might either substitute for the grandparent and help the child with schoolwork instead, or show the grandparents how to go about preparing for school with the child.

“We help the grandmother tackle his current problems.”

Supporting a pupil looked after by his grandparents

Milan attends the preparatory class in a standard elementary school which acts as the catchment school for a socially excluded location. Milan’s mother lives in the same location; however, her accommodation is of such a poor standard that she cannot have children in her care. Therefore, Milan and his older sister live close by in the care of their grandparents. Milan’s grandmother is very protective; she did not want to enrol him in kindergarten as she was afraid how he would cope with a strange environment. Fortunately, there was a chance of enrolling him in the preparatory class which Milan’s older sister had attended as well. For the grandmother and Milan alike, this was an environment they knew and trusted.

Teaching assistant Klára works with Milan within the preparatory class as well as the afternoon program after school. She is primarily employed by the school, but has a secondary job with the Nová škola, o.p.s. project. After a few months, Klára has a rather good overview of Milan’s family background where she primarily appreciates the grandmother’s very active approach:

“The grandmother works with us perfectly in fact, she is reliable and makes a serious effort to encourage Milan as much as possible.”

Klára is trying to take advantage of the grandmother’s involvement in the interest of Milan’s further progress, so she discusses with her, for instance, what she could practise with Milan at home, in an acceptably easy and playful manner:

“I communicate with Milan’s grandmother regularly when she collects the children from school. We discuss his current problems, progress or shortcomings. I explain what she could practise with him at home and how, for instance focusing on practising just two colours at the moment, saying out loud what they can see around them that is green and what is yellow...”

At the same time, it is obvious that within the boy’s background, the grandmother’s assistance is not enough for Milan to reach the adequate level of school readiness. Therefore, Klára has individual mentoring sessions with Milan where they practise the skills necessary for starting Year 1 at school:

“I mentor Milan once a week. We focus on basic counting, recognition of basic colours, orientation in space etc. We are making tiny steps at the moment and Milan is making a huge effort. He really enjoys learning new things.”

So even though Milan has been ill for a lot of time since September, TA Klára sees great progress and, therefore, hope that he will join Year 1 well prepared next year.





For some socially disadvantaged Roma pupils starting school, their inclusion in the class group and participation in classroom activities might be a problem right from the start. Some of those pupils are not ready for the school environment, they cannot stay focused on the teacher's explanations, or they face problems being accepted by the group of new, strange classmates.

In such cases, individual interventions of the teaching assistants which take place both at school and outside school (at home) can enhance school readiness of such pupils as well as strengthen their feeling of safety – a pupil who knows and trusts the TA from their home environment gradually starts to trust the school environment where the teaching assistant provides support.

“She didn’t want to walk to school with anybody but me.”

Helping with preparation and supporting school attendance of a Year 1 pupil

Anička is a seven-year-old Roma girl who – with respect to a lower level of school readiness – originally attended the preparatory class of her elementary school and last year she joined Year 1. The teaching assistant, Zuzana, who worked intensely with Anička in the past school year, reports the basic information concerning Anička’s family background as follows:

“Anička is a Roma girl who was born when her mother was very young – she was just fifteen and she could not look after her daughter at the time – so Anička was looked after by her grandmother. At the moment, Anička’s mother has two younger sons. Fortunately, the mother is a bit older and more sensible now, so she takes turns with the grandmother in looking after Anička as well.”

The mother and grandmother complement each other in looking after Anička; however, when it comes to schooling, *“both the mother and the grandmother communicate with the school very little”*, Zuzana adds.

When she joined a large group of other children at the beginning of school year, a problem with Anička's inclusion manifested itself right away – she was afraid of the unfamiliar environment, and a potentially high absence rate was a real concern. TA Zuzana describes the overall situation as follows:

“To start with, she was very shy, didn't want to communicate with anyone, was crying all the time and it was a huge problem for the teacher to make her enter the school building at all. She did not attend classes because she was too afraid. On some days, Anička refused to enter the building with anyone but me. So I waited in front of the school building every day in the morning, took her to the locker room and then to her classroom. During classes, she did not work with anyone but me again, so I attended her classes regularly. Gradually I left Anička with just the teacher in the classroom more and more often, and she eventually got used to it.”

Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, Zuzana could extend her support of Anička beyond the framework of classes and also visited her in her family environment – mentoring sessions in the family home and Zuzana's support of the communication between the school and Anička's grandmother or mother were important mainly during the first months of the school year. Nonetheless, even after the improvement in Anička's overall situation these forms of support were still necessary whenever Anička was absent from school. As Zuzana describes it:

“From the very beginning of the school year, I visited the family home to mentor Anička with respect to the schoolwork she missed. Later on, I persuaded her grandmother to enrol Anička in the after-school class for Year 1 pupils at school. Anička started attending the sessions where she can dance at the end as a reward for her efforts. I only go to the family home when she is missing from school. Both the grandmother

and the mother gradually started communicating with the school more, and when Anička is absent from school, they try to have everything spick and span.”

In this case, too, the TA’s intervention in the family environment helped set up better communication with the family and minimise the threat of educational failure – in Anička’s case right at the start of her school attendance.



The presence of a teaching assistance helps many socially disadvantaged Roma pupils create a feeling of a safe environment at school. This is particularly noticeable in cases where the TA is Roma as well – in such cases, many Roma pupils feel that thanks to the TA, they won't be harassed or ridiculed in the peer group just because of their ethnicity.

The effect of trust won by the TA through communication with parents outside the school environment and based on their overall interest in the child/family's life circumstances may work well even with non-Roma TAs. A teaching assistant trusted by the child may help the child grow to trust the school, or may prevent any potential manifestations of bullying – this makes a TA's help not just a desirable form of support but more of a necessary precondition for effective education of the pupil.

“He’s finally looking forward to school.”

Supporting a pupil at as well as outside school within the framework of abuse prevention

Dominik is a Roma boy from a socially disadvantaged incomplete Roma family. Teaching assistant Natálie, who has been supporting Dominik both at school and outside school since he joined Year 1, describes him as a friendly and curious pupil with a more challenging family background:

“He’s an easy-going, playful, nice and empathic boy attending the Year 1 in our elementary school. When his parents split, his mum moved one hundred and twenty kilometres away, to his grandfather’s place where they lived for quite some time. However, he goes and visits his father often and they have a beautiful relationship. At the moment, he lives with his mum and her new boyfriend here in a flat where I visit to mentor Dominik often. He also attends mentoring sessions at school together with other children, once in every week.”

Natálie often communicates with Dominik’s mother with respect to various things necessary for Dominik’s schooling, although she also

tries to involve the pupil's mother in his mentoring carried out in the family home. Both the TA and the mother and Dominik's teacher have noticed obvious progress he's made in learning in the past few months.

Since Dominik trusts and knows TA Natálie well, and since the TA's job description includes after-school work with the pupil, Natálie could get involved in handling the bullying that occurred at school several times. TA Natálie briefly describes her involvement therein as follows:

“At the beginning of the school year, together with his mother and class teacher, we tackled the issue of Dominik being bullied by another pupil when Dominik was too scared to go to school and sometimes was sick because of his fear. I often accompanied Dominik on his way to school, and I tried to make him feel supported, that he could trust me. We managed to organise a meeting with the mother, teacher and the mother of the boy who was hurting Dominik, and we handled the issue so that it did not happen again.”

In the home environment, Natálie discussed absence logs with Dominik's mother, and caught up on schoolwork when Dominik was ill for several weeks. Thanks to Natálie's work in general, the risk of Dominik lagging behind was avoided. Ultimately, Dominik started viewing school as a safe environment where he looks forward to going and where he can be successful – as Natálie assessed the result of her work with Dominik so far:

“I managed to catch up on all schoolwork he missed due to his three weeks' absence, and he's now on the same level of other average pupils in his class, and he is finally looking forward to school.”





Intensive work of teaching assistants in the pupils' families and with their parents, we often get a chance to learn about the causes of problems in the children's education process.

For example, with absence from school in the case of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils we often tend to suspect the pupils of truancy caused by a low level of their motivation to educate themselves. At best, we include the possibility of more frequent illnesses due to the unsatisfactory accommodation circumstances of the families in our consideration. However, we rarely take into account the fact that late arrivals at school could have a connection to the work commitments of their parents... Fortunately even such situations can be detected and handled with the help of active teaching assistants.

“I knocked on their window every morning.”

Addressing late arrivals and absence of siblings from a socially disadvantaged family

Iveta, who has been working with poor Roma families for several decades, is Roma herself and has a lot of empathy for the social problems of the families. Three years ago, she started working as a teaching assistant for children at school. Apart from a number of other children, last year she worked with Honzík and Amálka, Roma siblings from Year 3 and Year 4.

The major problem in Honzík and Amálka’s education was their late arrivals at school and a high absence rate, particularly in the morning classes. Therefore, Iveta contacted the family and started enquiring about the reason behind the absence. She describes her findings as follows:

“Honzík and Amálka’s mum was always keen to cooperate with the school but she went out to work as a cleaner somewhere, always very early in the morning. The father was non-functional in the home, I was never in contact with him, the mum said he either wasn’t at home or he was at home but did not help with the children.”

So there was no one to wake the children up and get them ready for school – the dad was not interested and the mum was at work at the time. Iveta, who went past their home address every morning on her way to work (and she knew the family lived on ground floor which also played a role), decided to get involved, leave her home a bit earlier, activate the children and accompany them to school in time. She describes the process as follows:

“The family live not far from the school, at a B&B; it is not a classic apartment, more like a hostel. I never visited their flat but I always knocked on their window and then I waited outside for them to get dressed and ready to go. I wouldn’t like to go inside, if just the father was at home, I wouldn’t like anyone to get any ideas. When the children got ready, I accompanied them to school. Later on, we organised meeting their mum in front of the school building, she had finished her cleaning job and as she was on her way back home, she gave them their school snacks right there.”

This kind of help reduced the number of later arrivals and morning absence of Honzík and Amálka to a minimum, and Iveta kept working with them like this the whole time it was necessary – as she says:

“I kept going there like this all winter and then it got better – the mum got a new job and she could be at home with the children in the morning, she woke them up and got them ready for school...”

Thanks to the Nová škola, o.p.s. project, Iveta received compensation for her assistance (intervention in the family outside class times) and she – like the other TAs in the project – could demonstrate that taking the work of a teaching assistant beyond the school environment together with interventions in the family can significantly contribute towards overall success of socially disadvantaged Roma pupils in the education process.





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“The project is being supported by the Committee of Good Will - the Olga Havel Foundation from the Active Citizens Fund. The programme promotes citizens’ active participation in the public life and decision making and builds capacities of civil society organizations. It promotes respect of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the respect for human rights including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Active Citizens Fund came to the Czech Republic in September 2019 with the goal to support CSOs regardless of their size and experience. It is operated by the Open Society Fund Prague, Committee of Good Will - the Olga Havel Foundation and Scout Institute. The Active Citizens Fund is financed from EEA and Norway Grants 2014–2021. With EEA Grants, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway contribute towards a reduction in economic and social disparity and the strengthening of mutual cooperation in Europe. One of the important objectives of the programme is strengthening bilateral cooperation between donor and beneficiary states through financial contributions in specified priority sectors. It supports bilateral relations between the donor states Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein and the Czech Republic.”

More information on the project is available at the website at:
<http://novaskolaops.cz/acf-o-projektu>

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“When they open the brochure, readers mentally travel to lowest-category flats in the middle of socially excluded locations called “home” by some of the children described in the stories. They can feel the classrooms attended by some of the children, sick and afraid of being bullied by their schoolmates. In such difficult situation and unpalatable conditions, teaching assistants may be a great help to the parents and children.

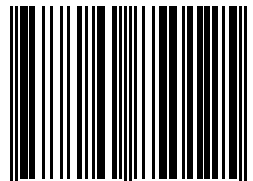
Roma children face much higher barriers on their path to education than children of non-Roma descent, be it economic, linguistic or social ones. Thanks to the direct support provided by the teaching assistants, who do a truly noteworthy and often very demanding job, every story of a child handling their barriers has a happy ending.

I would like to thank the group of authors for putting together this mosaic of case studies which give us hope that the playing field of opportunities can be even for every single one of us in the Czech Republic.”

Mgr. Klára Šimáčková Laurenčíková

Government Commissioner for Human Rights
Office of the Government of the Czech Republic

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